

Amnesty

by acciobook7

HBP--the way it *should* have been written. Written for the January '08 SS/HG Exchange. Canon-compliant all the way through DH, sans the epilogue.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 8

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And now, on with the show...

The grass flattened beneath her feet, wet and crisp in the coolness of the summer night. She froze as the sound of tiny, hurried footsteps met her ears. Though she could not see them, she knew they were there, scurrying about amidst the untended brush surrounding her.

She removed a roll of parchment and a Muggle pen from her satchel and lowered herself slowly toward the ground, taking up an Indian-style seated position atop the soggy grass.

She shivered as the coolness met the skin of her backside through the thin material of her pajamas. It was an unusually chilly night for July, and she felt that the dreary weather reflected well upon the events as of late.

She hated thinking about her parents, her family... her Muggle friends. Any of them could be a target for Voldemort, not only because they were Muggles, but also because they were linked to her, and she was linked to Harry. And Harry was "The Chosen One."

She sighed. There was no point in dwelling on such trivialities. She could no more protect her friends and family than she could the elves. Though, the latter of which, she could certainly *attempt* to meliorate.

A small creature was scuffling toward her, taking quick, cautious steps in its approach.

"Aw, it's okay, little guy..." she coaxed softly. "I'm here to help you."

The gnome seemed to believe her somehow, though she was sure it could not comprehend the meaning behind her words. The odd little creature eased forward a little further, halting just outside of her reach. As it stepped into the moonlight she noticed, a little abashedly, that this particular gnome was in fact a *he*.

She unrolled her parchment and began scribbling down notes:

-Fearful of humans

-Small, under two feet; much smaller than house-elves

-Seem comforted by soft voice tones

She placed the parchment carefully in her lap and laid the pen on top of it, concentrating on the gnome in front of her. He hadn't seemed unnerved by her hasty scribbling. She supposed he had probably seen Percy doing the same thing many times over in the sanctity and quiet of his family's garden. Perhaps he had taken shelter from the constant raucous of such a large family in the garden shed that sat several feet to her left...

The gnome crept ever closer, its beady little eyes never leaving Hermione's. It approached her bent knee slowly, reaching out a tentative, stubby finger towards her leg. When its hand made contact with her skin, he jumped, but did not move away. She smiled and extended a hand towards the tiny creature. This was certainly progress. Perhaps there was a possibility of incorporating garden gnomes into S.P.E.W.'s charter...

Just then there was a loud *crack* that erupted from the Burrow's gate. The gnome visibly jumped and sunk his pointy teeth into the skin of her forefinger, blood instantly trickling down her hand. "Bugger!" she hissed, bringing her finger to her mouth and sucking it crossly.

There were voices at the gate, steadily growing louder as their owners came ever closer to her location. "Shit..." she swore. If Mrs. Weasley found out that she was out of bed and traipsing around the family garden at night, studying gnomes—well, she certainly didn't wish to be subjected to one of the older woman's scoldings. Though not *quite* deadly, their effects could still be more than unpleasant.

She pushed herself up off the ground, the palm of her hand slipping on the sodden grass. She struggled to her feet and braced herself against the back of the shed/outdoor broom closet and slowed her breathing. *If they would just continue on to the house without stopping...*

No such luck. At this short distance she could make out the owners of the voices quite clearly. Harry and Dumbledore were in the middle of what appeared to be a very important conversation. The two men entered through the ramshackle door of the tiny shed and shut it tightly behind them. She wished she had never left Ginny's room. She *hated* eavesdropping. It just seemed so... *wrong*.

She attempted to block out their voices, but to no avail. She listened, albeit a bit shamefully, as Harry's voice drifted through the half-open window of the shack.

"It's just hard to realize he won't write to me again," Harry was saying.

She swallowed hard. This was absolutely the *worst* kind of conversation to which she could be listening uninvited. The last thing she wished to hear were Harry's painful thoughts on the all-too-recent death of his godfather. She zoned out for a moment, tuning back just in time to hear Harry speaking again.

"...make sure I take as many Death Eaters with me as I can, and Voldemort too if I can manage it."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Spoken both like your mother and father's son and Sirius's true godson!"

Hermione pursed her lips distastefully. *Was he actually condoning Harry's anger?*

"I take my hat off to you —" Dumbledore continued, "or I would, if I were not afraid of showering you in spiders."

That last comment did it. She was remarkably afraid of spiders, though she would never let Ron in on the secret. She bowed low, shuffling forward in a crouching position underneath the window, and made her way back toward the house under the cover of darkness. Just as she reached the rear of the abode, she heard the door to the shed creak open once more.

She backed herself up against the building and waited impatiently as the two men retreated inside. Several minutes passed, during which Hermione's thoughts fluctuated between the painful cold plaguing her bare feet and the hope that there were no spiders crawling amidst the grass at this late hour in the night.

Finally, the door opened, and out stepped a most happy Dumbledore. After waving a humble goodbye to the inhabitants of the household, he began treading the path that would lead him to the front gate, at which point she assumed he would Apparate.

The door to the house slammed shut, and a steady murmuring of voices were the only sounds she could discern from her location behind the building.

"Miss Granger?"

She jumped, her feet sliding on the slick grass. Dumbledore caught her before she managed to smack her head against the wooden siding. He held her by the elbow, propping her up and steadying her while she caught her breath.

"Headmaster," she gasped, once she had caught her footing. "I didn..."

"Didn't think I noticed you listening outside of the shed, Miss Granger?" His eyes twinkled. "Yes, I knew you were there."

"I'm so sorry, sir!" she replied hastily. "I was conversing with the garden gnomes..." his brows shot up into his hairline "and you startled me... and I'm really ~~not~~*supposed* to be out of bed at this late hour..."

Dumbledore waved his hand in front of him dismissively. "Nonsense, Miss Granger. I have not approached you this night to reprimand you. I simply request that you walk with me to the gate, so that I might," he paused, "have a word with you."

She nodded in the affirmative, and he offered his arm to her as they began their stroll toward the Burrow gates. As she took the Headmaster's proffered arm, she noticed his eyes draw down to her bare feet, and she blushed as he shot her an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore began, "as I'm sure you are aware, there have been some *disturbing* events taking place in both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds as of late." She nodded. "I wonder what your thoughts are on the matter?"

"I imagine that my thoughts are irrelevant, sir. There's nothing that I can do about them."

Dumbledore stared ahead toward the gate and smiled softly. "On the contrary, Miss Granger," he countered. "There is much that you will be able to do, both for your family in the Muggle world and your friends here and at school. I would like you to do me a favor of sorts, if you don't mind."

"Of course, Headmaster. How can I help you?" Hermione inquired gently.

He halted his steps and turned toward her, smiling. "As you have, I'm sure, assumed, Harry has quite a year ahead of him. He will have an unprecedented workload as far as his coursework is concerned, not to mention additional Quidditch responsibilities. He will have to keep an eye on these tasks while taking additional lessons, taught by myself." She listened carefully, sucking on her injured finger subconsciously.

He looked at her seriously. "He will need a muse, and a voice of reason, Miss Granger. I would like to ask you to be that voice for Harry. Help him, but do not encourage

him to undertake paths that will lead to suspicion and hate."

"Of course, sir."

He smiled, that off-present twinkle in his eye showing itself once again. "Thank you, Miss Granger. I knew that I could count on you."

He turned toward the gate again, taking a small step forward. He paused and turned back toward Hermione. "One more thing, Miss Granger. If you should wish for any additional tutoring this year... if you feel you are not being challenged enough by any of your teachers, please, do not hesitate to come to me. I will be more than happy to arrange for you to receive advanced tutoring on the subject."

"Er...thank you, sir, but I think I'll be okay."

"There will be a few changes in staffing this year, Miss Granger. It is not something that I wish to discuss with you right now, but if you feel your academic needs would be better met with extra tutelage from a teacher that you are more familiar with, I can make such an arrangement."

Hermione looked questioningly at him, not quite sure where he was going with this line of conversation. "Thank you, Professor. I'll be sure to let you know."

He smiled at her, turning back toward the gate. "Good night." He turned back to her once more. "Oh, and, Miss Granger, good luck on your O.W.L.s. I expect you should be receiving them later today." He glanced at her hand. "Don't forget to have that finger looked at, my dear. You wouldn't want it to get infected." He smiled at her affectionately and Disapparated. Hermione blinked rapidly, wondering if there was anything that the old wizard didn't know.

She shook her head, still sucking lightly on her forefinger, and started down the path toward the Burrow once more.

A well-placed silencing charm and careful footing on Ginny's fire escape were the keys to her successful undetected re-entry into the house. As she crept into her bed and under the covers, she glanced up at the clock on the wall. Three o'clock in the morning. The others would no doubt awaken by eight. She would be lucky to achieve five hours of sleep before the entire house awoke and worked itself into a frenzied state over Harry's arrival.

Minutes later, or so it seemed to Hermione, Ginny was shaking her awake with unnecessary force.

"Hermione, wake up. Harry's here!"

"Five more minutes..." she grumbled.

"No, Ron's waiting for you!"

Hermione rolled over in her bed and opened her eyes. The sunlight streamed through the open curtains, meeting her eyes harshly. She squeezed her lids shut tightly for several seconds before reopening them and staring unhappily at the redheaded girl. "Alright..."

She peeled back the quilted covers that it seemed she had only just crawled beneath and flung her legs over the side of her borrowed twin bed, feeling around the floor carefully with her toes, searching for the slippers that would hide her bare feet from the chilled wooden floors of the house.

After throwing on her dressing robe and tossing her hair up in an unruly excuse for a ponytail, she proceeded out her bedroom door and down the hall to Ron's bedroom.

She pushed open the door at the end of the hall, only to find Ron already tugging open the window shades and obnoxiously coaxing Harry to rise for the day.

It appeared as though she had walked in on an already in-progress conversation between the two boys, and chose to perch herself lightly on the edge of Harry's bed.

"How're you, Hermione?" Harry asked groggily.

"Oh, I'm fine," she replied, blinking against the sickening sunshine that was beating down upon them through the freshly opened window.

The boys proceeded to begin an oh-so-rousing conversation about breakfast, at which time Hermione took the opportunity to tune out for a few seconds, wiping the sleep from her eyes and glaring quite irritably at her wounded forefinger.

"Come off it!" Ron near shouted, bringing Hermione back to the conversation. "You've been off with Dumbledore!"

Harry looked none too pleased with the direction the conversation was heading. Hermione wondered if there wasn't something he was failing to tell them.

Harry informed them of a new teacher that would be starting at Hogwarts during their sixth year...Professor Slughorn. By the way he was describing the man, she wondered how he could be capable of teaching a subject as hands-on as Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry had construed him as the human equivalent to a walrus...

"Something wrong, Hermione?" Harry asked speculatively, turning to face her.

"No, of course not! So, um, did Slughorn seem like he'll be a good teacher?"

"Dunno," replied Harry.

At that moment Ginny entered the room, bitching and moaning about the recent appearance of Fleur Delacour at the Burrow. Fleur was due to marry Ron's brother Bill the following summer. The plans seemed to be coming to fruition rather more quickly than one would normally expect, but none of that really bothered Hermione. It was Ginny's constant whining about the situation that was really starting to get on her nerves, though she dared not show it. She followed the group downstairs in anticipation of a good, hearty breakfast, Ron and Ginny complaining about Fleur all the while.

The next few weeks at the Burrow passed much the same as that morning. Ginny constantly complained about Fleur, while Hermione and Ron treaded lightly around Harry, fearful of provoking the same temper that had plagued him the year before by mentioning Sirius' death before he was ready to discuss it.

Their O.W.L.s arrived later that same morning, bringing Hermione "Outstandings" in every subject except for Defense Against the Dark Arts, in which she placed at the level of "Exceeds Expectations." Professor Snape had informed them the year before that he would only be accepting "Outstanding" O.W.L. score recipients into his N.E.W.T. Potions class. Apparently, she would be the only one of the Golden Trio to study under Professor Snape this year. That would be one load off of Harry's shoulders, at least.

As summer holiday came to a close, Hermione, along with Harry, Ron and Ginny, prepared for their return to Hogwarts. The quintessential trip was, naturally, the venture to Diagon Alley, where they would purchase their school supplies.

After being shuttled to The Leaky Cauldron via special Ministry of Magic cars, courtesy of Mr. Weasley, they passed through the magical brick wall and onto their final destination, the shops of Diagon Alley.

As the trio entered Madam Malkin's, Hermione froze. Draco Malfoy appeared from behind a rack of dress robes, shouting angrily at the seamstress.

"Watch where you're sticking that pin, will you!"

The aristocratic voice was immediately recognizable to Hermione, and she winced at its harshness.

Harry and Ron looked as if they would like nothing better than to throttle Malfoy on the spot, reason or no. Hermione took a tentative step forward, shielding them from their mutual sworn enemy.

"If you're wondering what the smell is, Mother, a Mudblood just walked in," Malfoy said nastily, sneering at Hermione's reflection in the full-length mirror.

Harry and Ron had stepped in front of her, wands drawn and aimed precariously at Draco. Narcissa Malfoy sauntered out from behind the same rack, walking steadfastly toward Harry and Ron. Hermione watched on in horror as Harry and Narcissa participated in an intense battle of words, the winner of which could not be determined by standers by.

As they wrapped up their shopping, Hermione spotted Draco Malfoy, without his mother, heading down a back walkway.

"Come on!" said Ron, dragging Hermione by the arm. Despite her incessant protests against the useless tracking of said resident Slytherin, she allowed herself to be dragged not only through Diagon Alley, but also all the way down to the informally forbidden section of shops known as Knockturn Alley, under the cover of Harry's invisibility cloak.

When they reached Borgin and Burkes, she accepted an Extendable Ear from Ron, albeit uncertainly.

"You know Fenrir Greyback?" Malfoy was saying. "He's a family friend. He'll be dropping in from time to time to make sure you're giving the problem your full attention."

Hermione listened in horror as Malfoy threw threat after threat at the shop owner, eventually instructing him to keep something...though he didn't elaborate on the item...safe. "Just don't sell it," he directed the man.

As Malfoy left the shop and hurried back up the road toward Diagon Alley, Hermione concentrated hard on the conversation she had just overheard. What in the world was Draco doing in Borgin and Burkes, and just what did he need Borgin to keep safe for him?

"You two stay here," she whispered to the boys, ducking out from under the invisibility cloak.

She scuffled forward and moved hastily toward the shop, adjusting her clothing before entering the store. She pushed forward and strolled in as casually as she could. Despite her cool demeanor, Borgin was staring daggers at her. Hermione swallowed.

"Hello, horrible morning, isn't it?" Hermione said brightly to Borgin. He looked at her as if he'd like nothing better than to introduce her to his cursed monkey's fist.

She thought hard about a suitable question to ask him, hoping the answer would enlighten her as to the identity of the object that Draco was having held for him.

"Don't touch that!" he snarled at her as she reached a hand out toward an ornate opal necklace on one of the higher shelves. She smiled and pulled her hand back hastily.

"The thing is, that...er...boy who was in here just now, Draco Malfoy, well, he's a friend of mine, and I want to get him a birthday present, but if he's already reserved something, I obviously don't want to get him the same thing, so... um..."

She registered the unamused look on Borgin's face and immediately wished she had taken a different line of questioning. He drew himself out from behind the counter and approached her dangerously, his hands balled into fists at his sides.

"Out," he said sharply. "Get out!"

Hermione swallowed hard, glancing down at the crack beneath the entryway, hoping that Ron was still monitoring her via the Extendable Ears*No flesh-colored string in sight*. It didn't look promising.

"I know who you are, little girl..." Borgin said roughly, pointing a finger at Hermione. "You're *Potter's* friend," he spat distastefully. "I would be careful, if I were you, my dear. There is much about your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher that you don't know. Little Mudbloods like yourself won't be safe for much longer."

Hermione was at a loss for words. She turned on her heel and ran immediately out of the shop, rejoining her friends under Harry's cloak. Just as she was about to tell them about Borgin's warning, Ron, as usual, just *had* to make a snide remark about her efforts.

"Ah well," Ron taunted her. "Worth a try, but you were a bit obvious ..."

She shot him a disdainful look, sure that, were it physically possible, steam would have been shooting out of her ears. "Well, next time you can show me how it's done, Master of Mystery!"

She pondered the meaning behind Borgin's words the entire span of the trip back to Burrow. What was the shopkeeper talking about? Was there something about Professor Slughorn that she ought to have known, either through rumour or reading?

She considered telling Harry and Ron about the warning, but thought better of it in the end. Professor Dumbledore was right. Harry had quite enough on his shoulders as it was. He was already overly suspicious of Draco Malfoy. No, it was better that she keep the information to herself.

Her final week at the Burrow was filled mostly with reading. She breezed through her copy of *Hogwarts, a History* twice, looking for any information on the seemingly notorious Professor Slughorn, but found nothing. Inquests into her other history books produced identical results.

When the day finally arrived to meet the Hogwarts Express at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, Hermione was more than happy to be going back to school. She and Ron ushered themselves into the Prefects' cabin and donned their school robes, preparing themselves for their obligatory rounds.

"What's yer problem, Hermione?" Ron asked through a mouthful of chocolate frog.

"I don't know what you mean, Ronald," she answered him dismissively, tucking *Most Potente Potions* back into her trunk.

"You and your bloody books," he taunted. "You're such a nerd."

She shot him a hateful look. "Oh, shut up, Ron! You're not funny, you know."

"Maybe not," he countered, tossing another chocolate frog wrapper to the floor. Hermione huffed and spelled it into the bin with her wand. "But you've been acting like a space cadet for the last week. All you do is brood over your copy of *Hogwarts, a History*. You haven't spent any time at all with me or Harry!"

"There are more important things than Quidditch, Ron. Though, I wouldn't expect you to know that."

His only answer was to glare at her as he popped yet another chocolate frog into his mouth. She rose from her seat, stowing her wand beneath her robes and placing a hand on the handle of the compartment door.

"Everyone's in their compartments, and we've got to do rounds. Are you coming?" she asked, hands on her hips, both eyebrows raised in *don't mess with me* manner.

"No," he answered sharply, looking away from her and out the window. "I think you can handle it on your own. You know ~~everything~~, after all."

"Whatever, Ron." She sighed and exited through the sliding glass door.

She strolled up the aisle and proceeded to count the compartments and their inhabitants.

"One, two, three...*mmph*," she exclaimed.

She stumbled forward, tripping over her shoelace and landing on all fours, her knees colliding roughly with the worn berber of the train's runner. *Shit*," she swore when she saw that the flooring had managed to tear a hole in her tights.

"Language quite unbecoming of a young lady, Miss Granger."

The deep voice startled her, and she jumped up, her head colliding roughly with someone's down-turned face.

"Aargh!" Professor Snape groaned, pinching his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Impertinent wench!" he spat bitterly.

Her eyes widened in horror as she watched the blood trickle slowly out of Snape's overly prominent nose. "Professor! I'm so sor..."

"Fifty points from Gryffindor!" he snarled, removing a handkerchief from his pocket and holding it under his nose.

"But we aren't even at school yet..." Hermione stopped mid-sentence. It was true, they *weren't* at school yet, but there was no point in arguing the matter with this particular professor.

"Twenty points more for your *cheek*!" he bit back sorely.

"But, sir..." she began to say, but changed her mind. She stared up at Snape, registering the furious glint in his eyes that dared her to argue with him. If looks could kill, she would have been dust where she stood.

He brushed past her, retreating into the teacher's compartment of the train. The smell of patchouli and wormwood reached her nostrils, giving her the impression that he had been working on a potion recently...probably something quite advanced, if he was using wormwood as a main ingredient.

She sighed. First a fight with Ron, then a rip in her only pair of tights, and now, she had managed to lose her house seventy points before they had even reached the castle! *Some first day this is shaping up to be...*

Hermione looked to the entrance doors to the Great Hall, anxiously awaiting Harry's unexpectedly late arrival. When he approached the table, she noticed a mass of dry, caked blood covering his nose and mouth.

"You're covered in blood!" she gasped, raising her wand to his face and muttering, *Tergeo*." She moved over to allow him to take his normal seat next to her and across from Ron, though not before shooting him a suspicious glare.

She watched him carefully throughout the beginning part of the Headmaster's start-of-term announcements, wishing he would see the benefits of *controlling his impulses*.

"Professor Slughorn is a former colleague of mine who has agreed to resume his old post of Potions master."

Dumbledore's voice sliced through her musings like a blade. Potions master? *But if Slughorn is teaching Potions, then what is Snape...*

"Professor Snape, meanwhile," continued Dumbledore, as if he had read her mind, "will be taking over the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Hermione's mind reeled. She had assumed that Dumbledore had offered to place her in advanced tutoring for Defense Against the Dark Arts. After all, it is the only class in which she hadn't received an *O* on her O.W.L.s. He'd acted as if he thought her academic development was being stunted by the lack of a challenge the classes presented to her. But, extra lessons? With a teacher that she was *more familiar with*. Did he mean Snape? *He would never go for that...*

Hermione was brought back to the present by the sound of Snape's name rolling off Harry's tongue venomously.

"Snape'll be gone by the end of the year," Harry said loudly.

"What do you mean?" asked Ron.

"That job's jinxed. No one's lasted more than a year.... Quirrell actually died doing it.... Personally, I'm going to keep my fingers crossed for another death...."

"Harry!" Hermione snapped at him.

What a prat. To think he'd rather Snapedie than have him as a Defense teacher. Snape wasn't all that bad, really... Granted, he had taken seventy points from her on the train, simply for not looking where she was going. *As a matter of fact...*

She glanced at the House hourglasses to her left. The Slytherin jar was filling with emeralds even as she watched. Gryffindor's was looking a bit shabby. As a matter of fact, it looked awfully low to only be missing seventy points...

At any rate, Snape could be a right nasty piece of work at times, but he was still a brilliant teacher. She imagined she had learned more in one year as a student in his class than all five years combined in anyone else's.

Before she could explore that line of thinking any further, Dumbledore's loud announcement of, "Your beds await... Pip pip!" reached her ears, and, standing, she helped usher the younger students toward Gryffindor tower, thinking only of the sweet solitude she would receive once she reached her dorm room.

The next morning was a busy one. Hermione had already confiscated two Fanged Frisbees and a singing quill by the time she had reached the Great Hall for breakfast. After downing a quick bowl of cereal, she hurried off to her first class, Ancient Runes. Aside from a trunk load of homework, the class was rather uneventful.

"Miss Granger," Snape drawled, startling her, as she entered his classroom. "You are ten minutes early. Are you *that* intent on proving your title as the resident Gryffindor Know-It-All?"

She glared at him. "No, *sir*."

"Then, might I suggest, Miss Granger, that you queue in the hall with the rest of the sixth-year suck-ups?"

She hastily withdrew herself from the classroom, furious at his demeanor. *Impossible man*. And to think, Dumbledore actually wanted her to spend *more* time in his presence than was required!

As Harry and Ron lined up behind her, Snape opened the door, glaring at her as if she were a stain on his loafers. "Inside," he ordered, sweeping away into his classroom and taking a menacing stance at the head of the room.

When all of the students were seated and directing their full attention toward him and him alone, Snape began the lecture.

"The Dark Arts," Snape started, "are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal..."

Hermione listened carefully as Snape laid out his syllabus for the class. There was something different about him this year. He was still his normal, brooding self, but, somehow, he wasn't. She thought back to her very first Potions lesson, during which he had given the most intriguing speech to which Hermione had ever borne witness. Both lectures were interesting...fascinating, even...but the manner in which he spoke while reciting this year's lesson plan revealed a new fervor in her ex Potions master. He was truly enjoying himself in his newfound position. He seemed intrigued... engrossed... impassioned?

Snape's speech came to a halt, and he glanced around the class before asking his first question. "What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?"

Hermione's hand shot immediately into the air. She knew *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Six* almost as well as she knew *Hogwarts, a History*.

Snape's obsidian eyes met her own, his irritation with her constant stream of answers more than apparent in his facial expression. "Very well...Miss Granger?"

Hermione smiled, triumphant. "Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you're about to perform, which gives you a split-second advantage."

Aside from a small quip about her answer being copied almost word for word from the textbook, he let her alone. *Progress from the previous day*, she mused.

Immediately following his question, Snape split the class into pairs, instructing them to practice using nonverbal jinxes. To her credit, ten minutes into the class, Hermione was the only student to have achieved the feat. Snape, not surprisingly, awarded her no points for the accomplishment. *Git*.

Naturally, before the class was over, Harry had earned himself his first detention of the year. Apparently, he was under the impression that Snape held a penchant for jokes. *Some people never learn...*

She led the way into her old Potions classroom, which had been severely remodeled to reflect the personality of her new professor. Unlike the dull, dreary atmosphere that had plagued the area when Snape had inhabited it, the dungeon classroom was now bright and full of colour. The window blinds were opened wide, eliciting a heavenly glow amidst the steam emitting out of four cauldrons seated on various tables at the head of the room.

Hermione took her seat gingerly, eager to begin a new year of Potions study. Though she would never admit as much to Ron and Harry (for fear of yet another good Snape/bad Snape argument), Potions had always been one of her favorite subjects.

The smells issuing from the cauldron to her front right were unusually strong. She couldn't quite place all of the ingredients, though she was sure the recipe was among the more complicated in their syllabus. She felt the sudden urge to complete her homework out on the grounds, rather than in the common room. Dismissing the concoction for the time being, she concentrated on the two cauldrons to Harry's left.

"Anyone tell me what it is?" Slughorn asked, pointing to the clear potion in the brass cauldron.

"It's Veritaserum," she answered immediately, her hand shooting into the air as she spoke.

Professor Slughorn beamed at her, moving on to the second cauldron. "Very good, very good! Now... who can...?"

"It's Polyjuice Potion, sir," she answered, managing to raise her hand before speaking this time. The scents emitting from the third cauldron were still tickling her nose, calling to her. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but there was something strange about that third potion. Something...*enticing*.

Just when she thought she would have to have the ingredients of the third potion spelled out for her, it hit her...

"Now, this one here..." Slughorn gestured to the third cauldron. "Yes, my dear?"

"It's Amortentia!" Hermione answered brightly. "It's the most powerful love potion in the world!"

"Quite right!" Slughorn agreed with her. "You recognized it, I suppose, by its distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen?"

Hermione nodded. "And it's supposed to smell differently to each of us, according to what attracts us, and I can smell freshly mown grass and new parchment and..."

She halted mid-sentence, stunned. She could indeed smell parchment and freshly mown grass. She could also smell patchouli and wormwood...the exact scents she had detected on Snape's person on the train to Hogwarts. Her cheeks grew hot, and she hoped the others didn't notice her blushing. So she actually *liked* the way that Snape smelled? *Interesting...*

"May I ask your name, my dear?" said Slughorn, cutting into Hermione's thoughts.

"Hermione Granger, sir."

"Well, well, take twenty well-earned points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger," said Slughorn genially.

Hermione smiled. Well, that was twenty of the seventy points she had lost her house back in the hourglass. Now, if she could only find a way to earn back the other fifty...

"I take it," Slughorn continued merrily, turning to the small, black cauldron at the end of the row, "that you know what Felix Felicis does, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded excitedly. She did indeed know what Felix Felicis does. "It's liquid luck," she answered.

"Quite right, take another ten points for Gryffindor," Slughorn replied, beaming.

Liquid luck. What an idea. Of course, it was entirely against the law to use such a potion on the day of a test or sporting match, but there was nothing in the rules about using said potion to study, consequently ensuring the retention of the subject information. "Complete retention of subject matter..." she whispered, and Ron shot her a withering look. She blushed again, turning her eyes back to Professor Slughorn.

"So," Slughorn was saying, "how are you to win my fabulous prize? Well, by turning to page ten of *Advanced Potion-Making*."

Page ten. They were going to attempt the Draught of Living Death! She smiled. If anyone could follow directions from a textbook, it was she. She snatched up her copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, along with her cauldron and stock of ingredients, and got straight to work.

Halfway through the lesson, Hermione glanced toward Harry's potion. Hers was good. His was *perfect*.

"How are you doing that?" she asked, shocked.

"Add a clockwise stir..."

"No, no, the book says counterclockwise!" she snapped.

Idiot. There was no way he was going to end up with the desired result by adding his own twists to the text's directions, no matter how good his potion looked at this stage of the game.

Hermione worked on her potion feverishly, her hair sticking to her forehead from perspiration.

"And time's... up!" called Slughorn.

Hermione stared glumly down at her deep purple potion. It was nowhere near as nice as Harry's light lavender concoction. She knew who had won the Felix Felicis before Slughorn even announced it.

Hermione was furious as she made the long trek from the dungeons to the Great Hall for dinner. *How dare he cheat on an assignment just to win a stupid prize...*

Well, okay... so the prize wasn't *really* stupid. That was still no excuse for cheating on a school assignment.

She took her seat at Gryffindor table, purposely squeezing herself between Ron and Ginny, so as to avoid Harry for as long as possible.

Apparently, Harry had picked up on her stony demeanor, as he found it prudent to confront her after only a few moments' silence.

"I s'pose you think I cheated?" Harry asked harshly.

"Well, it wasn't exactly your own work, was it?" she snapped back.

"Did I hear right?" Ginny's voice entered the conversation. "You've been taking orders from something someone wrote in a book, Harry?"

As Ginny proceeded to question Harry, and Harry, in turn, proceeded to defend his actions to said redhead, Hermione took the opportunity to extricate herself from the table. She marched up to her dorm room in a huff, agitated with the way the day's events had unfolded. She would find a way to show Harry that cheating is never an acceptable substitute for studying and hard work...no matter what the cost.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 8

HBP--the way it *should* have been written. Written for the January '08 SS/HG Exchange. Canon-compliant all the way through DH, sans the epilogue.

As the days passed by, the workload for the fifth-, sixth- and seventh-year students piled up tremendously. Hermione, as usual, had not only completed her homework, but had also read each one of her texts from back to front...twice.

Not surprisingly, Harry and Ron were struggling with their own assignments like kites caught in a tailwind, and they were grumbling about it every chance they got to anyone who would listen.

"Fine," Hermione huffed one evening after Ron had asked her, for the third time, to correct his Potions essay for him. "But this is the last time, Ronald. I mean it. What about you, Harry?" she asked sarcastically, shooting a nonchalant glance at the other member of the Golden Trio. "Is the Prince writing your essays for you as well?" she added snidely.

Harry rolled his eyes and returned to the numerous applications for the Gryffindor Quidditch team that were splayed out before him. She knew she was being hard on her friend...he was only doing as his book directed after all. Still, the thought of Harry achieving better marks than she did by not following directions irked her immensely. She returned to her knitting, quite sure that this particular elf hat looked much better than the ones she'd made previously, and shut Harry out of her mind. She would just have to try harder in their next lesson...that was all....

The following morning, Hermione found herself, albeit reluctantly, standing watch over the Gryffindor Quidditch team tryouts.

The group was unusually large this year, and it appeared to be comprised of almost entirely first- through fifth-year girls.

Harry was making a funny gesture with his arms, and Hermione snorted out loud when she saw that he was in fact ordering a group of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw girls off the field.

"Morons," she sneered.

"I couldn't agree with you more."

The unmistakable baritone voice of her Potions master startled her, and she whipped her head around without pause to face him.

She stared at him as if he had more heads than Fluffy. "What?" he said nonchalantly. "Clearly, they are. Fawning over Potter... I am sure they are delusional."

The comment was so very Professor Snape that she couldn't help but giggle. Something was most definitely wrong with this picture. Was Snape being...dare she think it...nice to her?

They continued to watch the tryouts in silence, Hermione keeping her comments to herself, Snape snorting in glee each time one of the applicants missed a goal or dropped the Quaffle.

When it came time for Ginny to audition, Hermione found herself subconsciously leaning over the railing in front of her, her eyes glued to the pitch. Snape remained silent, though she could tell he was watching her friend as closely as she was.

A perfect practice. Brilliant!

"Adequate, I suppose," Snape commented snidely.

"Adequate?" Hermione scoffed. "She sank five in a row!"

"Barely," Snape retorted, eyes still glued to the pitch.

Hermione rolled her eyes and concentrated on the next group to try out...the Keepers.

Ron looked like he'd been nicking treats from one of Fred and George's Skiving Snackboxes. The young man to his right, whom Hermione recognized from her Advanced Ancient Runes class as Cormac McLaggen, looked as cocky as Umbridge in a collectible plate competition.

"I suppose you're cheering for him to mess up," Hermione commented and immediately regretted it. She had a bad feeling that Snape would probably dock her twenty points for cheek again.

"Quite the contrary," he responded noncommittally. "With Weasley on the team, that trophy will be sure to find a new home in my office at the end of the year. Though I daresay Minerva will be sad to see it go...."

Hermione was not quite sure what to make of Snape's uncharacteristic remark, and so, instead, she chose to watch the tryouts closely, hoping that her high-spirited vibes would somehow make their way down to the playing field below.

Cormac was up first, and he managed to save one, two, three...*shit*...four goals in a row. Things were not looking promising for Ron.

As Ginny went in for the final goal, Hermione caught a glimpse of movement from Snape out of the corner of her eye. She moved her head just in time to see him tucking his wand neatly beneath his cloak.

A boisterous cheer erupted from the ground below them, drawing Hermione's attention back to the area of play.

"There you go, Ron!" Dean was yelling at the top of his lungs. "Now all you have to do is save that last one, and you're in!"

Hermione's jaw dropped, her head snapping toward Snape. "You cheated!" she scoffed, watching Snape carefully, looking for an indication that she had been seeing things. The action was so blatantly uncharacteristic of Snape, or any other teacher for that matter, that she could scarcely believe what she had just seen. Perhaps this wasn't Professor Snape at all, but instead, a Polyjuiced version of the man?

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Miss Granger, though I suggest you return your attentions to the activities below, lest you find yourself in detention for airing ridiculous, false accusations," he replied in his usual bored baritone.

She scowled at him, his eyes still fixed to the ground below them, and switched her gaze back to the tryouts *That sneaky bastard*, she thought as Ron saved his third goal in a row. She pondered the situation for a moment, her mind analyzing both sides of its own inner argument. On the one hand, he had only Confunded McLaggen to better his team's chances of winning the Quidditch Cup. Then again, he had done something that benefited one of her best friends, so she really couldn't complain about it... could she?

When Ron saved his fifth and final goal, the crowd erupted in cheers. She smiled brightly as Ginny and Harry nearly knocked him off his broom when he landed, ensconcing him in a two-sided bear hug.

"I suppose I can't really complain, can I, Professor?" she asked, smiling, and turned her head to her left.

Her face dropped when she saw that Snape was gone, and she twisted herself around in a full three-sixty, searching for the man's whereabouts. Amazingly, he had managed to sneak out of the stands and off of the pitch, completely undetected by her. She had to give it to him... the man was stealth incarnate.

She paused. Perhaps she really was 'losing it,' as Ron had been hinting at her so frequently as of late. Was it possible that she had imagined the encounter? She shook her head and proceeded down to the pitch below. She had to congratulate Ron on making Keeper for the Gryffindor Quidditch Team.

"Hey, Granger," McLaggen called to her as she stepped off the bleachers and onto the sidelines.

"Er...hey, Cormac," she answered hesitantly.

"What are you doing right now?" he continued, approaching her and giving her a light pat on the arm. "You wanna head up to the library? Maybe study for the Ancient Runes exam together?"

She looked at him oddly. She had never even spoken to Cormac before...not even during class. Cormac was a seventh-year, and ran with an entirely different crowd than she. If she hadn't been bumped up to Advanced Runes, she probably wouldn't even know his name. It struck her as somewhat suspicious that he would be approaching her, the best friend of the person who had just beat him out for Gryffindor Keeper, now.

"The exam isn't until next week," she responded.

He didn't move, but continued to stand in front of her, an expectant look on his face.

"And I've got something I have to do right now," she added belatedly.

"With Weasley, I suppose," he spat back.

She furrowed her brow, trying to decipher if he was truly agitated or if he was just joking around. "Yeah, actually...."

"Figures. See you, Granger."

She watched McLaggen's retreating form as he made his way back up to the castle, wondering what on earth he was on about. She joined her friends at the center of the pitch, and the three of them proceeded to Hagrid's hut to explain their sudden permanent absences from his class.

On the way back to the hall for dinner, Hermione and Harry were invited to Professor Slughorn's first party of the year, scheduled to take place at eight o'clock that evening. Ron was pointedly ignored.

Two hours later found Hermione grudgingly making her way to Slughorn's office, McLaggen following closely at her heels.

"Excellent, excellent!" Slughorn beamed as he opened the door, standing aside and allowing the two of them to enter.

Hermione chose a seat in the corner of the office, cradling her wineglass in her palm for the first hour or so of the engagement.

"Not quite as glamorous as he made them out to be, are they?" McLaggen said, nudging her with his elbow.

"Hmmm?" she replied absently, shooting back a quelling look.

"The parties. He spent the first few weeks of school boasting about how brilliant his parties always are. To be honest with you, I think I'd rather be studying for that Runes exam."

She giggled, quite in agreement with McLaggen's assessment of the evening. "Tell me about it."

"Oh!" Slughorn's rather loud exclamation pulled their attention back to the rest of the party. "Look at the hour! Time flies when you're having fun, no?"

Neville, along with several of Slughorn's other guests, nodded emphatically. Cormac and Hermione exchanged amused looks.

"Better be off, or you'll be out past curfew! I shall see you all at my next gathering, I'm sure?" Slughorn asked hopefully.

Everyone nodded their ascent, including Hermione and Cormac, though the two did it more out of courtesy than a desire to attend another party.

It was quarter past ten by the time Hermione crawled through the portrait hole and into the Gryffindor common room. Pointedly ignoring both Ron and Harry, she immediately retired to her dorm room, falling into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

Their next Potions lesson arrived before she knew it, bringing with it an entirely new concoction for the group of sixth-years to brew.

Slughorn waved his hand at the board, and a complex, but fairly easy to follow, set of directions appeared in clear, pristine handwriting.

Hermione smiled. She would have no need for any hand-me-down Potions book for this lesson. The Draught of Clarity, or Memory-Enhancing Potion, as it was often referred to, was something she could have brewed in her third year with her wand hand tied behind her back. She unstopped her vial of powdered hellebore and got to work.

Thirty minutes later saw a very pleased Hermione. Her Draught of Clarity was precisely the right shade and texture, and the spirals of steam were rising steadily in an anti-clockwise motion, just as the directions had stated. Her cauldron even smelled meekly of armadillo bile and acromantula droppings...mildly nauseating, yes, but accurate nonetheless. Seeing as it was impossible to top perfection, there was no way the Prince would be reigning supreme in this lesson. Hermione bottled up her ingredients, tucked them back into her Potions kit and stood back, awaiting the praise she deserved.

"Professor, what stinks?" Ron asked crudely, wrinkling his nose.

"Just the acromantula droppings," Slughorn replied. "Their smell overpowers the potion, as it is the dominant ingredient. Now, if there are no further questions," he shot an irritated glance in Ron's direction, "I shall be making my way around the classroom to grade your assignments."

Dean was first. His potion was bright blue, not the soft shade of pastel green that it should have been, and Slughorn simply shook his head and moved on down the row. As Hermione surveyed the potions of her classmates, she realized that hers and Harry's were the only ones that would pass for acceptable with their professor. She smiled. Harry was about to learn a very important lesson. Studying and hard work could achieve the same...if not better...results as cheating.

"Miss Granger," Professor Slughorn said, stopping before her table and puffing his chest out proudly. "Your potions surpass themselves with every class. Well done, my dear!"

He moved down the line, pausing at Ron's cauldron, then moving directly on to Harry's without so much as smelling the first. She couldn't blame him. Ron's potion was a sickly shade of gray and was bubbling up what appeared to be black mucus.

"Excellent job, Harry!" Slughorn praised when he stopped to test Harry's potion. "A perfect shade and consistency. And the smell is of...of..."

Slughorn paused, sniffing incessantly at Harry's cauldron. Excellent. It appeared as though Harry had made a mistake after all.*So much for his perfect Half-Blood Prince.*

"What is that I'm smelling, my boy?" Slughorn asked Harry, still sniffing the air roughly as if he were a hound dog tracking a fox.

"Essence of clove, sir," Harry replied. "And fluxweed, to counteract the stench of the acromantula droppings."

Hermione didn't think Slughorn's grin could have gotten any wider if he'd magicked it that way.

"Fluxweed, a sister of the mint family, amazing! Not only a Potions savant, but an inventor as well! My boy, you amaze me more and more with each lesson. Now, about the gathering I'm having this weekend..."

As Professor Slughorn pulled Harry out from behind his place at the table and proceeded to discuss (at great length) the plans for his next party, the rest of the class, including Hermione, packed up their things.

When the clock on the wall signaled the end of the period, Hermione was the first one out of the room. She had had enough of Harry's stupid book. It was cheating, whether he and Ron wanted to acknowledge it or not. She simply *had* to prove to him that copying someone else's answers was not the best way to achieve results. She was going to find a way to do it...and she knew just the man to talk to.

After Hermione had concluded her rounds for that evening, she made her way down the seventh-floor corridor to the stone gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office. As a prefect, she had been given the password to the Headmaster's workplace at the start of term. She paused, rolling her eyes at the childish array of sweets that the Headmaster always chose for his rooms, and belted out, "Lemon fizzies."

The great granite beast leapt obediently out of the way, and Hermione gingerly stepped onto the spiraling stairs as they initiated their ascent to the destined level.

After grabbing the brass griffin knocker and rapping politely, she patiently waited on the outside of Dumbledore's heavy oak entry door until the elderly wizard called for her...by name...to come inside. She shook her head, smiling. It really did seem as though the man knew everything.

"Ah, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said pleasantly, "to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

He gestured toward a pea-green, felt-covered seat on the guest side of his antique oak desk, and she graciously sat upon it.

"Lemon drop?" he asked, offering her a bowl of yellow candies.

"No, thank you, sir," she replied, waving him off.

The Headmaster reclined in his chair, his eyes twinkling behind his half-moon spectacles. Hermione allowed him a moment to pop two lemon drops into his mouth, then asked the question she had come to pose.

"I've come to ask if your offer for extra lessons is still on the table, sir."

Dumbledore regarded her politely, removing his glasses and polishing them with the hem of his emerald robes.

"And in which subject, might I ask, will you be seeking these lessons?" he responded, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose with his forefinger.

"Potions, sir."

"I see," he replied. "Is Professor Slughorn not challenging you enough in his classes?"

"No," Hermione replied, shifting a bit uncomfortably in her seat. "It's not that, not really, anyways. It's just that I feel as if I would benefit from extra lessons outside of his classroom. If he could just spare an hour or two each week..."

"Impertinence!" cried a voice from behind her.

She whipped her head around and searched for the source of the voice, eventually snapping her eyes back to Dumbledore and gazing questioningly at him when she was unable to find it.

"Outrageous!" the voice called again.

Turning abruptly once more, this time she was able to find the person...or portrait, rather...responsible. A scrawny, elderly wizard with jet-black hair was glaring angrily at her from a heavy gold frame with the name "Arthur Shiverbalm" on its plate. The man looked as though he'd have throttled her, if he had only had the three-dimensional arms with which to do it.

"Professor Slughorn was a personal student of mine, and I'll not have you sully his good name with your nonsense requests!" the ornery wizard decreed.

Hermione's jaw dropped. "I wasn't sully..."

"You've grown too lenient in your old age, Albus!" the portrait cried, his glare now focused on the Headmaster. "These students are running wild! Second-guessing teachers. In my day..."

"I wasn't second-guessing at all!" Hermione shouted back at the portrait. "I want Professor Slughorn's help. I just wanted some extra less..."

"Just like your teaching staff," the portrait interrupted, ignoring Hermione completely, his eyes never having left Dumbledore's in the first place. "Waltzing in here at all hours of the night, whining about students and tasks you've asked them to..."

"That's quite enough, Arthur," Dumbledore interjected sternly. "I wouldn't want to have to pull your shades shut again."

The jaw of the man in the portrait dropped so far open that Hermione was sure it would smack the frame.

"Why, I never!" the portrait wizard shouted indignantly, whirling out of sight so quickly that his robes made an audible *whooshing* sound as he disappeared beyond the frame.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I apologize for Headmaster Shiverbalm's rudeness, Miss Granger. He has a bit of an uneven temper. Now, you were saying?" he asked, popping another lemon drop into his waiting mouth.

"Er...yes," Hermione replied slowly. "I was hoping that Professor Slughorn might agree to take on extra lessons with me. One lesson per week would more than suffice, and..."

The elderly wizard held up one gnarled hand, forestalling her request. "I'm afraid, my dear, that Professor Slughorn was quite clear about this matter when I hired him. It is in his contract that he will not be giving lessons outside of his required schedule."

"But, sir," she exclaimed, "it would only be for an hour per week, and if you could perhaps speak with him..."

"Please," Dumbledore interrupted, holding up his hand again, "let me finish."

Hermione quieted down, an irritated expression marring her features.

"While Professor Slughorn will not be open to giving extra lessons, it may be possible to arrange an alternative. Professor Snape..."

"But, sir, Professor Snape would never..."

"Professor Snape," Dumbledore interceded, raising his voice over hers, "while reluctant to teach those who do not wish to learn, is more than happy to assist those students who have taken a special liking to his subject. Although he is no longer the Potions master for the school, he is still the foremost expert on the subject in this country."

Hermione paused, allowing the Headmaster to finish before countering his argument. "I'm not saying that Professor Snape isn't brilliant, sir, but the likelihood of him agreeing to tutor me is fairly nonexistent."

"And why do you say that, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked kindly. "Have you not been first in your year at Potions every term since you began your academic career at Hogwarts?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"And did you not receive an Outstanding on your Potions O.W.L.?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then I see no reason why Professor Snape would deny you extra lessons, if your classes aren't quite up to speed with that of which you are capable."

"He hates me." The sentence flew from her lips so bluntly that it sounded harsh even to her own ears. She blushed.

Dumbledore smiled, regarding her carefully over his recently-polished glasses. "You give yourself far too little credit, Miss Granger. It just so happens that Professor Snape said to me just the other day that you were the best Potions student he'd ever taught."

Hermione couldn't help but let her jaw slacken hugely, making her look far more like a guppy than a human being.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled brightly. "Yes, my dear. Even a teacher such as Professor Snape is capable of a compliment where one is deserved. Now, I cannot promise you anything, but I would not underestimate my powers of persuasion. I shall speak to Professor Snape for you in the morning," he paused, his brow heightening, "if that is what you wish?"

Hermione finally shut her mouth; the fact that Snape was capable of complimenting anyone...especially her...still a bit much for her to comprehend. "Yes, sir, if you wouldn't mind, that is."

Dumbledore clasped his hands together merrily and rose from his desk, turning the corner and standing next to Hermione. "Excellent, excellent. I shall see what can be done, then."

He politely pulled Hermione's chair out for her and walked her to the door. "I will let you know, one way or another, though I have high hopes that the answer will be in the affirmative. You'd better be off now. I suspect Mr. Weasley may have missed his rounds for the evening."

Hermione smiled. Now she was *certain* that the man knew everything.

Hermione found it difficult to sleep that night. Though extra lessons with Snape were not her ideal concept of a good time, he was, in fact, the foremost Potions master in all of England. Under his tutelage, the sky would be the limit. She sorely doubted that Professor Snape would agree to spend any more time in her company than was required by school doctrine, but the Headmaster had seemed fairly confident in his...*what had he called them?*...powers of persuasion.

The following morning came much too quickly for Hermione, and she made her way down to the Great Hall for breakfast. She was far from hungry, and it felt as though a large rock had settled in the hollow of her stomach.

"Fanks fer cuvrin fermee lassnight, 'Miyee," Ron said to her over a mouthful of eggs as she took her seat at the breakfast table.

"You're welcome," she replied rather harshly. "But don't expect me to do it again. Dumbledore knows you haven't been doing them, by the way."

Ron blanched, and Harry cut short his conversation with Seamus to turn to Hermione.

"When did you see Dumbledore?" he asked her speculatively.

"I...er...ran into him during my rounds last night," she lied quickly.

"Oh," Harry replied and turned back toward Seamus.

"So, anyways," Seamus continued now that he had Harry's attention once more, "the Holyhead Harpies...."

Hermione turned back to her untouched plate of food just in time to see a tawny barn owl dropping a catalog onto the table in front of her.

"Oh, good!" Ron grunted, reaching for the rolled-up magazine. "*Quidditch Weekly's* here."

He savagely unwrapped the parcel, untying the string and smoothing it out in front of him expectantly.

"*Collectable Books Monthly?*" he said in a fairly repulsed tone. "This has to be yours," he concluded, tossing the catalog haphazardly toward Hermione.

"Ohhhh," she grumbled irritably. "You've gotten bacon grease on it, Ronald! Honestly!" She shook her head.

"Sorry," he answered noncommittally, his eyes searching the space above the table for the owl that would be carrying his *Quidditch Weekly*.

A second bird soared over Hermione, carrying in its talons a small, neatly folded note. The black crow dropped the parcel directly onto her lap this time, and she looked at it curiously before opening it.

The letter was folded into a perfect square and tied together with a thin, black string. There was no name written on the front of it, so she assumed its sender had told the bird for whom it was intended and where she normally sat during breakfast. This meant that the sender probably resided in the castle. Hermione swallowed hard, untying the parcel. She hoped it was from Dumbledore, and she hoped it bore good news. The message was scribbled in small, cramped writing, and there were only three main lines:

Miss Granger,

Your first lesson is scheduled for this Wednesday at 8 P.M., per Headmaster Dumbledore.

If you would like there to be a second, do not be late.

These lessons are private, and will remain as such if you wish for them to continue.

Professor Severus Snape

Potions Master

Hermione wasn't sure whether she should be ecstatic or disheartened. Snape had agreed to tutor her, but under very specific (and volatile) conditions. Oh, who was she kidding? She was beside herself! The foremost Potions expert in the country was going to be tutoring her, and *only* her, in an extracurricular environment. She wouldn't just be ahead of the curve at Hogwarts, but if she worked hard, she could graduate with more knowledge and experience than most university alumni.

She refolded the note, tied the string around it and stuffed it into her schoolbag. *Wednesday at 8 P.M. Perfect.*

Hermione moved down the narrow set of stone steps that led to the dungeon corridor. It was 7:45 on Wednesday evening, and she was fifteen minutes early for her lesson with Professor Snape. Harry and Ron had Quidditch practice on Wednesdays from six to ten, so her presence would not be missed in the Gryffindor common room. She paused halfway down the corridor, turning to the entrance on her right that led to Snape's office.

"Enter." Professor Snape's signature drawl reached her ears through the door as she was raising her hand. She hadn't even knocked.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," she said politely, placing her cauldron and Potions kit on the floor to her right.

"Not there," he said irritably, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. "In the lab. Give me a minute." He paused, halting his writing and looking up at her from his place behind his desk. "You're early."

"I apologize, sir. I just didn't want to be late," she answered quickly.

He ignored her and returned to scribbling something down on an unusually long piece of parchment. She stood quietly, taking the opportunity to survey the room.

She had been in Snape's office only once before...in her second year. As it was, she had only stayed in the room for less than one minute, and she had spent most of that minute staring at the inside of his Potions cupboard, searching for boomslang skin.

Now that she had a few minutes to really examine the place, she took her time in doing so. The walls of the office were in shadow, and all four were lined with glass jars, strange objects floating inside of the clear containers.

Dimly lit torches were fastened to the front and back walls, giving the room an eerie glow. On the guest side of the desk were two chintz armchairs, both as black as onyx and lined in gold. There was a door on the right side of the room that she assumed led to Snape's private quarters, though she could not be sure.

"You may sit," he drawled irritably, not looking up from his writing.

She brought her cauldron, Potions kit and book bag with her as she made her way to the left guest chair. After quietly placing the items on the ground behind the chair, she perched herself on the seat precariously, being careful not to make any more noise than was necessary.

She glanced at the clock on the wall...7:51. She was sure he was planning on making her wait until exactly 8:00 before beginning their lesson. From what she knew of Snape, the man did everything to the letter and definitely to the minute.

Exactly nine minutes later, and without glancing up at the wall clock, he laid down his quill and rolled up his lengthy section of parchment. After placing both items in the topmost drawer of his desk, he rose from his seat and walked over to the mysterious door on the right side of the room.

Hermione remained in her chair, unsure of whether or not he wished her to follow.

"Well?" he bit out, glaring at her.

She rose quietly and grabbed her belongings, following Snape as he swept through the door and into the other room.

"On," he announced clearly, and the torches on the wall all flared to life at his command. Apparently, they were spelled to ignite at his instruction.

This new room was almost an exact replica of the Potions lab that Snape had kept previously, only it was constructed at a smaller scale. Three tables, each with two stools, were the only furniture in the room aside from a statue of a gargoyle that sat in the corner, water pouring constantly from its mouth into a small stone basin.

"You may use the table on the right," Snape said out of nowhere. "If you make a mess, clean it up. I am not averse to giving out detentions for careless behavior that occurs outside of the normal classroom environment. Am I understood?"

Hermione looked at him meekly, completely oblivious to his intentions for the remainder of the evening. "Er...what would you like me to do, sir?"

He snorted and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the doorframe and looking at her like she had just asked him the sum of two plus two. "I should think that would be obvious. The only potion that you failed to brew properly this term is the Draught of Living Death. You will be brewing it tonight and next Wednesday...and the Wednesday after that, if necessary...until you get it right."

Her jaw slackened. "How did you..."

"Professor Slughorn has been spewing the news of Potter's sudden alleged brilliance at Potions since the start of term...including the fact that he was the only one in the class to correctly brew the Draught of Living Death in the very first lesson. The *only* one to brew it correctly, Miss Granger. Which means you did not."

"Oh," she said quietly.

"I have no idea what you are waiting for," he said casually, curling his fingers inward and bringing up his right hand to examine his fingernails.

"You haven't given me any directions, sir, and the book didn't..."

"The book," he interrupted her, looking up at her over his still-bent fingers, "is not required for this lesson. You will be brewing from memory."

She gawked at him. "Memory? But, sir, I couldn't possibly complete the potion from memory. I didn't get it completely right the first time. I would have to improvise new calculations when it comes to stirring, and..."

"Precisely, Miss Granger. Contrary to popular belief...*your* belief, at least...not all the answers can be found in a book. Now, either commence brewing, or leave."

Hermione shot him a look as if to ask, "Are you serious?" But when he did little more than go back to studying his fingernails, she slumped her shoulders in defeat and arranged her items in proper order on the table to which she'd been assigned.

The brewing process took well over an hour. At the end, Hermione's potion was a very light shade of lilac, but not, "clear as water" as her book had stated it should be if brewed to perfection. When she laid down her ladle on the table beside her cauldron, Snape rose from the counter on which he had been organizing ingredients and walked over to inspect her potion.

"It's not perfect," she said glumly.

"No, it is not," he agreed. "Do it again."

"What?" she exclaimed in disbelief.

"I said, do...it...again."

"But, sir, it's already 9:30, and I'm not supposed to be..."

"You are a prefect, Miss Granger. You are allowed to be in the halls after curfew. Now, do you wish to get this right or not?" he snapped.

"No, I want to, Professor, but I can't think of anything to do differently that would fix it," she replied earnestly.

"I do not remember you asking for my help during the first brewing," he said nonchalantly, half-leaning on, half-sitting against the table.

She guffawed at him. "But you said I had to brew it on my own!"

"No, I did not. I only said that your book would not be necessary. Are you in a private tutoring session or not?" He arched a brow at her. "I believe that as I am the person running this lesson, the title of tutor belongs *to me*. You should have asked."

Hermione considered arguing with him, but thought better of it. Unless she was mistaken, Snape had just offered to show her how to brew the draught correctly. She Evanesc'd her potion and began the brewing process anew.

"Sir?" she questioned him as he watched her progress over her shoulder.

"Hmmm?" he answered absently.

"I'm not really sure how to maximize the benefit of the sopophorous bean."

His gaze switched from her cauldron to her eyes. "Specific questions only, Miss Granger."

Hermione thought for a moment, trying to figure out a way to phrase her question that would not irritate her tutor. "Is there a way to harvest the juices of the bean that will render better results than cutting?"

Snape gave her a rare half-smile. "Much better, Miss Granger. And yes, there is. Take out your silver dagger."

Hermione did as she was told and attempted to hand the knife over to Snape, but he waved her off dismissively. "No. You will be completing this on your own, Miss Granger. Believe me when I say that you will appreciate it once we've finished. Now, put on your dragon skin gloves."

He waited while she complied with his instructions, then continued where he had left off. "Now, hold the bean down carefully with one hand, and use the flat edge of the dagger to gently squeeze the bean flat in a rolling motion."

She complied, and when the juices from the little sopophorous bean spilled out over the plastic cutting board, she gasped. There was enough juice to fill an entire vial...much more than she had ever expected a tiny thing like that bean to be able to produce.

"Very good," Snape said, and she noted that she detected no tone of sarcasm in his voice. "Now, add the juice, and begin your stirs."

She did as she was told, pausing when she got to her sixth stir.

"Sir?"

He didn't answer her, but she continued anyway. "Should I add a clockwise turn every seventh stir?"

She turned to look at him, and he arched a speculative brow, replying, "Why do you ask?"

She thought quickly, not wanting to answer truthfully that she had seen Harry do it. "Because the clockwise stir would slow the diffusion of the valerian roots, and that might explain why my color was off last time."

He continued to stare at her, making her uneasy. She shifted on the spot, shuffling her feet.

"A lucky guess," he said, still arching a brow at her. "You are correct. The clockwise stir, while not written in the book, is essential for a perfect potion. Proceed."

She smiled brilliantly at him, and she could have sworn she felt him smiling back when she turned to tend her potion. Ten minutes later, the potion was finished, and it was as clear as ice.

"Brilliant!" She beamed, turning to look at him.

"Adequate," he responded dully.

She frowned. "Why is it only adequate? It's clear as water, isn't it? Just like the book says it should be."

"What did I tell you about books, Miss Granger?"

He reached past her and grabbed one of the empty vials out of her Potions kit, brushing her arm with his own in the process. She shivered. It was an odd sensation, and she wasn't quite sure why she had felt it. She was brushed up against all day long on a regular basis...in the hallways, between classes, in the common room...but this was, well, different. She looked up at him, and he stared back at her oddly.

"Miss Granger, are you quite all right?"

"Yes, sir," she answered immediately, though she could feel that she was blushing.

He scrutinized her for several seconds before continuing his explanation. "When bottled, your potion will only remain clear for a matter of minutes. The only thing keeping it clear at the moment is its exposure to air. Observe."

She shook the sensation off and immersed herself in watching him closely. He sucked a small amount of the liquid into a dropper and replaced it in the vial, stopping the cork when he was finished. Within the first minute, the potion in the vial turned back to its previous shade of lilac while the portion in the cauldron remained clear.

"So how do we fix it?" she asked almost immediately, snapping her eyes back to Snape.

"That," he said, placing the stoppered vial on the table, "is a problem that we shall work on in our next lesson."

She smiled and packed up her ingredients, being careful to leave the table as she had found it. When she had finished, she slung her backpack over her shoulder and picked her cauldron up off of the table, cradling it carefully in the crook of her arm. For only the second time since she'd arrived in the lab, she glanced up at the clock on the wall, her eyes bulging when she saw that it read 11:15.

"Shit," she blurted out, only to cringe once she'd realized what she'd said in the presence of a teacher.

"Do not force me to take points, Miss Granger," Snape said. He was bent over the table, scribbling something down on a small piece of parchment. When he was finished, he rose back up and handed her the note.

"Read this before our next lesson. Wednesday at 8 P.M., just like tonight. Again, I will instruct you not to be late and to keep these lessons private."

She took the note and looked up at him curiously. "Excuse me, sir, but why is it so important to keep these sessions a secret?"

He glared at her, and for a moment, she was worried that she was about to be yelled at.

"I do not wish for you to inform anyone of our lessons," he said, "because I do not wish to extend this invitation to any other student. I have turned down tutoring requests in the past. The only reason that I have agreed to this one is because the Headmaster has asked it of me as a personal favor. Is that clear enough for you, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir," she responded, wishing she hadn't asked the question in the first place.

He walked past her and opened the door to the lab, standing aside so that she could pass through.

"Next Wednesday, 8 P.M." he said, dismissing her. "And do be sure that you've read that book, or do not bother coming at all."

She nodded, keeping her eyes to the ground, and exited his office.

On the trek back from his office, Hermione pondered the night's events at length. She had to admit that he was a brilliant tutor. Any other professor would have simply written the instructions on the board and waited for her to complete the potion to the best of her ability. Not only had he taught her to brew the potion blindly, but he had also made her think about her methods on her own, not just copy them from a book. She felt confident that, if asked, she would be able to brew the potion correctly, completely from memory.

She rounded the corner at the top of the dungeon steps, brushing against the corner of the wall as she went. The sensation made her think about other events that had taken place that evening.

Why had she shivered when he had brushed her arm? Yes, one would normally jump, move or at least look down upon being touched by another person, but her feelings at the time were somewhat different.

She chuckled at herself when she saw where her line of thinking was taking her. Clearly she had been deprived of sexual contact for far too long if she was thinking of her former Potions professor in any manner but a scholastic one.

Not that sex was foreign to her...far from it, as far as she was concerned. The two weeks she'd spent at Viktor's vacation home this last summer had been filled with sexual exploits. In fact, she'd actually been disappointed when she'd had to leave.

Still, it had been a while.

Thinking about Viktor led to comparing him with Snape. They were similar in ways that she would have never thought of if unprovoked. Both were intelligent men in their own rights. While Viktor's intellect was masked by his outward appearance as the stereotypical *dumb jock*, Snape's ability to be seen for his mind was compromised by the fact that almost everyone around him thought of him solely as the Arsehole in the Dungeons.

Now that she thought about it, Viktor and Snape were much more alike than she'd ever noticed. Their appearances, for example, were not that dissimilar. Both men had signature prominent Roman noses. Both had unique and intriguing eyes. She suspected that if Snape spent as much time on the Quidditch pitch as Viktor did, the two would have had similar figures as well. They were equal to one another height-wise, at any rate.

"Dilligrout," Hermione stated clearly as she approached the portrait hole. The Fat Lady swung sleepily inward, and she stepped through into the common room. She was immensely pleased to find the place empty and trudged immediately up to her bedroom.

Lavender and Parvati were both snoring loudly as usual. She stripped down to her underwear and bent to grab her nightgown from the trunk at the base of her four-poster, pausing when she caught her own reflection in the full-length mirror.

She was not dissatisfied with her body. Her breasts were on the smaller scale, but perkier than most of the girls' in her class. She had a tight, flat stomach, though it lacked muscle definition. Her legs were well-toned...probably from all the walking she did between her elevated number of classes.

She glanced at her roommates. There was no reason that the two of them should be so popular with the boys while she was so commonly blown off as the bookish third member of the Golden Trio. There was nothing for it. She would have to start working on her image.

Though there was a significant lack of acceptable male counterparts amongst the sixth-year boys, there were actually some very tempting specimens among the sevenths. She slipped into her nightgown and under her comforter, thinking about her plans for the following day. If Snape was turning her on subconsciously, then she definitely needed to get laid. She grabbed the almost-forgotten note that Snape had written her and read it by wand light: Potions of the South Pacific. She made a mental note to stop by the library the following morning, then shut her eyes and allowed her mind to rest, saving her planning for the subsequent morning.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 8

HBP--the way it should have been written. Written for the January '08 SS/HG Exchange. Canon-compliant all the way through DH, sans the epilogue.

Hermione had never thought of Advanced Ancient Runes as a particularly distressing class. She had also never gone to said class in her fifth-year school skirt and shirt. Both of which she had shrunk while attempting to use her parents' washing machine during last year's summer holiday.

She had awoken the morning after her first Potions tutorial with a renewed sense of purpose. She had been single for far too long, and as Viktor was overseas playing the Chudley Cannons in the International Quidditch Final Qualifiers, she realized she would have to resort to delving into the shallow gene pool that made up the Hogwarts student body.

Hence her revealing outfit.

She had skipped breakfast. It just wouldn't do to have Harry or Ron laughing at her, and that thought alone made the notion of going to class on an empty stomach more than acceptable in her opinion.

So, she grabbed a glass of water from the pitcher in the common room...always cold, thanks to her friends, the house-elves...and proceeded to her first class, Advanced Ancient Runes. Nothing. Not one look, not even from Cormac, who had taken to leering at her like a hyena eyeing a blood-rare steak as of late.

Halfway through the class, they divided into pairs. Hermione, as usual, paired with Parvati.

"Hey, Hermione," Parvati whispered after Professor Babbling had set a list of equations for the class to work out. "What's with the outfit?"

Hermione let her hair fall forward, obscuring her face in hopes of hiding her blush. "Laundry accident. Stupid machine's on the fritz," Hermione lied beautifully. "I knew I should have just done a cleansing spell like the rest of you... Must be my Muggle upbringing."

"Oh," was Parvati's only response.

"Hey, Hermione," Cormac called softly from behind once Parvati had risen from her seat and approached the teacher's desk to ask a question.

"Hmmm?" Hermione replied absently, spinning around to face him whilst chewing on her quill.

"Are you going to Slughorn's party on Saturday?" he whispered, leaning forward.

"Huh?" she answered blankly, blinking at him. "Uh...yeah, I guess so...probably."

"Great. So do you think Ginny will be there?" He smiled.

She furrowed her brow, looking at him oddly. "Why?"

"Just wondering," he replied innocently.

"Uh...yeah, I guess so..."

"Great, then I'll meet you two in the common room at eight," he said before going back to his runes. He looked as pleased as a pig in shit as he started to hum softly to himself. Turning around to face the board, she shook her head. *What was that about?*

Hermione had a free period after Runes, and she spent it studying alone in the library, thinking. Her skirt was halfway up her thighs, and her shirt was so tight that she could see the outline of her white lace bra pressed up against the cotton from the inside. And still, no one had noticed her.

She could have sworn she'd seen McLaggen staring at her, but he had just wanted to know if Ginny was going to Slughorn's party on Saturday. She sighed loudly. So much for seduction.

At the end of her free hour, she packed up her books and headed downstairs. Her next stop would be lunch, to which she nearly sprinted, as she was close to passing out from the hunger pains caused by skipping breakfast.

She shuffled over to the Gryffindor lunch table, and Ron literally squeezed the egg salad out of his sandwich when he saw her approach him and take her seat.

"What are you on about?" he asked, glaring at her.

"I don't know what you mean, Ronald," she answered, picking up an apple from a centered bowl and examining it closely. Apparently she had managed to catch *someone's* attention, even if it was her somewhat daft best friend.

"What's with the outfit? Who're you trying to impress?" he asked, spooning the littered egg back into his sandwich with his bare fingers. He then proceeded to wipe his pants and replace his hands around the messy ration, taking a ridiculous bite and chewing with his mouth open.

Hermione grimaced at his poor table manners. Ron was looking at her expectantly, and she shook off her offended frown and did her best to answer him without dry-heaving.

"I am not trying to impress anyone, not that it is any of *your* business," Hermione replied, taking a bite of her apple as Harry took a seat next to Ron. This was certainly not the reaction she had expected. Ron didn't seem impressed, rather, angry at her audacity.

"What are you two on about now?" Harry asked crossly.

"Hermione's dressed like a bloody vixen!" Ron shouted.

Hermione nearly choked on her bit of apple and managed to disguise it as a snort. She was chuckling madly. Harry looked at Ron as if he was Confunded, and Ron's face grew redder with each passing second. *Vixen*. That was certainly not something that she had been called before...

"Go on," Ron said nastily. "Show him. Stand up. He'll agree." He waited, his egg sandwich, amazingly, lying forgotten on the plate before him.

"Agree to what?" Hermione asked with a furrowed brow.

"Agree that you look like a SLUT," Ron replied at the top of his lungs.

Hermione's mouth dropped open, the bit of apple that she hadn't swallowed falling dully onto her plate. Harry's eyes widened in alarm as he looked from one friend to the other. The moment seemed suspended...frozen in time. She felt every eye in the room on her. There was a sickening silence, during which everyone around her stopped and stared, trying to discern what she was wearing from her obscured seated position.

Hermione's face was as red as Ron's hair, and she found herself unable to form a proper response through the haze of her anger.

She stared at him as if she'd like nothing better than to pick up her butter knife and plunge it straight into his cornea...and she could have...and her eyes darted quickly to Harry. He, too, was apparently at a loss for words. His mouth was flapping up and down like a fish taking in water, and his eyes were snapping back and forth between the two of them.

Her rage still mounting, Hermione slammed her hands down on the table, lifting slightly from her seat, her volatile parting words perched on the tip of her tongue.

A strong hand landed on her shoulder, holding her steadfast to her seat. Her eyes snapped up to glare at the person who would dare limit her movement at a time such as this. Ginny was standing behind her, glowering angrily at her brother.

"Ron, you fucking jerk!" Ginny whispered loudly. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Ron gave her a warning look, which Ginny naturally ignored. "You're an idiot, and it won't work!"

Lingering anger aside, Hermione found herself looking up at her long-haired companion. "What are you talking about?"

Ginny answered, her eyes never leaving Ron. "He's jealous, 'Mione. He had lab with Cormac last period, and he was bragging about how both of you are going to Slughorn's party on Saturday. He thinks we're all trying to exclude him by *getting ourselves invited* to the Slug Club parties."

Ron looked furious. "No, I'm..."

"Oh, shut up, Ron," Ginny interrupted harshly.

Hermione turned back to Ron, her eyes ablaze. She spoke calmly, despite the rage she felt in the pit of her stomach. "If I ever hear you speak about me like that again, to my face or behind my back, I'll hex you in a way that will guarantee your brothers the sole right to further your family's lineage."

Ron looked confused, though whether it was by her words or her anger, she couldn't be sure.

She extracted herself from the table and made her way out of the Great Hall, Ginny hot on her heels.

"'Mione... 'Mione, wait up." Ginny puffed, running to catch up with her.

Hermione waited until she was far enough down the corridor that they wouldn't be heard, then stopped and turned to the female Weasley.

"'Mione, are you okay?" Ginny looked nervous.

"No, I'm not okay, Ginny. Your brother just called me a slut in front of half the student body."

"He's just jealous," she replied, shaking her head. "He's an idiot."

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest. "You're right about *that*."

"Come on," Ginny said with a smile. "Let's go grab something in the kitchens."

Hermione shook her head. "No, thank you. I'm going to go up to the library for a bit."

Ginny nodded and patted her on the shoulder, then walked back into the dining hall. She glanced back when she reached the door, only to find an empty hallway behind her.

Hermione made her way up to the fourth floor library, a deep scowl etched on her face. She was on her way to check out the book that Snape had assigned her, but all she could think about was that she was sick of school, sick of Ron, and sick of men altogether..."

Smack!

Hermione collided with something tall and dark, knocking her backward onto her rear and causing her to drop her schoolbooks.

"Watch where you are going, Granger!" Snape snapped irritably.

Hermione leaned to the side and massaged her aching hip, wincing when she touched a spot that would later develop a deep bruise.

"I'm sorry, sir," she replied through clenched teeth.

When her professor didn't answer her, she looked up, only to see him staring avidly at the library door. She arched a brow at the man, wondering why he was neither scowling at her nor leaving her presence.

"Prof..."

"Kindly right yourself, Miss Granger," Snape interrupted quickly, eyes averted.

She had no idea what he was on about. She looked around and saw that her books were strewn about her, one of her slip-on Mary Janes was leaning unsteadily against the stone wall to her right, and her skirt...she blushed. Her skirt was flipped inside out and resting on her abdomen, exposing her cotton panties completely. She quickly smoothed it down and pushed herself back up onto her feet.

"Sorry, sir," she mumbled.

Snape made an effort at a half side-glance, and seeing that her skirt was now concealing what it was meant to cover, he looked down his nose at her.

"See that you are more careful next time," he said in a deep voice, sweeping off down the corridor.

As she watched him disappear down the stony staircase, robes whipping wildly behind him as he went, she wondered if that had been a blush she'd seen before he'd departed. She bent down and picked up her schoolbooks, tossing her left Mary Jane on top of the pile. When she was properly seated in her sanctuary of literature, she slipped her shoe back on her foot, smiling broadly. That had definitely been a blush on his cheeks. At least her efforts weren't lost on *everyone*.

"You're mad!" she heard a female voice bellow beyond the portrait hole.

Hermione paused mid-sentence, her half-spoken, "Dilligrout," dying on her lips before she'd finished the word. She pressed an ear up against the portrait of the Fat Lady, eliciting an indignant huff of, "I never!" from the painted woman.

"No, I'm not. Think about it. She was obviously with *him* last night," Ron said, his voice unmistakable.

Hermione froze. If he was referring to her, then he knew that she had been in Professor Snape's office the night before...but, how?

More importantly, if everyone knew of her extra lessons, Snape would surely discontinue her tutelage. It was time to do some damage control.

"Dilligrout," Hermione muttered.

"About time," the Fat Lady mumbled irritably.

The portrait hole swung quickly inward, and Hermione stepped over the threshold into the common room. Ginny's head whipped around at the sound, her eyes widening in what Hermione was sure was either horror or embarrassment when she saw who had just entered the room.

Ginny swallowed hard. "'Mion..."

"Save it, Ginny," she interrupted, her eyes snapping to Ron's. "And just what *precisely* were the two of you talking about?" She took up an aggressive stance, hands on hips, legs shoulder-width apart.

"Nothing," Ginny interrupted again, but Hermione held up a hand, silencing the younger witch.

"Well?" Hermione asked again, staring daggers at Ron.

Ginny was looking particularly nervous, her eyes darting back and forth between her friend and her brother like a mouse caught between two cats. The female Weasley's hands were clasped together in front of her, and she was rubbing them together as though she held an invisible towel that she couldn't quite wring out.

Ron was giving Hermione a defensive look, much like a toddler who had been caught in a lie.

"Where were you last night?" Ron finally spoke up.

"Ron! That is none of your business," Ginny said sharply.

"No, it isn't," Hermione added coolly, crossing her arms protectively across her chest.

"Well, you weren't here," Ron continued. "And Ginny said you weren't in the girls' dorms during your free period..."

"I just said that I didn't see *her* in the dorms," Ginny cut in quickly. "That doesn't mean that she wasn't in her room!"

"I think we all know whose room she was in," Ron said nastily, his eyes staring into Hermione's as if he were trying to read her thoughts.

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked, quite baffled. Why Ron would be so concerned that she was taking extra lessons was beyond her comprehension.

"I'm leaving," Ron spat, storming past Hermione and out the portrait hole.

Hermione looked at Ginny, confused.

"He thinks you were with McLaggen," Ginny said in defeat, plopping down into one of the velvet chairs near the fireplace.

"*What?*" Hermione asked, stunned.

"I told him that it was none of his business who you were with," Ginny replied, looking up at her friend hopefully.

"Why on earth would he think I was with Cormac last night?" Hermione asked, taking the seat next to Ginny.

"Oh," Ginny responded, slapping the arm of her chair in mild annoyance, "because you weren't at breakfast this morning, and you're always at breakfast, and then McLaggen was bragging about going to the party with you on Saturday..."

"But he asked me about you!" Hermione interrupted loudly.

"Yeah, well, he asked *me* about *you*, so I really don't know what to make of any of it," Ginny said, attempting to coax Crookshanks out of his corner by the fire. The half-Kneazle merely grinned and shut his eyes, much too interested in a kitty catnap to be bothered with Ginny's snapping fingers.

Hermione ran through the current conversation in her mind. Whatever Cormac was up to, she didn't like it. Whether he was interested in her or her friend, he had done the wrong thing by playing both sides of the fence. And why on earth would he tell Ron that he was going to Slughorn's party with her? As far as she knew, Cormac *hated* Ron, and vice-versa.

"So that's it?" Hermione said finally, catching her familiar's eye and motioning toward Ginny with her neck. The shaggy beast reluctantly rose from his spot on the carpet, stretched, and made his way toward the redhead. "That's why he thought I'd spent the night in Cormac's room?"

"Not totally," Ginny said, scooping Crookshanks up delightedly. "He asked if you were in the library this morning after first period, and I told him that I thought you were because I couldn't find you in your room. Oh!" she added abruptly, halting her scratching of Crookshanks' ear, eliciting an irritated growl from the cat. "Oh, you can wait a second," she said to the feline in mock irritation.

Ginny reached into her jumper pocket and pulled out a rolled piece of parchment, then held it out across the gap between the two girls' chairs.

"What's this?" Hermione asked, taking the proffered note and unraveling it.

"It's from Professor Snape," she replied absently, cooing Crookshanks into a submissive belly-up position.

"Oh," Hermione answered blankly. Her lessons were private, and it wouldn't do to have to explain herself to Ginny. Judging by the content look on both the redhead's and her kitty cohort's faces, she didn't think that her presence would be missed. "I'm just going to head up to bed. Just send Crooks up when you're done, okay?"

Ginny nodded distractedly, her eyes on the cat as she playfully batted his paws.

Hermione reached her room and kicked off her shoes, taking an Indian-style seated position on her bed. Her roommates were nowhere in sight, and so she opened the letter as soon as she found a comfortable position in which to read it.

Scanning it quickly, she realized that the note was not from Snape at all. Apparently, he was just the courier.

Dear Miss Granger,

I am quite eager to hear how your lessons are proceeding with Professor Snape. If you can manage to find the time before your evening rounds, I would be delighted if you could stop by my office. Shall we say 8 o'clock?

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

P.S. I have a craving for Acid Pops this week.

Hermione glanced over at the alarm clock on Parvati's nightstand. *Shit*. It was already quarter past nine. She stuffed the note in her skirt pocket and ran down the girls' dormitory steps two stairs at a time.

"Acid Pops," she stated clearly as she approached the gargoyle.

She ascended the spiraling staircase, skipping every other step despite the lack of necessity in doing so. When she reached the top, she pushed open the door to Dumbledore's office and entered quickly, her apology already forming itself on the tip of her tongue. Hermione never got the chance to utter it. She and the Headmaster were not alone.

"I mean it, Albus! I will not..." Snape stopped mid-sentence, his head whipping around sharply to Hermione.

"Don't you *knock*?" Snape said sorely, glaring at her and crossing his arms over his chest irritably.

She halted her steps, mortified that she had just intruded on a private meeting between her professor and the Headmaster. Snape seemed livid, and it did not appear as if it had anything to do with her unannounced entry into the conversation.

"Now, now, Severus," Dumbledore cut in politely. "Miss Granger is here by my invitation." He turned a kind eye to Hermione. "Fashionably late, Miss Granger?"

"I'm so sorry, sirs," Hermione answered immediately, shaking her head in apology. "I didn't mean to..."

"Apologies are not necessary, Miss Granger. Your entry is quite well-timed. Professor Snape was just leaving."

Snape's eyes snapped from Hermione's to Dumbledore's, his eyes narrowed in anger at the elder man. She wondered if they had been discussing their tutoring sessions. Perhaps Snape didn't want to continue spending his free time furthering her education. She shook her head. She was probably just being paranoid.

"We will continue this discussion at a later time, Severus," Dumbledore said, leaving no room for argument. "Now, if you wouldn't mind..."

Snape uncrossed his arms and did an about-face toward the door, his robes whipping wildly around him. As he exited the entryway to Dumbledore's office, she couldn't help but wonder if he charmed them to billow like that...

"Have a seat, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said, waving a hand at the seat opposite him.

She turned her head back to face the Headmaster and complied, settling in the same chair in which she had sat during their last meeting.

"Now," Dumbledore proceeded, holding out his signature bowl of lemon drops to Hermione, which she waved off politely. "Professor Snape tells me you had your first lesson last night. How did it go?" The elder man rested his elbows on his desk and folded his hands under his chin in a pyramid shape, awaiting her answer with a smile.

"Very well, sir. I've managed to learn a lot even in our first session," she answered truthfully.

"Excellent, excellent," the Headmaster answered, reclining back in his seat.

Hermione paused, wondering whether or not she should ask the question that had been on her mind since entering the room. Resignedly, she decided she had to know.

"Sir, if Professor Snape doesn't want to...that is, if the situation of our sessions is inconveniencing him in any way, I would be more than willing to end them," she said nervously, hoping that the portrait of Arthur Shiverbalm wasn't monitoring their conversation. What she really didn't need right now was a comment from a two-dimensional figure regarding her lack of tact.

Dumbledore eyed her intensely, his eyes, as always, seeming to take in more than they gave away.

"Do you wish to end your arrangement with Professor Snape?" he asked seriously.

"No," she nearly shouted, causing several of the dozing portraits to glare at her, then roll over crossly and go back to sleep. "I just don't want to force him into doing anything that he doesn't want to."

Dumbledore's eyes were boring into hers again, and it was all Hermione could do not to look away under his scrutinizing gaze. Eventually, he leaned back in his chair once again. He removed his glasses and began to massage the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

"No, Miss Granger, no one, least of all myself, wishes to see that happen."

He replaced his spectacles on his face and turned to her again, sporting a wan smile. "As it were, I happen to know that Severus does not mind tutoring you. Quite the contrary, as a matter of fact. He has informed me that it is a relief to teach a student who actually wishes to be taught."

Hermione beamed at the comment, reaching out for a lemon drop. She was halfway to the bowl before she remembered that she detested the syrupy sweets.

"I would like to ask you *not* to repeat that to Professor Snape, if you wouldn't mind. I assume an explanation for that request is not necessary?"

Hermione smiled and nodded, knowing full well that Snape would never willingly admit that he liked any aspect of his job.

"I'm sorry to cut our meeting so short, Miss Granger, but it is getting rather late, and I am not as young as I used to be..."

Hermione smiled her acknowledgement. "I'm sorry for being so late. I only just got your note."

Dumbledore rose from his desk, walking toward the door. "Quite all right, my dear. Would you mind doing me one small favor?" His caterpillar eyebrows rose up his forehead.

"Of course, sir," she answered immediately.

Dumbledore waved his wand toward his desk, and a small, rolled piece of parchment, much like the one she had received that evening, flew off of it and into his hand. He handed the note to Hermione and proceeded to open the door for her.

"Would you mind giving that to Harry for me, please?" he said kindly.

She nodded, shoving the note in her pocket.

"Thank you, my dear. Goodnight," Dumbledore said, clearly attempting to stifle a yawn.

"Goodnight, Professor."

Hermione began a slow trek to her room, checking the hallways of the castle in her wake. After a quick stop at the library to check out *001 Cures for Common Skin Ailments* and *Clearly You Should Read Me*, she was on her way back to her dorm room. Though the Headmaster had eased her fears about Snape's interest in their tutoring project, she still had quite a bit to think on.

Her instructor had been to the point of fuming when she had walked into the room, consequently interrupting the men's conversation. She wondered what had pushed the professor over his ever-dwindling boiling point.

"Dilligrout," she said for the umpteenth time that day as she entered the portrait hole. She looked around the common room, searching for Crookshanks. Unable to spot him, she made her way up the dormitory steps, stopping briefly at Ginny's open door. Either Ginny was having an incredibly bad hair day, or that reddish fluff ball on top of her head was Hermione's feline familiar.

"Traitor," she whispered, shaking her head.

As she tucked herself into bed, she wondered if making herself up the next morning would even be worth the effort. After all of her primping that past morning, she had only been noticed as anything more than *alive* by one...possibly two members of the opposite sex. She rolled her eyes in the darkness. There was no point in thinking about it this late at night. She would simply decide in the morning. She pulled out the books that she had just checked out from the library. After a few moments of comfort-seeking and a whispered "*Lumos*," she was well on her way to reading herself to sleep.

The remainder of the week brought much progress on the dating front. Though she had not been asked out by anyone as of the following Wednesday, she had in fact been noticed by many sixth-year and even some seventh-year boys. *Men*, she chastised herself. They were of age, they were (presumably) sexually active, and so they were *men*, not boys.

She couldn't quite convince herself of the argument.

She had taken to once again wearing her regular school skirt, but she kept the tighter shirt as a component in her ensemble. The lines of the smaller blouse were flattering, and it tended to bunch a bit less than the ones she had bought that past summer from Madam Malkin's.

The only snag in her plans had been Saturday night. She had attended Professor Slughorn's Slug Club meeting as planned, but Cormac had not been enamored with Ginny as Hermione had hoped. He spent most of the night following Hermione around like a lost puppy dog. Not that Ginny minded, as it were. She took to giving Hermione amused looks whenever Cormac's head was turned. *Twit*.

Wednesday evening brought a much-anticipated Potions lesson to Hermione. She made her way down to the dungeons and rapped lightly on Snape's office door. To her surprise, the door swung open of its own accord.

"Good evening, Professor," Hermione called to Snape, who was seated, as before, behind his desk.

She had been more prompt with her arrival this week, and the clock struck eight at the exact moment she finished her greeting.

Snape tucked his papers away in one of his desk drawers and walked briskly into his Potions lab, sans greeting. Familiar with the drill after the previous week, Hermione followed him, her equipment in tow, heading straight for the far end of the room.

"The third table again, yes," Snape said, motioning with his neck toward the same table she had used the week before. "I wish you to brew the Draught of Living Death again, yes, Miss Granger," he added when she opened her mouth to speak, "without directions. Now," he motioned to a notebook he had laid out on the table for her, "I want you to document your process. Show your work...all of it."

Hermione nodded, extracting her materials and arranging her ingredients in silence. She brewed the potion just the same as she had the week before, this time pausing when she reached the halfway point. She noted the potion's appropriate blackcurrant colour in her notebook and raised her head to find Snape.

She nearly jumped when she saw him sitting lightly on the first table, feet barely touching the floor, watching her with an amused look on her face.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but had forgotten the question that she had intended to ask. After a few seconds' thought, she put down her quill and smoothed out her robes lightly, looking down at her notebook and pointing to her notes with her index finger.

"Sir, the potion calls for the sopophorous bean next, but isn't this where I should add the bubotuber pus?"

Snape's eyebrow nearly receded into his hairline, and he stood to his full height and uncrossed his arms, staring at her with a shocked look on his face.

He looked at her intensely, studying her. "Why would you add bubotuber pus to a recipe for Draught of Living Death?"

It was all Hermione could do to keep herself from grinning ear to ear. He was trying to intimidate her, but it wouldn't work. She knew she was right...she had looked it up herself in the library earlier that day.

"Because, sir," she proceeded confidently, "it will keep the colour clear after bottling, thus extending its shelf life."

He continued to play his little game, looking at her as if she were a dim pixie attempting a geometry equation. "~~You~~ realize that bubotuber pus is used to treat acne, not as a restorative?" he stated incredulously.

Her smile grew. "Exactly, sir. The pus of a bubotuber, as discovered by Sacharissa Tugwood in the nineteenth century, not only reduces the size of the pimple, but also the redness. In fact, it dilutes the colour completely." His frown finally eased, and she let her smile grow marginally. "Personally," she continued, "I would just use Visene, but seeing as I don't have any with me here at school..."

Now he really was looking at her as if she had three heads.

"Umm... a Muggle remedy for red eyes, sir."

"Of course," he said, though he still looked a bit confused by the term. "Where did you read about bubotuber pus being used as a colour vanishing alternative?"

"I didn't," she said, shrugging her shoulders and unstopping her vial of bubotuber pus. "I knew that I had to find a way to turn the potion clear. Not an easy task, by the way," she added, measuring a few drops of her newest ingredient with her Potions scale. "So I checked out a couple of books from the library. The properties of bubotuber pus were in *1001 Cures for Common Skin Ailments*. I read *Potions of the South Pacific*. It was interesting, but not as informative as the first. The ingredient they suggested was far too volatile for my tastes. I also checked out *Clearly You Should Read Me*, but the title was quite misleading. I have no idea what it was doing in the Potions section."

Brow furrowed, she sucked the pus into a dropper, placed it aside and began her stirs, afterwards wiping down her ladle and placing it gently on the table next to her cauldron. When she finally looked up, Snape was still watching her peculiarly. To be honest, it was making her a bit uncomfortable.

"What?" she said rather rudely, immediately regretting her lapse in thought when Snape's eyes narrowed in her direction.

"Tongue, Miss Granger," was all he said before stepping away from his table and joining her across the room.

She looked up at him as he took his place beside her, waiting for his approval before continuing with her experimentation.

"Show me," he said, nodding toward the cauldron.

She flashed him a brilliant smile and picked up the dropper, squeezing the pus gently into the potion and allowing it to dissolve of its own accord.

"Now, the final stirs..." she said softly, mostly to herself. When she had finished stirring, the potion turned clear, as it had the week before. Snape removed an empty jar from Hermione's Potions kit and used a clean dropper to move some of the final product into it. Hermione held her breath as he capped the container, willing it to stay clear.

Sixty seconds later, Hermione was out of breath, and the potion was still clear. Snape nodded and placed the sealed jar on the table next to the cauldron.

"Very good," Snape said unemotionally.

Hermione thought her jaw was going to have a bruise on it from hitting the floor. Snape...Professor Severus Snape, Black Bat of the Dungeons...had just paid her a compliment.

"We are going to move on to something a bit more difficult next week," Snape said, moving away from the table. "You'll want to bring your dragon skin gloves."

Hermione nodded and began packing up her belongings. By the time she had finished, Snape had silently retreated to his office.

"Next Wednesday, eight o'clock?" she asked, pausing at the door to the hallway.

"Yes," he said absently, scribbling something on another lengthy piece of parchment.

She exited through the door, halting suddenly when he called to her.

"Dragon skin gloves," he shouted through the open door. She nodded, though he couldn't possibly have seen from his angle, and continued on her way back to her dorm. All in all, she couldn't have imagined a better lesson.

The week crept by uneventfully. She had successfully managed to avoid Ron at meals by arriving early for breakfast and late for lunch and dinner. The downside to that arrangement was that almost *no one* arrived for breakfast before seven o'clock, and she subsequently found herself eating alone with Neville Longbottom and Cormac McLaggen...not the ideal start to her mornings, but she found them to be the lesser of two evils.

Her Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons had begun to intensify in nature. She was now able to perform nonverbal spells without conscious thought, and Snape had started pairing her with Pansy Parkinson to allow them to advance while the rest of the class caught up. Neville, unsurprisingly, was the worst in the class at nonverbal spell work. If she were honest with herself, she really thought that his lack of ability was holding the rest of the class back. Pity, as she found him to be such a kind and gentle person. His daily tongue-lashings, courtesy of Snape, were costing Gryffindor some serious points...the result of which was Neville's increasing isolation from his peers. Gryffindor generosity aside, none of them took kindly to losing points due to Neville's lack of concentration in Snape's presence.

Hermione most likely would have offered to tutor Neville on the subject, if it weren't for her already crowded schedule, one that included some very important extracurricular lessons with said Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.

She made her way down to the Dungeons at quarter to eight, pausing briefly to check each classroom along the way. A light was coming from the room at the bottom of the dungeons stairs, six doors prior to the entrance of Snape's office. Hermione paused, listening for the sound of a pupil in a tutoring session with a professor. She heard nothing. The glow emitting from the partially open door was not strong enough to have been coming from a torch, and so she assumed someone was finding their way by wand light.

Approaching the area slowly, she paused on the outskirts of the threshold, listening intensely. Again, silence. Pushing open the door with a slow and steady hand, she dipped her head into the aperture.

Before she could sense anything amiss, a wand was at her throat. A muffled squeak escaped her lips, and she felt a callused hand cover her mouth and a second rip her into the room in a half-circle.

"I suppose that officially designates Miss Parkinson as the star pupil of your class."

Hermione sighed in relief. For once, the sound of Snape's voice sneaking up behind her was a welcome occurrence. He released her, silently calling to life the torches in the room.

"I thought there was a student in here unauthorized! You scared me," she said, her heart beating rapidly against her ribcage.

"And I believed an intruder was attempting to break into my private quarters," he said, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at her. "You are early."

She glanced around the room, noting that it was quite unremarkable aside from some antique shackles and cages that must have dated back to the sixteenth century, at least.

"Not *this* room," Snape snorted. "Through there," he said, pointing at a wooden door on the far side of the den. "This is Dungeon Number Five."

"Oh!" Hermione gasped, taking another glance around the room. "I've read about this room in *Hogwarts, a History*."

"How surprising," Snape said, rolling his eyes. She shot him a withering glare.

"They used to torture students in here during Merlin's time. It's rather unsettling," she finished, eyeing the shackles warily.

"Precisely," Snape answered.

He turned to the door, holding it open. Hermione continued to stare at the shackles on the wall, her eyes traveling up to the thumb-cuffs hanging low from the ceiling. "Spooky..." she said softly.

"I haven't got all night," he snapped irritably.

His harsh tone startled her from her reverie, and she quickly followed him out of the chilling den.

"Take out your equipment," he said, sweeping into the usual laboratory through his office. "I presume you have remembered your dragon skin gloves?"

"Yes, sir," she said, digging them out of her school bag and waving them once in the air.

"Very well. Instructions are on the board."

She glanced up at the mobile chalkboard that stood in front of a row of shelved books, studying the directions quickly. She had the right idea, and it was a good thing because as soon as she bent to pick up her Potions kit, he waved his wand toward the directions, and they instantly disappeared.

He looked up at her, signature smirk in place. "You may begin."

The Awakening Solution was a particularly tricky potion, but not something beyond Hermione's capabilities. One of the Everlasting Elixirs, the potion caused its drinker to awaken instantly from any state of rest, no matter how deep a sleep the person may be in. Its most common use was to rouse injured victims from comas.

The process was a detailed one and would take her just under two hours to complete. She uncapped her wartcap powder, used a quick, *Agamenti*, to fill her cauldron with a water base, and lit a fire beneath the metal tub.

Snape had taken to standing behind her again, though she found it less unsettling now that she had been expecting it. She handled her ingredients carefully, measuring all her doses twice before adding them to the concoction.

Approximately one hour into her brewing, a streak of orange fire caught her eye from the doorway to the laboratory. She smiled. She'd always loved Fawkes...he was such a beautiful bird...

Snape made for the entryway, buying Fawkes off with an owl treat that he miraculously produced from an inner pocket of his robe. He extracted a small scroll from the phoenix's talons and proceeded to read the note over carefully as soon as the phoenix had left, his eyes narrowing as he neared the end of it.

"Bloody ridiculous," he bit out softly, walking back into his office, his eyes never leaving the note.

Hermione returned to her potion, determined to finish it before the end of the evening. There were a few minor ingredients to add before the next major one, but the latter needed to be cut first, as it would have to be added quickly after the others. The potion required aconite...freshly cut. She had never worked with aconite in its natural form before, but she knew it to be quite sensitive during cutting. One false move would ruin the plant for good, and she didn't have a spare stick with her should she waste the first. After putting on her dragon skin gloves...the plant burned horribly if touched by bare skin...she grabbed her silver dagger from her bag, placing it on the table. She carefully studied the anatomy of the volatile plant before attempting to dissect it for her own purposes.

Seven perpendicular cuts, the instructions had read. She unraveled the plant from its plastic covering, allowing it to roll gracefully onto the cutting board.

She worked slowly, meticulously, until at last she had finished.

Seven perfect slices, she thought to herself happily.

She placed the aconite strands on the table by her ladle before removing her gloves, afterwards proceeding to add the essence of clove and fluxweed to her brew. She began stirring carefully, counting the clockwise stirs before switching directions. A few more turns and she could add the bicorn parts...

"Do not rush your stirring."

The unexpected voice from behind made her jump, and she almost spilled the contents of her cauldron all over the table. She stumbled, the chunky heel of one of her shoes turning on its side, causing her foot to bend beneath her ankle. She grabbed blindly at the air around her, one hand forming a fist around the front of Snape's robes, the other landing flatly on the table.

An instant, burning pain shot through her unbent hand, eliciting a strangled scream from her throat. Snape's eyes widened, his brows furrowed downward, searching for the source of her discomfort.

When he saw the tips of the aconite slices sticking out from under her flattened palm, he scooped her up immediately, one hand holding her under her bent knees, the other wrapped around her back, positioning her forward against his chest.

The pain was excruciating. She was at the point of passing out by the time he got her to a sink. He had carried her into the open storage cupboard, through the locked door at the back of it, and into a new and unfamiliar room lined with sinks, tubs, showers and unlabeled potions.

He placed her gently on a rickety cot in the center of the room, grabbing her arm roughly at the elbow and examining the inside of her hand closely.

"Keep it open," he said as he turned away from her and made his way toward a tall shelf of bottles and jars. As if drawn to it like a magnet, he found the intended solution immediately, quickly whipped around and made his way back to the cot.

"It burns!" she shouted at him. "You have to put water on it."

"No water. It will take longer to heal and leave a scar," he said quickly as he unscrewed the lid to the jar he had just grabbed. The purple paste smelled like rotten eggs, and Hermione scrunched her nose up in disapproval.

"What is it?" she asked as he scooped a huge dollop of the solution onto his bare fingers.

"Burn-healing paste."

"Burn-healing paste is orange," she said immediately.

"It's my own adaptation now stop-moving-and-shut-up!" he answered in one quick breath.

She did as he instructed, cringing at the initial feeling of the paste making contact with her skin. He massaged the balm into her hand, his eyes glued to the process.

Moments later the pain had subsided, and she found herself unable to look away from his face while he massaged her palm. He was transfixed with her injury and she with him. She had seen him brew a couple of times, and he had always been the same way when he worked...a picture of perfect concentration. She watched his face as his eyes narrowed and widened, tracking the wound to make sure it was healing properly. His brow was furrowed the entire time, and she found herself counting the tiny lines on his forehead, wondering how someone so young could possess the age wrinkles of someone who had lived a long and full existence.

Eventually he stopped rubbing, pulled himself upright and looked at her intensely.

"Well?" he asked seriously.

She had no idea what had changed, but suddenly the sound of his voice nearly took her breath away. She could barely find it within her abilities to look at her hand, smile and nod.

"Idiot!" he shouted suddenly, wrenching her painfully back into reality. "*Itold you to wear gloves!*"

He moved across the room to one of the open sinks and washed his hands, rubbing them together harshly in presumable frustration. She watched in silence, unsure of how to answer him when he was teetering on the edge between *irritated* and *furious*. When he had finished, he grabbed the towel off the edge of the sink and turned to face her, drying his hands roughly.

"Well?" he snapped.

"I *did* wear gloves," she said anxiously, suddenly finding herself capable of human speech. "I had taken them off to add the fluxweed and..."

"You should never even *look* at aconite unless your hands are adequately protected!" he interrupted loudly, his voice echoing off of the high-rise ceiling.

"You startled me..."

"Shit happens!" he interrupted again, his choice of words shocking her into silence.

She sat with her head hung low, eyes fixed on her own dangling feet. She could feel the tears threatening to spill over her lids and fought furiously against them. Now was not the time to show immaturity. Her lessons could very well be on the line. *Hell, I've probably already lost them...*, she thought regretfully.

The subsequent silence was deafening, and it seemed to draw out over several long, excruciating minutes. The lapse in conversation gave her the time she needed to ward off her tears, and once her eyes were suitably dry, she lifted her head bravely to face him.

He was staring at her...he had probably been doing so the entire time. She wondered what the meaning was behind it.

He made his way over to her and stopped just within reaching distance, the towel still held limply in his left fist.

"Hold out your hand," he said quietly, and she complied, lifting and positioning her hand palm-up.

He didn't touch it, but examined it closely, bending so far forward that she was sure he would have a purple smudge on his nose by the time he rose back up.

"It will be fine," he said, moving back over to the sink and tossing the towel in the wooden hamper next to it.

He turned around and studied her again, and this time she held his gaze as he did so. Several seconds passed, and he eventually broke the silence.

"At what stage were you in your potion?"

As if of its own accord, the answer leapt from her lips. "I had just added the fluxweed and was about to complete my stirs before adding the aconite." She glanced quickly at her hand and back again.

"What were your counts?" he asked, his face unrevealing.

"Sixteen clockwise, seven anticlockwise, and two additional of each that I didn't get the chance to complete," she replied robotically.

He was silent for a moment and looked as if he were calculating something in his mind.

"How did you know in which order to conduct your stirs?" he asked, leaning back against the sink.

The relaxation in his stance eased her tension, and she found her own demeanor a bit more reposed as she answered him. "You wrote it on the board, sir."

"Yes-yes—" he said, rolling his wrist impatiently. "How did you remember it?"

She smiled. "I remember everything, sir. I have eidetic memory."

He looked at her curiously for several seconds, his mouth not quite a frown, not quite a smile. Eventually, he crossed his arms over his chest and smirked.

"Of course you do," he replied, looking as if he had just found the final piece of a puzzle he had been trying to solve his entire life.

Another pause and he continued, "What would you have done next, seeing as the potion is now ruined?"

She suppressed a smile. "The seven strands of aconite were the next ingredient. They must be left to simmer, unstirred, for twenty-five minutes. Then, sixteen clockwise and anticlockwise stirs, alternating equally between each, and then an infusion of bundimun secretion to rid the final product of any unnecessary residual ingredients."

"Bundimun secretion was not on the board," he replied, his features unchanging.

"I know," she answered, shrugging her shoulders.

He proceeded to turn around and wash the sink out in silence, drying his hands on a new towel and tossing that one carelessly into the hamper as he did with the first.

"Come," he ordered, craning his neck toward the door. She followed him out through the storage room and back into the laboratory and proceeded to, unbidden, clean her work station. Snape watched her in silence, his demeanor unrevealing.

When she had finished cleaning and packing up, she strode to the door of the laboratory and held back, glancing up at him. He was still in his former position at the first table, leaning lightly against it with his backside, arms crossed in a relaxed fashion across his midsection.

"Thank you, sir," she said quietly, referring to his earlier assistance.

He nodded stiffly, extracting his hand from beneath his arm and holding out a small vial of blue liquid. "This," he said, "is a proper vat of Awakening Solution. Study it."

She took the bottle gently from him, placing it carefully in her robe pocket.

"Does this mean I am to return on Wednesday, Professor?" she asked cautiously.

"No," he replied firmly, and her face instantly fell.

"Be here on Tuesday night at eight o'clock," he added authoritatively. "The next potion must be brewed in two parts, and they must be done consecutively. You will need to return on Wednesday as well."

She smiled brightly, a colossal weight lifting from her shoulders. "Thank you, sir."

"Miss Granger," he called when she was halfway across his office.

She shuffled back to the door, holding on to the frame with her uninjured hand and peering back into the room.

"*Bring...your...gloves,*" he said, arching a brow.

She smiled at him before turning and leaving the room.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 8

HBP--the way it should have been written. Written for the January '08 SS/HG Exchange. Canon-compliant all the way through DH, sans the epilogue.

With the following Saturday came the school's first trip of the term to Hogsmeade. Mid-October was a particularly harsh time of year in Scotland, as it signalled the abrupt transition between autumn and winter. As a precaution against the crisp weather, Hermione dressed in layers before heading down to breakfast. Her Gryffindor Quidditch shirt, covered by her long-sleeve turtleneck and, finally, her annual Weasley sweater, were a bit warm inside the castle walls, but they would be essential once she left the gates. She draped her winter coat over her arm and made her way down to breakfast, choosing a seat next to Ron in an effort to form a ceasefire, if only for the length of the trip.

Ron wasted no time in reaping the benefits of Hermione's non-silence and sprinted off into a drawn-out retelling of his and Harry's morning blooper.

"...and then there was another flash of light, and I landed on the bed again!" Ron grinned, helping himself to sausages.

He had been regaling her with the tale of Harry's newfound *Levicorpus* spell...Hermione was not impressed.

"Was this spell, by any chance, another one from that Potion book of yours?" she asked.

Of course, she read the answer on his face before he was able to articulate it. Nevertheless, she sat and listened to his repeated defenses of the book's long-ago owner. Hermione frowned the entire time, trying to reason with both men, as Ron had taken to defending the phantom *Prince* as well.

"You just don't like the Prince, Hermione," Ron said tauntingly, "because he's better than you at Potions..."

"It's got nothing to do with that!" she replied. She could feel her cheeks growing hot. It was only quarter-past-eight in the morning, and Ron already had her at her boiling point.

After a long, chilled trek into Hogsmeade, Hermione gratefully entered Honeydukes with Harry and Ron. Unfortunately, they were not the only ones trying to keep away from the cold.

A booming call of, "Harry, m'boy," reached their ears simultaneously, and Hermione sighed her impatience. Professor Slughorn was going on about his parties, attempting

to persuade Harry into attending the next of them.

"Miss Granger loves them, don't you?" Slughorn asked, looking at Hermione hopefully.

"Yes," she lied, "they're really..."

She didn't even get a chance to finish her sentence, for Slughorn continued his rambling, each attempt to entice Harry into accepting his invitation clearly grating on Ron's nerves. *Well, at least there's a plus side*, she thought vengefully.

The trio agreeably decided to move on down the road, intending to stop at the Three Broomsticks to warm themselves with a few butterbeers. As they neared the familiar pub, Hermione noticed Harry staring daggers at the two men walking in front of them. She studied their figures, immediately recognizing the squat man on the right as Mundungus Fletcher.

"Mundungus!" Harry cried unexpectedly, causing the man, along with Hermione and Ron, to jump.

Mundungus dropped a battered suitcase to the ground, and Hermione squinted her eyes at the scene she could predict was about to unfold. Several of Sirius' possessions were strewn about the sodden ground, and as Hermione turned to her green-eyed companion, she could see that she had been right in her initial assessment...he was *furious*.

Harry extended an arm and pinned the wizard to the wall by the throat, Harry's teeth clamped together so tightly that Hermione thought the jaws-of-life wouldn't be able to pry them apart. Just when she thought things couldn't possibly get any worse, Harry pulled out his wand, jabbing it roughly up into Mundungus' jaw.

"Harry!" Hermione squealed, horrified.

The Boy-Who-Lived was now nose-to-nose with the ragged Order member, and the flames behind Harry's eyes depicted his fury.

"You took that from Sirius's house," Harry said, glancing quickly at the silver trinkets on the ground and then back up again.

Mundungus sputtered something unintelligible, and Harry poked him harder. The elder man was beginning to turn blue now, Harry's hand constricting steadily around his neck.

Out of nowhere, like an angel on a battlefield, Tonks Apparated directly next to the spot where Harry was standing. The distraction was exactly what Mundungus was looking for, and he grabbed his suitcase off of the ground and Disapparated.

Tonks herded the three of them into the Three Broomsticks, despite the many protests from Harry, and then went back out into the cold. Hermione grabbed them each a butterbeer from the bar, then joined them at a back corner table.

"Ron, what are you staring at?" she asked, taking the seat next to Harry.

"Nothing," Ron replied, looking quickly away from the bar.

Hermione glanced to her right, just in time to see Madam Rosmerta, the curvy barmaid, disappear into the back room.

"I expect 'nothing's' in the back getting more firewhiskey," she replied waspishly.

Idiot. She may not have been getting as many looks as Rosmerta, but at least she didn't have post-pubescent boys leering at her all day long.

"Shall we call it a day and go back to school, then?" she offered the moment Harry had finished his last drop of butterbeer. Her cohorts nodded emphatically.

The trio began the long walk back to the castle, mainly in silence, as Hermione was not exactly speaking to Ron at this point.

Halfway through their journey, Hermione noticed the figures of Katie Bell and another girl from the school growing closer. The girls were walking rather slowly, and it was not long before she, Harry and Ron were only feet behind them and were forced to slow to the leading pair's pace.

Hermione felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, and she twisted her head around slowly to both sides of her. Something wasn't right. Suddenly she heard Katie and the other girl, now being openly called Leanne, arguing furiously. There was some sort of tug-of-war going on between them, and Hermione stuck out both of her arms, holding Ron and Harry back from the dueling girls.

"Oy!" Ron shouted indignantly, and Hermione shot him a murderous look.

A blood-curdling scream issued from in front of them, and Hermione turned her sights back to the girls just in time to see Katie rising rapidly into the air. Her arms were stretched out to either side like an unorthodox angel, her eyes shut lazily as if she were sleeping.

Hermione felt a surge of power come towards her from the hovering figure, immediately followed by the sound of Katie's shrill, tortured voice reaching her ears with such force that she was sure she would have trouble hearing for hours.

She, Harry and Ron sprinted forward, just in time for the boys to catch Katie as she dropped like a stone from the sky. They caught her, but had trouble keeping her still, as she appeared to be seizing repeatedly.

"Go get help!" Hermione yelled to Harry and Ron, motioning toward the school.

Harry nodded, muttering something in reply before sprinting off toward castle gates, Ron hot at his heels.

Hermione watched helplessly as Katie experienced seizure after seizure, her only comforting thought that the spasms seemed to be lessening in intensity as they went on.

After what seemed like an eternity, Harry was running back to them, Hagrid close behind.

"Get back!" Hagrid shouted, bending over the convulsing girl. He immediately scooped Katie up into his arms and took off toward the school at as quick a run as his giant legs could manage.

Hermione rose and walked over to Leanne, placing her arm around the hysterical girl.

"It's Leanne, isn't it?" Hermione asked kindly, and the girl nodded.

Leanne proceeded to tell Hermione, and a half-listening Harry and Ron, that Katie had been acting strangely since the Three Broomsticks. Apparently, Katie had been given a package in the girls' bathroom and had been told to deliver it to someone at Hogwarts. Leanne told them that she'd tried to reason with Katie, telling her how irresponsible it would be to bring such a suspicious item into the castle, but Katie simply would not listen. Their argument led to the tug-of-war, and, subsequently, Katie's experience.

Hermione began to lead Leanne up the road to the school, rubbing her arm soothingly as they walked. They had barely reached the edge of the path when Professor McGonagall stormed through the gates, running toward them with a speed of which Hermione did not think the elder woman capable.

McGonagall ushered them all up the path, pausing when Filch came running toward them with his Secrecy Sensor.

"Take this to Professor Snape at once!" McGonagall instructed him and continued to lead them all through the school and into her office. She had completed the journey so fast that Hermione found she had to sprint simply to keep up with her.

Once all of them were settled into the Deputy Headmistress' office, McGonagall turned to the group, sizing them all up with her eyes.

"Well?" she said sharply. "What happened?"

With many breaks and a few crying fits, Leanne told McGonagall what had happened. Somewhere near the middle of the retelling, a small, neatly folded note appeared out of nowhere on the Deputy Headmistress' desk. The elder witch unfolded it, scanning it quickly before placing it back down on the oak surface. When the story was finally finished, and McGonagall had ushered the shaking girl out of her office, she turned back to the trio.

Not wasting a moments' time, Harry took the opportunity to lay his assumptions on the Deputy Headmistress.

"I think Draco gave Katie that necklace, Professor."

Here we go,, Hermione thought, shaking her head impatiently. Truth-be-told, she also thought it quite suspicious that the same necklace she had seen in Borgin and Burke's only minutes after Draco had been in the shop had now hurt a student from the school. That didn't mean that McGonagall would listen to such slander without due cause.

Just as she thought, McGonagall responded, "That is a very serious accusation, Potter. Do you have any proof?"

Of course, the answer was no. Harry tried to argue, but it was no use. Professor McGonagall was not about to listen to one student's untrusting views on another.

"Thank you for telling me your suspicions, Potter," McGonagall said with an inarguable finality, "but I need to go up to the hospital wing now to check on Katie Bell. Good day to you all."

She held open her office door, and Harry and Ron proceeded through it.

"Just a moment, Miss Granger," McGonagall said, bending low to her ear. "Professor Snape has requested your presence in his office after you've completed your rounds tonight. I'm sure it has something to do with the necklace," she added when Hermione gave her a quelling look. "I would not say anything to Potter and Weasley. You know how Professor Snape likes to keep his extracurricular assignments on a need-to-know basis."

Hermione nodded, glancing toward her friends who were now halfway down the corridor.

"You know," McGonagall said with a small smile, "Professor Snape has never taken on a tutee before. I imagine he hopes you will wish to apprentice in the subject someday. Of course, I was counting on you to go further with Transfiguration, but either profession would make for a fine line of work."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, Professor."

McGonagall nodded, following her student out of the door and heading off in the opposite direction toward the Hospital wing. Hermione let the idea sink in for a moment or two and then trotted down the hallway to catch up with her friends.

Hermione went about her rounds as usual, checking each classroom on her way down to the dungeons. As she passed the girls' bathroom on the second floor, a soft sob from inside of the room made her pause. She pushed open the lavatory door slowly, looking around for the source of the noise.

"Hello?" she called into the semi-darkness.

"Go away!" a threatening voice responded.

"Oh, Myrtle," she said with a sigh, relieved. "Are you all right?"

"I said GO AWAY!" the ghost replied.

Hermione walked to Myrtle's resident stall and rapped lightly on the door. "Myrtle, is everything okay?"

At Myrtle's responding silence, Hermione knocked again. "May I come in?" she asked politely.

"NO!"

The voice was harsh and panicky in an almost unrecognizable way, and Hermione nearly jumped at the volume of it. When Myrtle was angry, there was no point in sticking around, let alone trying to comfort her.

"Okay, then," Hermione said, shrugging her shoulders and exiting the bathroom.

When she reached the dungeons, she found the door to Snape's office open slightly, and she knocked quietly before letting herself inside.

"Professor?" she called to him, taking small, deliberate steps.

"Laboratory," he replied from beyond the door to the right.

She let out a relieved sigh, closing the space between her and the laboratory. When she reached the doorway, she gasped quietly. The lab looked like a tornado had just passed through it. Snape had the necklace laid out on what she had come to secretly think of as *her table*, and dozens of books and devices were sprawled around it.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" she asked softly, her eyes taking in the disheveled state of her surroundings.

He held up his index finger, holding her off while he completed his current task. The sight of him without his signature cape and frock coat was something she found almost comical. The white button-down oxford seemed incredibly out of place on him, and she had never once seen him with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. She waited patiently for him to finish, watching as he performed nonverbal spell after nonverbal spell on the still-glowing necklace. Several minutes later, after laying down his wand, he wiped the sweat from his brow with his bare forearm and rolled sleeve and turned to face her.

"What do you know about this necklace?" he asked her bluntly.

"Nothing of any importance, sir, only what Leanne told us after it happened."

He nodded. "Go on."

"Well, we were walking back from the Three Broomsticks...Ron, Harry and I...and Katie and Leanne were walking ahead of us," she replied. "After a while, I felt a sort of..."

He looked at her impatiently. "Well?" he said, holding his palms up and out to both sides of his shoulders with annoyance.

She sighed, knowing her answer was going to sound ridiculous. "I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up," she said quietly, looking down as she shuffled her feet. "It was the strangest feeling, like there was something evil in our presence and I could sense it."

His silence unsettled her, and she raised her head to face him. He was watching her with his intense gaze, as if deciding whether or not to take her word at face value.

"Continue," he said, gesturing with his hand.

Encouraged by his rapt attention, she held his gaze while she continued. "When she rose up off of the ground," his eyes widened with her words, "I felt a sort of...surge of power, coming from her."

"I see," he said slowly. "And Potter and Weasley? Did they feel the surge as well?"

"I don't believe so, sir," she replied.

He nodded, looking away from her, his stance suggesting he was deep in thought.

"It was cursed, wasn't it, sir?" she asked, breaking the silence. "The necklace...it was spelled with Dark magic. Not a normal curse, either... It was meant to eradicate the wearer...to kill...I felt it." Her body gave an involuntary shiver.

He turned his head back in her direction and studied her carefully for several moments, during which she found herself wondering if her statement had been unwelcome.

"It was meant to kill," he said finally, turning away from her and looking at the necklace.

"I want to help, Professor," she said earnestly. "Please give me something to do. I'll go mad just sitting around here while Katie is in St. Mungo's."

"Miss Bell will be fine in time," he said, his eyes fixed interestedly on hers. "There is nothing more that can be done for her other than rest... nothing that we are able to do here, at any rate."

Hermione blinked once and then nodded, her expression faltering.

"If you would like to help, it will be in the form of research," he said suddenly.

"How?" she responded instantly.

"This conversation does not leave this room, Miss Granger. Is that understood?" he asked, looking at her through narrowed eyes.

She nodded her head in the affirmative.

"There is an ingredient that can help her. The seizures have harmed her nervous system, and she will never be the same," Hermione inhaled sharply, "but they continue to occur, and we can stop them."

Hermione questioned immediately, "How?"

"There is a plant by the name of Optunia Terinblot." He walked back over to the table with the necklace on it and began to rummage through a thick, worn out text. Hermione followed him to the table, standing beside him as he found the page he was looking for and began summarizing passages from it.

"It is more commonly known as brierweed..."

"Oh!" Hermione gasped, causing Snape to halt mid-sentence.

"You've heard of it?" he asked, turning to her in surprise, his finger holding his place on the page.

"Oh, yes," she said, placing her own index finger on the page opposite, tracing the picture of the plant almost lovingly. "It only grows in very remote areas of the Sonoran Desert and is known to cure all sorts of ailments of the human nervous system. There used to be a book in the library on the subject..."

She looked up at him, brow furrowed. "But it's really rare. How are you going to find some?"

He shook his head dismissively. "Never mind that. The point is, I shall be away for most of the night, and I will not be able to research the proper formula. As the Deputy Headmistress is running the school until the Headmaster returns, and the other professors are quite busy as it is..."

His voice drifted off. "Our problem," he said, looking up at her again, "is that time is of the essence where Miss Bell is concerned. *That book from the library* that you refer to belonged to me. It has been missing for some years now, so the task will not be easy. Aside from that, the plant needs to be gathered, and the brewing method needs to be researched. I cannot do both at the same time."

Hermione responded the moment the last syllable had left his mouth. "I'll do it. I can start right now. Tomorrow is Sunday...I don't have any classes." She glanced toward the door. "But I wouldn't know where to start... I don't really spend much time in the Herbology section of the library."

"You will be using mine," he said flatly, turning back to the book.

Her jaw dropped in surprise. "*Yours?*"

He looked up at her, his face one of irritation. Upon seeing her impressed expression, his features softened. He gave a half-chuckle, half-snort. "Yes, mine. You will need to enter through my quarters," he studied her as if he was a security guard and he suspected her of shoplifting, "but you are to stay in the library."

"You have a whole library?" she nearly shouted in disbelief.

"I believe I just said that," he replied in annoyance.

"I know, but your own room full of books?"

He shook his head, turning on the spot and crossing the room. "You are hopeless, Miss Granger."

She smiled. His tone was playful, not mocking.

He grabbed a few items off of one of the tables and retreated through the door to the lab, Hermione following closely behind. Walking them both out of his office and down the hallway, he led them through Dungeon Number Five and up to the door at the rear of the dimly lit room. The heavy barrier swung inward as he approached it, and she found herself thinking it odd that he didn't have any wards in place to keep others out.

As if sensing her perplexity, he spoke to her, still walking steadily down the long, dark corridor that they had just entered. "It senses my presence," he stated casually.

"I knew it," she whispered and was surprised, when he answered, that he had been able to hear her.

"Knew what?"

"That the castle was a sentient building. It doesn't say so in any of the history books, but given..." She had been about to say, "but given the features of the Room of Requirement," but stopped herself in time. She wasn't sure that Snape knew about the room and did not think it wise to be the one to give him that information.

Thankfully, he did not question her further, and they had reached the end of the hallway. Yet another door swung open for him of its own accord, this one leading to a lavishly furnished room, all four sides ensconced in floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

Hermione found herself gazing in awe at the walls upon walls of rare and ancient books, her eyes nearly aching to devour each and every one of them.

"If you would not mind retrieving your jaw from my floor..." Snape said, brow rising.

She looked at him, unable to hide her smile.

He continued, "This is my den...or library. The section with the purple book case," Hermione now noted that the books were categorized by colour, "contains the albums on Herbology."

Hermione nodded, glancing fleetingly at the books before looking back at Snape.

"I should be gone most of the night," he continued. "If you are able to find the formula...which I am not confident that you will be...you are to write it on the black board," he raised his wand toward the center of the room, and a freestanding chalk board appeared, its wheels landing on the carpet with a soft *thud*, "there."

She nodded.

"The restroom," he pointed to an access between two of the large bookcases, "is through there. If you need anything, you can Summon a house-elf," Hermione pursed her lips disapprovingly, "and if you have any problems, you are to contact the Deputy Headmistress."

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"I must away," he said rather dramatically, grabbing his robes and frock coat from the stand next to the door. He paused before leaving, looking as if he had forgotten something, then moved toward the exit. Hermione turned toward the purple shelf, trying to discern where she should begin.

"Miss Granger," he called, and she turned back to him, "thank you for your help." She nodded, and he left the room, closing the door behind him.

Hermione's undertaking ended up being much more complicated than she had initially anticipated. Snape possessed, in total, thirty-seven books on desert plants alone. She began her task the only way she knew how...she read.

"Thirty-seven books," she said angrily, slamming shut *Desert Cacti and Fungus* rather harshly. "Thirty-seven books and not a single word on *Optunia Terinblot*."

She pushed back the chair and laid her head heavily atop her crossed arms on top of Snape's desk. Her stomach gave a frustrated growl, and she placed her forehead on her arms and looked down at her abdomen. No wonder she was hungry...she hadn't eaten a thing since breakfast.

Looking around at the disheveled array of books that lay upon Snape's desk and side table, she sighed. "I'd kill for some shepherd's pie..." she grumbled irritably.

A loud crack to her right made her jump, her knees banging against the underside of the desk.

"Miss asked for shepherd's pie!" Dobby squeaked loudly, a silver tray slapping down on top of the pile of books on the side table.

"Oh! Not there," she yelled in alarm, lifting the tray off of Snape's precious books and replacing it on an empty spot on the desk. Once she had secured the tray and picked up all surrounding books, she turned to Dobby, her arms bustling with tomes.

"Thank you, Dobby," she said kindly, setting the books down gently on the desk. "I didn't realize that you could hear me. You really didn't have to do this," she added, eyeing the tray hungrily. The moment she stopped speaking, her stomach growled loudly once more, and Dobby gave her a triumphant smile.

"Dobby listens for Miss. Miss is very good to the house-elves," Dobby replied, smiling brightly. "Miss is hungry! Miss should eat now."

She smiled. "Perhaps in a little bit, Dobby. I've got a lot of research to do." Her eyes drifted over to the pile of references that now covered most of the desk from corner to corner. She sighed. She already knew her answer did not lie in any of them.

"Miss has a big test?" Dobby said interestedly.

"No," she answered, shaking her head. "I just need to find information on a rare plant, and it doesn't seem to be available in these books. But you've been wonderful," she said, smiling at the elf politely. "Thank you for the dinner."

"Dobby knows! Dobby knows!" the elf squeaked excitedly. A second later he was gone without warning, the only sign he had been there a small puff of smoke left in his wake.

"*Elves*," Hermione said, shaking her head with a smile, and she began the project of re-shelving the uninformative texts.

Moments later, a second loud crack echoed throughout the room, causing Hermione to drop the copy of *Foul Weather Plants* that she had been holding. She swore under her breath when the heavy encyclopedia landed on her foot and turned a rather scornful eye toward Dobby.

Dobby looked petrified. "Dobby is so sorry, Miss. Dobby didn't mean to frighten. Dobby is a bad elf," the tiny creature cried, lunging for Snape's desk lamp.

Hermione caught his wrist just in time, holding on to it tightly and using her free hand to move the lamp out of Dobby's reach.

"It was an accident, Dobby," she said assertively, still wearing an irritated frown. "You do not need to punish yourself." She watched as the elf's eyes glanced fleetingly toward the lamp. Apparently, she would have to make herself *absolutely clear*. "I'm fine," she said, curling her lips up into a pretentious half-smile. "See?" she lifted her foot off the ground and stomped it powerfully back down against the carpet. Though it did hurt a little, the pain from the fallen book had, for the most part, subsided. She smiled cajolingly, and he returned the gesture with a toothy grin of his own.

"Miss is a kind lady," the elf said emotionally, eyes watering. "That is why Dobby has helped Miss."

"Yes, thank you, Dobby. I'll eat it in a bit, just as soon as I've finished re-shelving these textbooks..."

Dobby snapped his fingers, and the volumes all levitated from the desk and table, spinning around once, making Hermione dizzy. She watched on in awe as they flew to the bookcases where they belonged and arranged themselves accordingly.

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, that was very kind of you."

"No time," Dobby said, shaking with apparent excitement. "Dobby has helped Miss..."

"Oh, all right," she huffed, walking toward the silver platter. "I only have time for a quick bite th..."

"No time!" Dobby squealed, surprising her, and raised his hand, the platter mimicking the motion by ascending up off of the desk. The elf pointed toward the chair and gestured for Hermione to take a seat.

"Dobby, what..."

"Miss must sit! Dobby has helped," the tiny elf nearly shouted as the platter descended softly onto the newly-cleared side table.

Hermione was taken aback by his abrupt command, and she complied, looking at him curiously.

Dobby's mouth widened in a huge, accomplished smile, and he made sure he had her undivided attention before looking back at the tray. He snapped his fingers, and the platter disappeared, leaving in its place a monstrous green book with faded writing on the cover.

The elf picked up the book and hobbled over to Hermione, switching the tome from hand to hand in an attempt to hold its weight without dropping it. He pushed the text up over the edge of the desk, his body not quite tall enough for his hands to reach the surface.

Wherever the book had come from, it was old. She grabbed her sweater off of the back of the chair and wrapped her hand in it, proceeding to wipe the dust off of the hunter green cover.

"I can't read it..." she mumbled, staring at the foreign writing on the cover of the book.

"It's Elvish," Dobby said happily, reaching out and stroking the text lovingly with his fingers. "Dobby can read it. It says *Harafarim Va Dalefi*. Speak and ye shall find."

Hermione looked oddly at the elf. "Don't you mean *seek* and ye shall find?"

Dobby's smile faltered, and he stared keenly at the book. "No, Miss. Not seek. *Speak*."

Hermione pondered the inscription for a moment, smiling when she came to what she felt was an oversimplified conclusion.

"Optunia Terinblot," she said clearly, her voice directed downward toward the writing on the cover.

Both she and Dobby jumped backward as the book rose up off of the desk of its own accord, a brilliant, streaming light shooting out from in between its many pages. A constant, deafening hum was issuing from the floating text, the sound causing Hermione's ears to ache.

The book seemed to be circling the air in the room around itself, forming a fan that blew out toward the walls on all four sides of it. Hermione's hair whipped unnaturally behind her, and Dobby's pillowcase and tea cozy were on the verge of tearing loose completely.

"DOBBY!" she yelled over the noise. "WHAT'S HAPPENING?"

Dobby looked anxiously from her to the book, his normally bulging eyes now nearly protruding right out of his head. "Dobby doesn't know, Miss! Dobby got the book from hidden room!"

"WHAT HIDDEN ROOM?" she called back, raising her voice an octave higher to drown out the vibration.

"Harry Potter's hidden room!" Dobby squealed back.

She blanched. Dobby had retrieved the book from the Room of Requirement. *Anyone could have placed it there*, she thought fleetingly, and that was certainly *not* a good thing.

As quickly as the book had risen in the first place, it abruptly fell back down onto the desk, landing flatly and silently atop the ancient oak with little more than a soft *thud*.

Hermione cautiously approached the now stationary object, Dobby cowering subjacent to her, his bony fingers clinging nervously to her legs.

She reached a quaking hand toward the tome and jumped back as it opened prosaically to a page of its own choosing.

Her eyes widened in shock, her brow shooting up into her hairline when she read the title of the page aloud.

"The Properties and Practical Applications of Optunia Terinblot."

The sun was rising on the east side of the castle by the time Hermione had finished copying the lengthy formula for the Tiutisch Caedo draught to the blackboard. Being that her current place of occupancy was in the stygian sublevels of the ancient building, she was naturally oblivious to that unmitigated fact.

She sat back down at Snape's desk and began replicating the notes from the blackboard onto the sheets of parchment that were laid out before her. Shaking her head, she mused how odd it was that her professor didn't keep a notebook handy for purposes such as this one. She would just have to make do with the bits of parchment she had on her when she'd arrived.

She decided to copy down the required ingredients on a separate section, which would make it much easier for him to retrieve them before brewing.

What seemed like an eternity later, she finally organized her many pieces of parchment into three neat piles: ingredients, processing steps, and timetables.

She brought her arms up above her head and stretched them to their limit. As she brought them back down, her stomach gave an irritated growl. She had not eaten the dinner that Dobby had left for her.

The desk and table were covered with notes, lists and reference books, so Hermione decided to snatch up her tray of very cold shepherd's pie and pumpkin juice and eat it on the green velvet settee on the opposite side of the room. She ate gratefully, despite the fact that the food was not quite as visually appealing as usual. Six hours sitting out in the dark bowels of a chilly dungeon could do that to a meal.

She found her mind wandering as she ate. Perhaps if she were extremely agreeable to be around, and very quiet, Snape might allow her to observe the brewing. Her heart lifted at the thought, and she placed her empty tray and glass on the floor next to the sofa. The potion would be one that she had never heard of before and he had, presumably, never brewed.

Just a few minutes down that line of thought, and Hermione barely noticed as her eyes slipped shut, and she fell deep down into the murky world of dreams.

Hermione opened her eyes slowly to the sight of...well, nothing. The room was completely dark. She felt around at her side, and sure enough, her wand was within her grasp.

"*Lumos*," she said groggily, and the torches in the room flared to life a little too brightly, blinding her temporarily.

She blinked in rapid succession, and as the room came into focus, she remembered where she was.

"*Shit*," she cursed softly under her breath.

She had fallen asleep in Snape's quarters. She assumed by the lights being off when she woke that the castle had thought she needed rest...either that, or Dobby had returned while she was sleeping. She looked over at the side table, and sure enough, there was a tall glass of pumpkin juice waiting for her. She stretched her arms and legs as far away from her torso as she could get them, looking very much like a waking cat.

At least Snape hadn't gotten back while she was sleeping. She couldn't even begin to imagine the number of house points he would take for a student falling asleep on his sofa. Not wanting to be around when Snape actually did return from his search, she rose from her seat and collected her things, which actually only consisted of her quill, notebook, wand and robes.

She walked over to the lavatory...her last stop before returning to her dorm room and concluding her weekend. She wondered if Snape, or perhaps Dumbledore, would contact her when the potion was finished. In the light of the morning, she realized that it was probably unlikely she would be allowed to watch the brewing process. As she thought fleetingly about the length of time needed to finish the procedure, she realized that if it really did take two weeks to complete, her lessons would probably be put on hold. Pity... her Potions classes would be increasing in difficulty leading into the Christmas break.

She placed a hand on the bathroom door handle and turned it gently, glancing back to the glass of pumpkin juice on the table and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. There was frost on the glass...she must have just missed Dobby, as there was still frost on her waiting glass.

When she turned back to the lavatory she nearly fell over backwards.

"What have I already told you about knocking?"

Snape's snide voice registered in her mind only seconds after the sight of him. Wordlessly, she spun away from him, slamming the door shut behind her.

She nearly sprinted over to the settee, her hands covering her face in embarrassment. She had just seen Snape. *Professor* Snape, her Defense Against the Dark Arts professor...freshly showered, a black towel wrapped round his waist the only thing shielding his nude form from her eyes.

She couldn't have imagined a more humiliating scenario.

The worst part was that she wasn't repulsed as she thought she would have been. If she were honest with herself, she was a bit turned on by the sight of him...and that thought alone mortified her.

She tried to push the vision from her mind...the impropriety alone was reason enough to do so. Alas, she couldn't help herself...the memory was far too fresh. His hair had been hanging in long, wet strands, the ends of which sat barely touching his shoulders. A few of the raven locks had escaped the collected tress, and she could see their reflected image hanging loosely in front of his eyes as he looked into the bathroom mirror.

In the few seconds she'd watched him, she'd managed to memorize the lines of his body. A sparse collection of dark fibers seemed to be the only hairs on his thorax. The patch in the middle of his chest ran in a thin line down his abdomen and disappeared beneath the black towel.

He was not a big man, rich in neither body fat nor muscle, but his figure was one of strength and cultivation. She supposed it could be attributed to his activities whilst spying for the Order, though she preferred not to think about the dark side of his double life, if it could be helped.

The fact that he had not startled, or yelled, or slammed the door in her face, was not lost on her. Still, she feared that the consequences for not only falling asleep in his quarters, but also walking in on him half-naked the next morning, would probably be fairly nasty. She cringed when she thought what the punishment may consist of...she hoped he wouldn't end their lessons for good.

When she heard the door to the bathroom creak open, she stared down at her feet with great interest, avoiding his eyes at all costs.

"You may look up, Miss Granger. I am quite decent...*now*," Snape added irritably.

She chose to continue the intense observation of her shoes, answering him without eye contact.

"I'm sorry, sir... I didn't know you were back. I saw the orange juice the elves left, and I assumed..."

"I left the orange juice," he interrupted shortly.

She had no reply for that statement. To be honest, she was still waiting for Snape's tongue lashing. She couldn't have gotten *off* that easily.

"Where did you find it?" he asked calmly.

"Find what, sir?"

"Miss Granger, you will look at me when I am speaking to you," he said, and she turned to him slowly. "Better," he said, looking her in the face. "Now, where did you find the formula?"

That was not a question she had been expecting, and she had no idea how to answer him. Dobby had said he'd retrieved the book from the Room of Requirement, but she still had no idea to whom it belonged or why it had been placed there in the first place. *Perhaps a stretching of the truth, then...*

"One of the house-elves brought me a book that listed the properties of the plant."

He arched a cynical brow at her, answering doubtfully, "A house-elf?"

She nodded, and he shook his head, speaking distractedly, "I had thought perhaps you'd found it in one of my books."

She shook her head, glancing fleetingly at his bookshelves. "No, sir. I looked all night, but I couldn't find anything about the plant in any of them."

For some reason, he looked disappointed. "I see." He looked over at her notes on the desk. "And where is this mysterious book from which you dictated the notes?"

"Over..."

But when she turned her head, she found that the book was not on the desk where she had left it, and a glance at the side table proved that it was not there either.

"I don't know, sir," she replied, looking back up at him, puzzled. "I left it on the desk. I suppose the elves must have returned it after I fell asleep..."

"That," he responded, perusing his shelves, apparently seeking out the missing tome, "is a topic for later discussion."

She flinched. She'd known she wouldn't get away with napping on his settee. Though in all actuality, he didn't seem ~~that~~ upset.

"What colour was the book?" he asked suddenly, turning to her and leaning back against his ~~Morphology~~ bookcase.

"Colour?" she asked, taken aback by his question.

"*Colour*," he repeated slowly and clearly, eyes fixed on hers.

"Er...green, sir," she replied. "The book was green."

Again, Snape look disappointed, and righted himself from the bookshelf, walking over to examine the blackboard.

"Sir," she asked, completely baffled by Snape's actions, "what colour were you expecting it to be?"

He turned to her, and she could almost hear the wheels turning in his head. She waited patiently for him to speak to her.

"You've copied all the notes, word for word, from the book?" he asked.

"Yes, and no... they're all up there, but I've organized them into categories. I've done the same with my notes," she replied, pointing to the desk.

He nodded. "I have read them. They are very thorough."

She did her best not to smile like an idiot. "Thank you, sir," she hesitated, "and I apologize for falling asleep. I should have left when I was finished."

"Which I'm sure was quite some time after sunrise and consequently forgivable," he said unemotionally. "And on that note, if you wish to assist me with the brewing of this potion, you will have to learn to knock...starting *now*."

"Assist you?" she replied blankly. Clearly she was hearing things.

"Or go play tiddlywinks with Potter and Weasley...it's really of no consequence to me," he answered nonchalantly, though she could see the irritation in his eyes and body language as well as an underlying waspishness in his tone.

"I just didn't think you would let me," she answered quickly, trying to save herself from missing out on the project due to a mere miscommunication. "I would love to work on the potion with you. Thank you," she added as an afterthought, attempting to leave no room for him to revoke the invitation.

He studied her for a moment, during which time she truly thought he was going to change his mind.

"Go back to your dorm room," he said, and her face fell.

He looked her up and down, then added, "Clean yourself up." She could have sworn he was staring at her sleep-muddled hair when he said it. "Return to the laboratory in one hour. The room will be prepared when you arrive."

She nodded, masking her smile, and retreated to her room to prepare for the day.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 8

HBP—the way it should have been written. Written for the January '08 SS/HG Exchange. Canon-compliant all the way through DH, sans the epilogue.

The next two weeks passed by in somewhat of a blur. With winter exams coming up, Hermione's workload nearly tripled. Combined with her efforts for S.P.E.W. and her extra lessons with Snape...during which they would work on the Tiutisch Caedo draught...scarcely a day went by that she was able to work in more than three or four hours of sleep.

The Monday following Katie's accident was emotionally straining for Hermione, especially regarding her friendship with Ron.

"Slughorn's going to have a Christmas party, Harry, and there's no way you'll be able to wriggle out of this one because he actually asked me to check your free evenings so he could be sure to have it on a night you can come," Hermione had said during their morning Herbology lesson, gently squeezing at a Snargaluff pod.

Ron had looked incensed at the notion. "And this is another party just for Slughorn's favorites, is it?" he had said waspishly.

"Just for the Slug Club, yes," she'd answered coolly, deftly avoiding his glare.

"Well," Ron had said nastily, purposely squeezing his Snargaluff pod too tightly, causing it to spew a gooey substance all over their table, "I hope you enjoy your party. Why don't you try hooking up with McLaggen, and then Slughorn can make you King and Queen Slug..."

"We're allowed to bring guests," Hermione had said hotly, "and I was *going* to ask you to come, but if you think it's that stupid, then I won't bother!"

She could have referred to herself as furious, but that would have been an understatement. She really had been going to ask Ron to go as her date. Not that she had an interest in Ron, or even in being in Ron's *company* for any extended period of time, but it would have been the polite thing to do. If Ron went to the party as her date, he could entertain Harry for the evening, and perhaps she could make an early escape.

"You were going to ask me?" Ron had said disbelievably.

"Yes," she'd replied, "but obviously if you'd rather *lhooked up with McLaggen*..."

"No, I wouldn't," Ron had replied quietly.

The negative conversation was not made better by Ginny's confession to Ron the following night. Though she hadn't been there to hear it, Dean had relayed the story to her in their morning Ancient Runes class.

"She was really pissed at Ron. She told him you s...er...snogged Viktor," he had informed her clumsily.

Hermione was staring daggers at Dean as though he were Ginny herself. "And that's all she said?"

Dean had nodded, but Hermione didn't believe him. It appeared as though the secret was out of the bag. The revelation explained Ron's nastiness toward her in the following weeks.

Sunday evening, as the fortnight came to a close, she found herself sitting in the Gryffindor common room, thinking back on the past two weeks. She had spent nearly all of her time either studying or knitting elf hats, and even the latter was becoming somewhat of a thorn in her side. It wasn't that she minded creating the gifts for the creatures, really, but ever since she'd found out that Dobby had been taking them all for himself, the lure of a free Elvish society just wasn't quite as rewarding as it had once been.

Her only respite, recently, had been her tutorial sessions with Professor Snape. When she was around him, she could be herself. There would be no idle chit chat about Quidditch or some other inane subject that she knew little to nothing about...it was just her, Snape and their work. If Harry or Ron heard her speak this way about extra lessons, they would probably have her committed. Of course, they had never been much for coursework anyway. To her, the extra sessions were pure bliss.

The portrait swung inward, stirring her from her reverie. "Hey," Ron said detachedly, passing by her and dropping his broom onto the floor next to the fire. "This is for you."

He handed her a small folded note with no writing on it. "Who's this from, Ronald?" she asked, staring warily at the note. She still didn't quite trust Filch's Secrecy Sensor...not since Katie's accident at least.

"Dunno," Ron said, flopping down on the chair closest to the fire and toeing off his shoes at the heel. "Luna gave it to me."

Wrinkling up her nose at the unpleasant odor emitting from Ron's sweaty socks, she turned to the letter that she had been given. Though Luna was a bit... odd... to say the least, she was certainly no saboteur. After casting a quick, silent *Specialis Revelio*, she concluded the letter was safe and unfolded it carefully.

Dear Miss Granger,

Please report to my office immediately.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

"Where you off to?" Ron asked suspiciously as she rose from her chair and made her way to the portrait hole.

"Nowhere," she said, grabbing her cloak up off of the rack by the door.

Ron's eyes narrowed as he watched her, and she caught a glimpse of his surly look from the corner of her eye.

"What?" she snapped irritably, turning to face him.

"It was from McLaggen, wasn't it?" he asked coldly.

"What are you talking about?"

"McLaggen sent that note. I knew I should've read it first," he said sullenly, shaking his head with a frown.

Hermione could feel her blood begin to boil. If he started reading her notes... if he jeopardized her lessons for any reason...

She marched over to him, bending over so that he could see the fire in her eyes. He actually looked frightened.

"You listen to me, Ronald. If you *ever* read any of my mail, owl post or no, I will report you immediately to the Headmaster, and I *will insist* on filing charges for mail tampering. I'm sure your father, as a Ministry official, would be *more* than angry to have that on his desk in the morning. Do I make myself clear?"

As she spoke, Ron's face shifted from that of terror, to quiet disappointment, to one of pure, silent rage.

"Fuck off, Hermione," he said softly, turning toward the fire.

To her surprise, she wasn't the least bit offended by his vulgar statement. She was used to his nasty behavior by now, and that concept scared her a little. What was happening to her friendships in the light of maturity?

The thought plagued her all the way to the Headmaster's office. During the past couple of weeks, she hadn't really given much thought at all to her hobbies, her friends...even herself. When she'd spent Tuesday night in the dungeons working on the potion with Snape, no elves had complained about the lack of hats the next morning...not even Dobby. When she hadn't been at dinner for three consecutive nights because she was catching up on homework, no one complained. In fact, no one seemed to even realize she hadn't been there...not even Harry. When she'd gone back to wearing her longer, less flattering school skirt because Ginny had asked to borrow her shorter one to impress Dean during a study session (and had never given it back), no one noticed. Well, she didn't *think* anyone had noticed, anyhow. Though, McLaggen had given her a somewhat disappointed look when she walked into Ancient Runes the morning she had changed styles.

She had changed in the past couple of weeks. She didn't care whether or not Ron and Harry came to her, nightly, for help. She didn't mind when they went off without her and *forgot* to invite her along.

She realized that the boys had always been a crutch for her...a way of blending in with the crowd. Yes, they were fine boys with good hearts *even Ron*, she snorted, *when he wants to be*...but she had always relied on them to keep her grounded to the world around her. She didn't *want* to be grounded any longer. There was a war to be fought and tasks to be accomplished, and she would always, *always* be there to help them both, but she had her own life as well... a life she had forgotten in the wake of her friendship with *the Boy-Who-Lived* and his best friend.

Adulthood hit her like a ton of bricks, and suddenly there was an entirely new and foreign weight sitting on her shoulders. The realization struck her at an entirely inopportune moment as she reached the gargoyles and spoke the password to Dumbledore's office.

"Ah, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said kindly through his open office door as Hermione stepped off the spiral staircase. "Good evening, my dear. I take it you are well?"

"Yes, thank you, Headmaster," Hermione said, entering the office.

To her surprise, Professors McGonagall and Snape were in the room as well, both with very pleased looks on their faces. Well, McGonagall looked pleased. Snape wore a satisfied sort of smirk on his face, which she supposed was as happy a look as the man ever donned in a public setting.

"I suppose you are wondering why we have called you here tonight?" Dumbledore asked, walking to stand beside Snape.

Hermione nodded eagerly.

"Professor Snape informs me that the two of you have managed to complete the Tiutisch Caedo draught, just this afternoon?" Dumbledore asked, eyes twinkling.

Hermione nearly fell over. *The two of you?* "Well, the potion was really of Professor Snape's making..."

McGonagall gave Snape a sharp, inquisitive look, at which time Snape replied to Hermione, "Nonsense." He looked at her seriously. "You contributed just as much to the potion as I," he drawled.

McGonagall looked quelled, Snape took a defensive stance with his arms across his chest, and Dumbledore looked extremely pleased. Hermione probably looked like a troll with the flattered, dumbfounded look she was sure they could all see on her face. Snape had just been nice to her...*in front of someone*

"Excellent," Dumbledore said happily. "The potion has since finished cooling and is ready for transport. Now, Miss Granger," he continued, walking behind his desk and taking a seat. "Professors Snape and McGonagall are going to be taking the draught to Miss Bell at St. Mungo's this evening. I've invited you here because I thought you might like to join them."

Hermione smiled, then looked up at Snape, seeking his permission to tag along. He nodded almost imperceptibly, and she turned back to the Headmaster. "I'd love to, sir. That is, if both professors approve."

"Of course we do," McGonagall cut in shortly. Snape remained silent, but looked content nonetheless.

"Then it's settled," Dumbledore said, clasping his hands together loudly. "I believe that the three of you should be off, that is, if you are to return at a reasonable hour."

Professor McGonagall entered the fireplace first, tossing in a pinch of Floo powder and calling out clearly, "St. Mungo's."

Hermione walked over to the fireplace and stood next to Snape, expecting him to go next.

"After you, Miss Granger," he said politely, gesturing toward the fireplace.

Hermione smiled and stepped into the hearth, mimicking McGonagall's previous actions.

She landed gracefully in the adjoining Floo at St. Mungo's, Snape following after her. The welcome witch eyed them warily, painting her fingernails and moodily glancing up at the clock on the wall.

"We are here to see Katie Bell," McGonagall said loudly, boldly approaching the front desk.

Hermione could have sworn she'd seen Snape roll his eyes, and he walked over to the corner of the waiting room and began conversing with a portrait on the wall. The picture showed an elderly wizard holding a chicken...an odd thing to have hanging in a hospital, Hermione thought.

The witch behind the desk replaced her nail brush in its vat of polish and replied to McGonagall in a practiced, sing-song voice, "Visiting hours are..."

"We are not visitors. We are here on direct orders from Headmaster Dumbledore," McGonagall interrupted waspishly.

The witch stared at her for several seconds before replying, "Fourth Floor, Spell Damage, last door on the..."

"I know where her room is," McGonagall interrupted briskly, eliciting an irritated huff from the other witch. McGonagall took off down the hall, and Hermione noticed the welcome witch eyeing the woman cattily as she watched her leave. Hermione hadn't seen McGonagall act so rudely since the time of Umbridge's reign at Hogwarts, and she wondered at her actions.

Hermione waited for Snape to finish speaking to the man with the chicken, then joined him when he approached her side and began walking down the hallway toward the staircase.

"She would not allow her to visit last week," Snape said out of nowhere, and Hermione regarded him oddly. "The welcome witch," he clarified, taking in her confused look. "She would not allow Minerva to visit Miss Bell after hours. They have been on sour terms ever since."

"Oh," Hermione replied, hiding a smile. McGonagall might have had her faults, but lack of spunk wasn't one of them.

When they reached the fourth floor, Snape guided Hermione down the hall and into Katie's room. The elder witch was standing over her, talking to the unconscious girl.

"I thought she was awake?" Hermione asked in confusion.

"She was," Snape replied. "She has been given a sedative in preparation for the draught. It would not be a pleasant experience if she were conscious."

Hermione nodded, then stepped back and watched as her professors administered the potion to her comatose classmate. Snape removed the vial from an inner pocket of his robes and poured the liquid into her mouth while McGonagall gently massaged Katie's neck so that she would swallow it.

She thought about her classmates' original reaction to the necklace tragedy. In the few days following the incident, Katie had been the talk of the school. As she looked back on the past couple of weeks, Hermione realized that she hadn't heard so much as a whisper about Katie since then. How soon they'd all forgotten her.

And yet, here, in front of her, were two people who had spent the past two weeks doing everything in their power to improve the girl's condition...people who weren't even *friends* of the victim, but only her teachers. Snape had spent every waking moment outside of the classroom working on the Tiutisch Caedo draught, and McGonagall had actually gotten thrown out of St. Mungo's for visiting her too often.

Yes, adulthood was upon her, and the weight would be that much heavier without peers who were capable of identifying with her feelings. She didn't care if it sounded arrogant. It was the truth...she was just more mature than they were.

That evening, when she said goodnight to the portrait of the Fat Lady, she proceeded directly to her room. Of course, she wasn't rude, and she waved a silent goodnight to Harry and Ginny...and even Ron, as a matter of fact...but there was no heart in her bedtime parting.

She reflected on the success of the potion she had helped Snape to devise. She had participated in a project that saved someone more pain than she could imagine...perhaps even her life. Though she couldn't be present for Katie's awakening, she had noticed a difference in her features immediately after the potion had been administered. Her tortured face had almost immediately transformed into one of peace, and Hermione had sighed contentedly at the sight. She had a purpose in life, and it didn't involve arguments about Quidditch teams or discussions about proper makeup application techniques. No one else seemed to share her passion for something greater than schoolyard tomfoolery, and her own penchant for something deeper seemed to isolate her even further from her friends and peers.

As she climbed onto her four-poster and tucked herself in for the night, she wondered if anyone else understood how she was feeling...at the moment, she felt completely

alone.

Christmas was approaching fast, and Hermione found less and less time for her extracurricular activities. She hadn't read a book for pleasure alone in months, nor had she knitted a single elf hat. Ron had taken to openly groping Lavender in the hallways, which made it awkward for her to spend any time in her dorm room at night if the girl was there. Essentially, Hermione couldn't have cared less about who Ron was sleeping with, but she knew he was doing it just to spite her. Ginny had certainly made a mess of their friendship with her slip of the tongue regarding Viktor.

The relationship between her best friend and her roommate had kicked off on a rough note, to say the least. Ron had done very well during one particular Quidditch game (Ginny had managed to talk her into watching it instead of getting ahead on homework) and was *celebrating* with Lavender in full view of the entire student body.

He'd carried out the *celebration* right in front of her, and everyone else, to establish the fact that he had someone whilst she had no one. The fact that he could have been so vindictive and hurtful hit her in a very sore spot. She was lonely, he knew it, and he was using his new relationship to spite her. It worked. Ron ended up with a face full of flying canaries, and the scratches from said birds ended up lasting for weeks. She wasn't sorry for it afterwards. As a matter of fact, she thought he quite deserved it. *Git*.

McLaggen had asked Hermione to Slughorn's Christmas party, and she had grudgingly decided to accept the invitation. She had thought she and Harry would just go together, but he had asked Luna, and to be honest, she didn't want to show up alone. Of course, going with McLaggen brought the added bonus of irritating Ron. Normally she would consider revenge a childish and unfruitful endeavor... but this situation was different. He *had* started it after all...

The night of Slughorn's party, Parvati Patil fawned over her immensely. Without an invitation of her own, she had taken to living vicariously through Hermione. Though she nearly never wore makeup, she humoured Parvati and allowed the girl to paint her face and style her hair. She'd also taken her suggestion and borrowed one of her more flattering dresses. The garment was rather low cut, but not low enough to reveal more than a glimpse of cleavage. It bunched in the center of her chest, and two thick straps rose up from the knot, twisting around in the rear and meeting the silky material again at her lower back. It was a bit loose in the midsection...Parvati was just slightly larger than she was...but the size difference gave the material a flowing effect, which Hermione thought rather eye-pleasing. To be honest, she didn't really mind the attention from her roommate. She'd been on the outs with Ron for weeks, the effects of which had taken their toll on her friendship with Harry and Ginny as well. She couldn't blame the two of them really...it wasn't easy to divide up one's time between feuding friends.

She met Cormac in the common room at eight o'clock. Not one to disappoint, Cormac had more than dressed for the occasion. He wore a brilliant set of black wizard's robes with a deep purple oxford underneath. When she saw him, she wondered if her outfit was chic enough for the situation. Her hesitations were quickly quelled...when he'd seen her come down the stairs, he'd done a double take.

"You look beautiful," he said in an awed voice.

"Thank you," she replied, smiling.

Hermione was most surprised to see Snape had decided to attend the Christmas gathering. Though, to his credit, he was sulking in the corner when she walked in.

"Mead?" Cormac asked, gesturing toward the refreshment table.

Hermione glanced to her right. "No, thank you, Cormac. Maybe just some punch, please?"

He flashed a very pleased smile in her direction, saying, "I'll be right back."

Glancing over at her glowering professor, Hermione decided to ask him his take on the evening. She walked up to him and stood slightly behind the man and to his right, striking up casual conversation.

"Having a good time, Professor?" she said politely. She'd had to raise her voice to be heard over the chatter of those around them, and she realized the moment it came out that it sounded quite shrill.

"For the last time, Sybill," Snape replied, turning his head, "I don't..."

When he saw her, he paused mid-sentence. He seemed very surprised to see her...that, or he was simply taken aback by the discovery that she wasn't Professor Trelawney. Either way, he hadn't finished his sentence and showed no signs of doing so in the near future.

"Er...there's a lot of people here. I didn't expect it to be so crowded," she commented casually. "It looks like Professor Slughorn's magicked the office to accommodate everyone."

He seemed to shake the absent look off his face and decided to participate in the conversation. He glanced around the room, answering her casually, "Yes, it does look rather larger than usual..."

"There you are," Cormac said merrily, sneaking up on her from behind. "One punch," he added when she'd turned to him, and he handed her a large glass of red liquid.

"Thank you, Cormac," she answered, taking the glass and smiling pleasantly. She turned back to continue her conversation with Snape, but the man had mysteriously disappeared from her side. He had probably been pulled into some ungodly discussion with their host. Or maybe (and she felt sorry for the poor guy if this was the case) Professor Trelawney had finally managed to track him down. She understood. If her former Divination teacher had come looking for her, she certainly would have run for the hills.

Cormac grunted unhappily. "It is way too crowded in here tonight. I can scarcely breathe..."

She nodded, scanning the room for Harry or Ginny. "I completely agree."

"You know, Hermione," Cormac said, and she turned to him, "you and I really don't get many chances to talk to one another. I feel like I hardly know you."

She gave him a skeptical look, cocking an eyebrow. "We're talking right now, aren't we?"

"Oh, my dear girl," Trelawney wailed, creeping up next to them through the crowd. "I am very surprised to see you here." Hermione could smell the stench of cooking sherry emitting from her pores, and the odor increased when the woman got close enough for them to smell her breath when she spoke. "I was under the impression that these parties were exclusive, and you never were much of a student..."

Trelawney had taken Hermione's hand and was shaking her head disappointedly. Hermione felt her face grow hot and had a sudden urge to smack the witch over the head with the bottle of alcohol from which the woman was currently swigging.

"Actually," Cormac piped up, wrenching Hermione's hand away from the older witch's grasp, "Hermione is the top student in her year and has been every term since she started at Hogwarts."

Hermione blinked and looked at Cormac, who was staring daggers at the Divination professor.

"I...well, y-yes," Trelawney stuttered, "in subjects graded on text book study, but..."

Cormac's face was unchanging, and the woman chose not to finish her sentence. Instead, she craned her head up much like a giraffe reaching for food in a tree and called out, "Oh, Severus, there you are!"

Hermione turned her neck just in time to see the swish of Snape's billowing black robes disappear into the crowd. Trelawney scurried off quickly after him, stumbling over her elaborate attire and nearly dropping her jug of liquor.

Turning to McLaggen, Hermione smiled appreciatively. "Thank you, Cormac."

He shook his head, clearly still agitated from the encounter. "She's a tart," he commented dryly.

Though Hermione couldn't have agreed more, she chose to be respectful and settled for an acknowledging smile.

"Come on," Cormac said, placing his hand on her lower back. "Let's go somewhere where we can hear ourselves think."

He led her past the other guests, her neatly styled hair falling out of place as it brushed against the large Christmas tree in the center of the room *So much for looking presentable*. They walked into an adjoining room, one that she had been previously unaware of, and he sat them down at a bench on the far wall.

Before he said a word, he pulled a gold flask out of the inner pocket of his robes and drank from it heavily.

"What are you drinking?" Hermione asked disapprovingly.

"Firewhiskey," Cormac replied, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing at the sides of his mouth politely. "Would you like to try some?" he added, offering her the flask.

"No, thank you," she said, eyeing the drink warily. She hardly ever drank and couldn't imagine the spectacle she would make of herself if she indulged in liquor as powerful as firewhiskey.

Cormac shrugged his shoulders, taking another deep swill from the flask. "Did I ever tell you," he said, smiling at her, "about the time I made a hundred saves in one season on my city's division Quidditch League?"

"Er...no..." she replied, feigning interest.

Apparently he saw through her ruse and proceeded to scope out the room, as if a different topic of conversation would jump out at him from one of the portraits. "Hey, look," he said out of nowhere, pointing above his head, "mistletoe."

Hermione did her best not to gawk at him and chose to change the subject instead. "I'm just going to go get another glass of punch," she said politely, extracting herself from the seat.

"I'll get it..." Cormac replied, moving to get up himself.

"No, really, it's okay. I wanted to see if Harry was here anyways. I'd like to say hi. I haven't seen much of him lately."

Cormac shrugged his shoulders and stayed in his seat, alternating sips from his flask and his cup of mead.

No sooner had she walked through the door and back into the party than she heard Harry calling to her.

"Hermione! *Hermione!*"

"Harry! There you are, thank goodness!" she said, shuffling up to her friend. "Hi, Luna!"

"What's happened to you?" Harry asked, staring at her hair.

She rolled her eyes, snorting. "Oh, I've just escaped...I mean, I've just left Cormac," she said. "Under the mistletoe," she added in explanation as Harry continued to look questioningly at her.

"Serves you right for coming with him," he said severely.

She shook her head, looking away from him. Sure, *he* could say that. He'd had loads of girls fighting with each other for the chance to be his date to the party. She'd only had one invitation.

"I thought he'd annoy Ron most," she replied in a half-truth. She was sure her attending the party with Cormac would definitely annoy Ron, though that wasn't the only reason she'd gone with him. Harry hadn't even *thought* of asking her, and they were supposed to be best friends! The reality was that she was lonely, and being the only one at the party without a date would just have reminded her of that fact. She suddenly felt like just going back to her dorm room...

"Let's get something straight," Harry said seriously, lowering his voice so that Luna couldn't hear him. "Are you planning to tell Ron that you interfered at Keeper tryouts?"

What a double-edged question, she thought. She hadn't even *been* the one who'd interfered at tryouts, though she had allowed Harry to think she had done it...

"Do you really think I'd stoop that low?" she finally replied, deciding that was the most appropriate answer. She wasn't really lying one way or the other after all...

"Good," Harry answered. "Because he'll just fall apart again, and we'll lose the next match..."

"Quidditch!" she said angrily. "Is that all boys care about? Cormac hasn't asked me a single question about myself. No, I've just been treated to 'A Hundred Great Saves by Cormac McLaggen' nonstop ever since...oh, no, here he comes!"

Hermione darted toward the back of the room, not wanting to be in the middle of a Harry/Cormac argument. She was sure it would only lead to a discussion involving Ron, and that was one conversation in which she did *not* wish to be a participant.

"Cormac!" Hermione called once he was out of range of Harry. "Back here."

Her date came sauntering toward her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and leading her once again into the other area.

"Too loud in there," he commented and sat down on the bench once again. Grudgingly, Hermione took her seat beside him, sipping on the glass of punch she'd picked up on the way back into the adjoining room.

"So have you heard about Katie?" Cormac asked casually.

"No, what about her?" Hermione replied eagerly.

"She's out of her coma. She still has to stay in St. Mungo's for a bit, but they say she'll make a full recovery in time." His words were starting to draw out a bit, and he offered her the flask again, which she waved off politely once more.

"Who did you hear that from?" she asked him as he took yet another large gulp of firewhiskey.

"Dun remember," her replied, tipping his flask upside down above his head and peeking into the hole with one eye closed. "Bugger," he said disappointedly, tucking the empty case back inside his robes. "Wanna dance?" he slurred, looking at Hermione.

"Er..." She sized him up with her eyes. He was definitely buzzed, if not bordering on drunk. "There's no music, Cormac."

"So?" he countered defiantly.

"So we can't dance, then..." she said, furrowing her brow and shrugging her shoulders as if to say, *duh*." "

"Bollocks," he snapped back at her, rising from his seat and grabbing her arm.

"Cormac, I don't want to dance," she said, wrenching her arm out of his grasp.

"You're my date," he said obviously.

"*And*?" she replied in a voice that clearly implied his answer had made no sense.

"And so you have tuh dance with me, thass what!" he nearly shouted, and she rolled her eyes at him.

"I'm going back to the party," she said, brushing past him.

He grabbed her arm again, and she paused, shooting him a dangerous look.

"Let go," she said slowly and sharply, attempting to leave no room for argument.

"All right, I'll let go," he said, his eyes raking over her body, "if you kiss me."

"Dream on," she replied disbelievingly, pulling on her arm, though Cormac did not relinquish his grip on it.

"Why? Yer little boyfriend has a girl. You're single," he said, his eyes on her waist.

"Single, not stupid," she replied, glaring at him.

"You really are a frigid bitch," he said coldly and clearly.

"Let me go, Cormac," she said dangerously, attempting to restrain her anger.

"No," he said finitely.

"Let...me...go," she hissed through clenched teeth.

"Or *what*?" he said tauntingly. "Yull use your wand on me, *Perfect Prefect Granger*? You know the rules. Ye' can't hex me."

"No, but I can."

A sudden stream of white light shot past her ear and hit Cormac directly on the shoulder.

"Aaargh!" he cried, letting go of Hermione's wrist and clutching at his arm.

She whipped her head around to see Snape standing behind her, wand pointed at her would-be attacker.

"One hundred points from Gryffindor," he spat venomously, anger shining in his eyes, "and you will have detention with Mr. Filch every Saturday for the rest of the year. Now apologize to Miss Granger for being a nasty piece of work, and then return to your common room."

Cormac looked flustered and frightened and took a step forward, still rubbing his injured arm.

Snape's wand twitched. "No," he snapped, halting McLaggen. "Say it from there."

McLaggen lowered his head, muttering, "Sorry, Hermione."

"Louder," Snape commanded authoritatively, "and articulate to Miss Granger exactly what it is you are apologizing for."

"I'm sorry," McLaggen said clearly and then paused, apparently trying to decide which answer Snape would accept. "I...I'm sorry for grab..."

"Wrong," Snape cut in, his voice low and dangerous. "Try again."

"I..." he began, looking up at Snape's face. His eyes widened at the livid expression the professor was wearing, and he turned his eyes to Hermione. "I'm sorry for being a nasty piece of work," he concluded, and Snape lowered his wand.

"Now go to your common room," Snape ordered, leaving no room for argument. "And Mr. McLaggen," he added as Cormac paused in the archway, "I do not want to see you for the rest of the evening. Do I make myself clear?"

McLaggen nodded, though he was still facing toward the door, and Hermione only saw the motion from the back of his head. He exited the room, and Hermione turned to Snape.

She supposed she should have been grateful, and she would have been, if her rescuer had been anyone other than Snape. Coming to her rescue was an act she *didn't* want him to feel he needed to perform. When she was with Professor Snape, she felt like an adult...an equal amidst a fellow inquisitive mind. What he'd just done had made her feel childish and inept, and the contrast in feelings was confusing her. She looked at him seriously.

"I could have handled it myself, you know," she said clearly.

"Of course you could have," he answered immediately, surprising her. "And you would have been in serious trouble for hexing a fellow student. Do not be stupid, Hermione."

Her eyes widened, as did his...he had just called her by her first name.

But before either of them could comment on slipup, Professor Slughorn's stubby fingers wrapped around Snape's shoulder. The portly man stepped through the doorway, voice booming.

"Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus!" Slughorn hiccupped merrily, pulling Snape toward the other room. And, just like that, Snape disappeared with him into the

crowd.

Hermione spent a few more minutes by herself in the back room, part of her seeking quiet contemplation and part of her, to her own surprise, wanting Snape to rejoin her so that they could finish their conversation.

Hermione, he had called her. Of course, it was her name... though she had never heard Snape refer to anyone by their first name...with the exception of his colleagues, of course.

Did this mean that he thought of her as a fellow adult, an equal, perhaps? More likely than not, it was a simple lapse in thought. He had been incensed with McLaggen and was probably just too angry to think clearly... though, that alone was a separate subject to ponder. Just *why* had he been so angry? She had seen him yell at students before...Neville practically got a tongue lashing from the man on a daily basis. But he had been different just then, and she had seen the way he'd looked at Cormac. Snape hadn't looked as if he'd wanted to punish him; he'd looked as if he'd wanted to *murder* him.

She glanced up at the clock on the wall. It had been nearly twenty minutes since the confrontation, and Snape had not returned. She presumed he was either still enjoying the party, or else he'd gone back to his chambers for the night.

She turned and walked through the still-bustling crowd, noticing that Harry and Luna were nowhere to be seen. Sighing, she reached the exit door, stopping short when she nearly bumped right smack into Snape.

She inhaled sharply. "P..."

"A word," he said at a near whisper and motioned toward the hallway. She followed him all the way down the corridor and into the second floor staffroom.

He waved his wand at the door, and it shut itself tightly, its lock clicking into place. Hermione watched him carefully, hardly daring to breathe. She had no idea what this meeting was about, but she hoped he was not about to apologize for his use of her given name during their last conversation. She had liked his use of it, and though she knew that he would probably never refer to her in such a casual way again, she didn't want him to regret the event, either.

"The Headmaster has just sent me an urgent message, and it involves you," he said purposefully.

Hermione's heart rose in her throat. With all the Muggle raids the Death Eaters had been performing lately...

Snape seemed to read her mind and waved a hand at her. "Your parents are fine. The message is in regards to your plans for the Christmas break."

She nodded at him, relieved.

"You were planning to return to your parents' home for the holidays, were you not?"

"Yes, sir," she replied.

He declined his chin. "Well then, this will not be a pleasant request," he continued, looking away from her. "The Headmaster and I have undertaken a project that is to be completed over the Christmas break. Unfortunately, unforeseen circumstances will not allow him the time needed to participate in the process. It is an undertaking that will require two people and, regretfully, one that I cannot complete alone."

"So," she clarified, "you want me to stay over the break to help you?"

He looked at her carefully, apparently gauging her response. "I realize that you would prefer to spend the holiday at home with your family, and I assure you that the Headmaster and I would not ask this of you if it were not completely necessary," he finished, his face a blank canvas.

"I would be more than happy to stay," she said, giving a slight smile. "I'll just have to write to mum and dad and let them know I won't be there for Christmas. It's awfully short notice..."

"An unavoidable complication, I assure you. Of course, I shall be able to manage without assistance on Christmas morning. The Headmaster has assured me that he will secure a Portkey for you for the day so that you may partake in the celebrations with your family."

"Oh, then they won't mind," Hermione replied happily. "We're not much for celebrating Christmas anyhow with the exception of the presents bit."

"Good," Snape replied, pointing his wand at the door and unlocking it with a silent spell. "Then I shall see you in the laboratory tomorrow morning?"

"Absolutely, sir," she answered. "What time should I be there?"

"Any time after ten o'clock," he answered, walking toward the door, Hermione following closely behind him. "I may not be there, as I have...obligations...in the morning. If that is the case, just wait for me. I should not be gone much longer than that."

"But if you're not there, how will I get in?" she asked.

"I have altered my wards to admit you," he replied nonchalantly, opening the door and glancing down the hallway. He seemed to have glimpsed something of interest, and he strode purposefully away from her down the corridor.

She watched him disappear down the stairway and found herself in an almost ethereal state at the thought of the coming day. There would be no boring holiday at home listening to stories about her parents' dental practice... no lonely nights in her twin bed staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars she'd had on her ceiling since she was six. No, none of that for her on this particular holiday. This year she had a mission...a purposeful one...and she was almost giddy with the prospect of her Christmas break not being wasted. Instead, she would be working alongside the one person at the school with whom she could actually hold an intellectual conversation. Her outlook on the weeks that were to follow had just taken a whole different direction, and for that, she couldn't have been more grateful.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 8

HBP--the way it should have been written. Written for the January '08 SS/HG Exchange. Canon-compliant all the way through DH, sans the epilogue.

"You need to stir that twice before you can add the hellebore," Snape said distractedly, adding a sprig of knotgrass to his own cauldron.

"Technically, yes, but if I add the hellebore *while* I'm stirring, it will disperse better, and I won't have to let it simmer as long."

He broke from his own brewing and watched as she tested her theory. Sure enough, the potion immediately changed from light green to dark teal.

"Very good," he said detachedly, turning back to his own work.

They had been working in cordial synchronization for three days. Snape had given Hermione free reign to change and experiment her processes as she wished. So far she had been right about three separate variations of her own devising. The one time she had been wrong, Snape had simply *Evanesco'd* the concoction she had been working on and said patiently, "Again."

She had seen a new side of Snape emerge in the time she had spent with him since the break began. His patience had both surprised and excited her. With this new, amiable Snape, she could feel free to ask questions and take chances that she never would have attempted when she'd been in his Potions classroom.

She had asked, more than once, actually, about the intended effects of the potion. Both times, Snape had simply told her that he was unable to discuss the potion's intended use with her, and she should content herself with the knowledge that her work was going to be used in a worthy cause.

They'd taken meals together in the lab, most of them brought by house-elves. Snape had been quite impressed that Hermione's simple utterance of, "I'm starving..." brought the appearance of Dobby, and occasionally Winky, who had apparently also been listening intently for Hermione's call.

"They act as if you are their Mistress," he'd commented the day before, after taking a bite into a rather large egg salad sandwich as Hermione stood to refill their glasses of pumpkin juice.

"Nobody is their Mistress," she'd replied reproachfully, sitting back down across from him. "They are free elves, and if I had my way, the entire kitchen staff would be liberated right alongside them."

"Naturally," he'd replied, taking a sip of his newly-filled glass. "But I would keep that information to myself, if I were you. It is no wonder none of the other elves have visited the dungeons in the past week. They are all afraid you will throw a sock at them if they come to clean. Quite inconvenient actually..."

"Oppressor," she chastised.

"Anarchist," he replied, smirking.

As their third day of work came to a close, Hermione cleaned up her workstation and retreated into Snape's office to copy down her notes on the day's progress. He'd allowed her to use his desk for such documentations, and she would wordlessly move to a separate chair on the opposite side if he entered the room with the intent of recording his own findings.

"There is no need to change seats," he commented when she began to rise as he entered the room. "I will sit here," he finished, walking toward the guest chair across the desk.

"But it's your chair," she replied, still half-standing, slightly risen up off the chair.

"You use it as much as I do," he answered absently, taking the seat across from her and unfolding his notes. He looked up at her over the parchment he was scribbling on. "Sit," he said, pointing at the chair with his quill. She complied, smiling.

"So what are your plans for Saturday?" she asked nonchalantly, scribbling out the last paragraph she'd written.

"Regarding what?" he asked, eyes on his parchment.

"Christmas, of course," she retorted.

"I will be working on the potion."

"Yes, but after that?"

He looked up at her over his writing. "There will be no *after*," he said matter-of-factly. "The potion requires constant surveillance. You know that."

"Well, yes," she answered, putting down her quill, "but I had thought you would have factored in a stasis period. It is Christmas after all."

"Christmas is rather inconsequential to me," he stated clearly, returning once more to his notes.

She regarded him carefully as he scribed, a sympathetic look etched into her face. "I don't have to go," she said quietly, watching for his reaction.

"Go where?" he replied, his quill unceasing.

"Home...for Christmas, I mean," she clarified. "I don't have to go back. I can stay and help you brew."

"Do not be ridiculous," he said, brows furrowed, looking down at his notes. "I am perfectly capable of finishing the day's work without a peer."

"I know that," she said rather defensively. "I just thought you'd want company. Who wants to be alone on Christmas?"

"I believe I have already told you that Christmas holds no luster for me," he said, bringing his eyes up to hers. "My last Christmas was solitary in nature, as was the one before that and the one before that. Trust me, I do not mind."

He waited until she nodded her understanding, as though he wanted to be sure his point had sunk in. She returned to her writing, though her mind was wandering and certainly nowhere near her work. It saddened her to think that Professor Snape would be alone on Christmas. Of course, he had said that he didn't mind...that he was used to it actually...but did anyone ever *really* become accustomed to a reclusive existence?

That night, when Hermione returned to her dorm room, she grabbed her most recent issue of *Collectable Books Monthly* out of her trunk and opened it atop her duvet. Scanning it quickly, she found what she was looking for and hastily scribbled out her inquiry on a small piece of parchment. She would use Pigwidgeon, who Ron had left with her over the holidays in case she needed to reach them from her parents' home, to send off the letter right away. The little bird would need to start off quickly if she was going to pull this off.

"Pssst! Pig! Come here, will you?"

The tiny owl unfurled his head from in between his feathers, blinking rapidly at Hermione.

"Care to post a letter for me?" she said encouragingly, dangling the rolled parchment in front of her.

Pigwidgeon hooted excitedly, hopping off of the bedrail of Parvati's four-poster bed and landing softly atop Hermione's coverlet. She pulled out a small bag of money from her nightstand drawer, opening it and removing a few of the coins.

"Thank you, Piggy," Hermione said pleasantly, tying the letter to the bird's leg before getting up to open the window for him. "Take this to 21 Symphonic Place, London, okay? You can just leave it in the mail slot out front if no one is there."

The owl ruffled his feathers and took direct flight off of her bed, sailing quickly out the window and disappearing into the night. She shut the latch and smiled happily to herself. This was going to be a fine Christmas.

Christmas Eve came quickly, and Hermione was exhausted by the middle of the day. The potion required thirty additions to it that day, and both she and Snape found themselves tiring quickly with the many exhausting tasks they had been performing.

"Seven turns, then take a break," Snape said to her when the potion had turned a deep shade of turquoise.

She nodded, wiping the sweat from her brow with her shirtsleeve. When she had finished stirring, she sat back on her stool and waited until Severus had put a stasis on his cauldron and perched himself on the seat next to hers.

"I have somewhere to be for the next few hours," he said to her once his breathing had evened out. "Will you be able to handle the next additions on your own?"

"Sure," she answered, sipping at her bottle of water. "I've got the lines sketched out on the chalkboard. I should be fine. Is it something important?"

"Yes," he answered, nodding. "If you have any uncertainties, my notes are on the desk in the library."

"Am I able to get in there without you?"

"The wards have been altered in there as well," he replied, rising from his seat. He glanced at the clock on the wall. "I have to go now. I shall be returning before cleanup."

With that, he was gone.

She toiled hard over the next several hours, stopping only when the potion required simmering. By the time she placed the ladle down at last, she was exhausted. She'd long since unbuttoned the top three buttons to her blouse and rolled up her shirt sleeves, and her hair was escaping its rubber shackle in curly tendrils around her face. She was glad Snape wasn't there to see her, as she was sure she looked a mess.

The last potion addition of the day required lovage, a plant that she was quite unfamiliar with. After several minutes spent attempting to decide whether it should be chopped or shaved, she gave up and decided to check Snape's notes on the subject.

"Shaved with a piercing shear..." she said aloud to herself, scanning the piece of parchment. "What on earth is a piercing shear?"

She thumbed through Snape's other notes, searching for a description of the tool. Coming up empty, she searched around his desk for a manual or a notebook...anything that would shed some light on the subject.

After pulling a black binder from the second drawer of the *escritoire*, she opened it to a page marked with a single black ribbon. The title read *Maglia Sradicare*. The entire page was in Italian. She glanced up at one of Snape's bookcases. "*Accio Italian to English Dictionary*."

The decoded title of the book, *Linked Eradication*, caught her curiosity.

The more she translated, the wider her eyes grew. In total, the page read as follows:

Seventeen drops submersed in any drink,

On the day of desired dissolution,

To the primary of the order,

Will channel through with the proper incantation:

Tutto Distruggere

Tutto Distruggere... total destruction.

She turned the page, letting out a loud and horrified gasp...there was a drawing in Severus' print of the Dark Mark, linked by two thin lines to the title of the incantation and the list of ingredients required for the potion she'd been working on.

"What are you doing?"

Severus' cold, deep voice reached her ears from the doorway. She looked up at him and could sense her anger flashing behind her own eyes.

"Why?" she asked dangerously, staring him down.

"You were not supposed to see that," he said quietly, his gaze not leaving hers.

"This is what you had me doing?" Her voice rose as she spoke. "This is why I spent my holiday here instead of with my parents...to brew a potion to EXTERMINATE PEOPLE?"

"Hermione..."

"Don't!" she shouted, rounding the desk and approaching him. "Just tell me why. Why in Merlin's name would you make ~~that~~ to begin with, and why have me help you with it? All those people!"

"Hermione, you do not know all of the details," he replied, keeping his voice calm.

"I know what the book says. I know that you are trying to get rid of You-Know-Who by killing off his followers, using the Dark Mark as the link."

"Death Eaters," he said sternly. "Listen to what you just said. They are minions of the Dark Lord, Hermione."

"They aren't all evil," she replied at little more than a whisper, her voice shaking. Tears were shining in her eyes. "You can't just destroy an entire group of people. You are talking about mass genocide. It's *wrong*."

"It is a last resort. We have no intention of using the potion unless it is absolutely necessary."

She looked at him seriously. "You mean if Harry fails...if he dies and You-Know-Who lives."

"Yes," he said, watching her carefully.

"You would die *with* him," she said, her voice soft. "How could you do that? How could you just sacrifice yourself?"

"I..." he paused, considering his words carefully, then sighed. "I have never held the delusion that I would live to see Potter destroy the Dark Lord. Each day in the presence of his madness is a moment closer to death. My assignment is one of danger, if not peril. I would gladly lay down my life if it would insure his destruction."

"Please," she said, her eyes moving to the floor. "Please don't say that."

Tears were escaping her eyelids and creeping slowly down her face, shattering with a quiet *splat* on the carpet below them.

"I apologize for keeping this from you," he said evenly.

"That's not why I'm upset," she said, letting slip a hollow chuckle.

"Severus," she said, raising her eyes to look at him, gauging his reaction to her use of his given name. He made no movement, no sound. She continued, "I just can't believe that you don't care."

His eyes bore into hers, and she felt her breath hitch in her throat, a stifled hiccup of a sob.

"My feelings have no place in any of this," he said softly.

"And mine?" she whispered back.

"In regards to what?"

"To you," she answered.

He stared at her for what felt like an eternity, his expression unreadable. Finally, he raised his hand to cup her cheek, wiping a stray tear from her skin with the pad of his thumb.

"Hermione," he began...then paused.

Her eyes were glued to his, and she felt as if there were no one else in the world. It was just the two of them alone in that library...a moment frozen in time.

His scent invaded her senses...patchouli and wormwood, the same fragrances she had smelled in Slughorn's Amortentia brew. Her eyes fluttered shut for a moment as she processed the aroma, her olfactory senses tingling. When she opened her eyes, she found herself studying his face, every line, every curvature. Her eyes ran down his prominent nose and rested on his mouth. His lips looked soft and moist, and she felt the urge to taste them for herself.

She leaned in towards him and stood up on the balls of her feet, bringing her face closer to his. He jerked minutely backwards at first, his expression that of surprise. Almost immediately, he stilled all movement, and she could see that he wasn't breathing.

She came very close to drawing back...to forgetting about her intended actions and leaving the room right then and there.

But she didn't draw back. And she didn't leave the room. She reached up with her lips and placed them on his, brushing them lightly from side to side. Seconds passed, and he didn't reciprocate her movements, only allowing her mouth to rest upon his without attention.

She withdrew from the kiss, her eyes drawn to the floor, away from his. When she looked back up, he was staring at her with an unreadable visage. An apology would be in order...she had crossed a very crucial line.

She could feel the wetness building behind her eyelids. "I..."

His lips were on hers before she could finish her sentence, his caress firmer than hers had been. She sighed into his mouth and brought the fingers of her left hand up to tangle in his hair, and he reciprocated the action.

She parted her lips slightly, and he took the opportunity to delve into her mouth, allowing her to taste him. The kiss intensified, and she wrapped her right palm around his neck, forcing him to support her weight. The action elicited a low growl from somewhere within his throat, and he pulled his head back slightly, raking over her body with his eyes. He snaked his left arm around her back and pulled her to him roughly, his mouth finding hers once more. She sighed happily at the feeling of being pulled flush against his body, inhaling sharply when she felt the hardened evidence of his arousal sticking into her stomach.

He pulled his lips back and rested his forehead on hers, both of them breathing heavily. His eyes locked with hers, and she smiled at him...a happy, brilliant, satisfied smile.

He blinked several times, his mouth parting more than once as if he wanted to say something. "Hermione," he breathed, her whispered name from his lips sounding like music to her ears.

He wrenched back from her suddenly, and she almost fell to the floor at the loss of his support. Letting out a pained groan, he grabbed his left forearm with his opposite hand, squeezing his eyes tightly shut.

"I have to go," he said, rushing to the coat rack and grabbing his cloak.

He paused when he reached the door, turning back to her. "We will discuss this when I return."

"Severus," she called quickly, and he halted. "I just..."

He interrupted her sentence with yet another pained cry. "It gets worse if I wait," he said hastily between clenched teeth.

"Go," she replied immediately.

He declined his chin once and turned, leaving the room in a flourish of rippling robes. She watched him go, and the events of the last few minutes raced through her mind. There would be no sleep for her tonight. The exhaustion that she had felt only hours ago now seemed to be turned into an inability to sit still, and she fluttered around the room as a nervous energy invaded her body. She left the laboratory and made for her bedroom, unsure of whether she should be happy or distressed. At the moment, she was simply confused.

Snape didn't return that evening. He wasn't back by the time she caught her Portkey the next day, either. Luckily, her return letter from the distributor o*Obscure Books Monthly* came early the next morning, along with her order, and she was able to leave it for him in his quarters.

She hadn't been able to sleep the night before, not even for a split second. The memory of Severus' lips pressed tightly against hers ran through her mind over and over,

and she found herself in a state of profound, meticulous contemplation.

Christmas morning at the Grangers' went very much as she'd expected it to. Her dad woke her up by blaring holiday music through the family's expensive surround-sound system, and he'd torn through his stocking by the time she'd reached the bottom of the staircase.

"I just couldn't wait!" he'd said, beaming over at Hermione.

"I told you to wait for your daughter!" her mother had chastised from the kitchen. "Honestly, you'd think you were the adolescent and *she* were the parent..."

Her original plan had been to spend the night at her parents' and return to Hogwarts in the morning, but her curiosity (and concern, if she could bring herself to admit it) regarding the professor had her anxious, and she felt the urge to return early to the school.

"Mum, I have work to do," she said consolingly when her mother had asked why she was leaving early.

"Your extra lessons?" her mother asked speculatively. "You haven't stopped talking about them since you got here. You must be learning a lot."

"I am," she answered, smiling.

"And he must be quite captivating," her mother added wryly.

"Who?" Hermione asked distractedly, tossing *Rare Herbs of the Serengeti* into her trunk.

"Whichever boy has you so smitten with him," her mother answered, her smile creeping into her voice.

Hermione froze and then continued to pack as if her heart hadn't just almost stopped beating. "I don't know what you are talking about, Mum," she said nonchalantly. "There is no guy."

"Mmm hmm. Whatever you say, dear," her mother answered, then left Hermione to finish packing.

Hermione waited until she heard her mother's soft footsteps descending the staircase, and then she peeked her head out of the doorway. She was all alone on the second floor of the house, and she shut her bedroom door before sitting down heavily on the edge of her bed.

Her mother thought she had a crush at school...a lover, perhaps. Was she *that* obvious? Truthfully, she wasn't even sure that she felt that way about Professor Snape... *Severus*... *Snape*... *er*... her tutor.

To be fair, he was an extremely intelligent man...more intelligent, perhaps, than anyone she'd ever known. He was intense and focused on his work, probably even more so than she was herself. She wouldn't call him a *handsome* man, but his features held an incredible amount of character.

At any rate, she was drawn to him, and she didn't know quite how to feel about it. He was her tutor, her professor, and twenty years her senior...could there really ever be anything between the two of them? Would he even *consider* such a social taboo? Though she had no recollection of reading anything in the school rules in reference to a student/teacher relationship, she couldn't imagine there not being something written on the subject.

She sighed, tossing a pair of folded white socks rather roughly across the room. *Who am I kidding?* she thought sullenly. *It's never going to happen.*

She checked her watch and glanced down at the monocular Portkey she had been given the previous day. If she was going to activate it early, now was as good a time as ever.

After hugging both of her parents goodbye and gathering up her presents and school items, she pointed her wand at the magical device and stated clearly, *Activus*."

Moments later, she found herself staring up at the iron gates of Hogwarts, trudging down the snowy path to the school. She had barely put her trunk down in her dorm room when a small, black bird began pecking mercilessly at her window. Opening it curiously, she had to literally duck out of the way when the anxious fowl came tearing through the open aperture and into her room, landing with annoyance on her bed.

"Who on earth do *you* belong to?" she asked curiously, approaching the slender crow. The tiny creature held out a leg in what she mused was almost a snotty manner, and Hermione nearly chuckled aloud at the sight. She paused before taking the proffered bundle, studying the bird. It was looking away from her in a way that clearly stated, "I'm too good for this," and she could have *sworn* the thing had one eyebrow arched higher than the other.

"Oh, you *have* to belong to Severus," she said amusedly.

The bird let out a sneeze that sounded eerily like a snort, and she nearly doubled over in a fit of giggles. When the crow glared at her, she did her best not to convulse with uncontrollable laughter and finally managed to extract the package from the bird's leg. The little aviary comedian took flight off of her bed and soared out of her window gracefully, and Hermione watched it fly down the outside of the tower toward the substructure of the castle. Oh, yes, that was definitely Professor Snape's bird.

A neatly folded piece of parchment was attached to the package, and she unraveled it carefully, reading the solitary line that had been scribbled onto it *Happy Christmas*.

She attempted to pry open the tiny box, but it appeared to have been spelled to a smaller version of itself. After placing the parcel on her bed, she extracted her wand from her waistband and stood in front of it. "*Reverto*," she incanted, pointing her length of vine wood at the package.

The box grew to at least ten times its previous size, and she unfastened the now normal-sized latch carefully. Inside was a beautiful quill-and-parchment set, complete with three different coloured bottles of what she knew to be very expensive ink.

She reached an eager hand into the box and touched the quill, jumping back immediately when a feeling of unnatural power coursed through her fingertips and up her arm.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said in surprised awe, reaching back into the box and picking up the quill with her writing hand.

The scribing utensil fit perfectly between her third and fourth fingers and seemed to contour itself to form an independent fixture to her hand. She couldn't even smile at the gift...she was far too enchanted with the concept of it.

She'd read about such an instrument before, but had never had the luxury of seeing one in person. It was a Peruvian Stylograph...a rare and much sought-after quill invented in the late fourteenth century. So rare, in fact, that she'd heard of collectors offering up entire sets of first-edition works in exchange for the acquisition of one of the devices.

The quill was charmed to recognize each new owner, giving it a magical signature that made it nearly impossible for anyone but its current master or mistress to yield it. She'd never received such a gift in all her life, and she had the sudden urge to tear down to the dungeons at lightning speed.

After placing the gift lovingly back in its box, she finished her unpacking and changed into a warmer outfit before heading down to visit the professor.

"Don't you *ever* knock?" he asked, not looking up from his scribbling as Hermione entered the lab in the dungeons.

"No." She chuckled lightly...his voice had lacked bite.

"Thank you for the present, sir. It's amazing. You really didn't have to do that."

He looked up at her over his scribing. "Nor did you. I have no idea where you managed to find a first edition copy of *Plants of the Sonoran Desert*, but I have never received such a gift." He looked back down at his parchment, his voice diminutive when he added, "Thank you."

She nearly compared their identical reactions out loud...she had thought the same thing when she'd opened her own present.

"I assume that you no longer wish to assist with the potion," he said seriously, eyeing her.

She sighed, partially because she hadn't been expecting him to bring up the potion and partially because she'd hoped the conversation would start off on a different, more intimate note.

"I *want* to help," she started, entering the room and sitting down next to him. "I just don't see why such a weapon is necessary. Harry..."

"Potter, according to the Headmaster," Severus interrupted, "is making adequate progress in his training. But you must realize that he is still going to have to face the most powerful wizard ever born. His chances of victory are slender, if not nonexistent."

She sighed, picking up a jar lid and spinning it around absently on the table. "I know," she replied, "but the thought of killing all those people, even if ~~they~~^{we} are trying to do the same to me and others like me, just doesn't seem right."

"Things are not always so easily categorized, Hermione," he answered, and she hid a smile when she heard him use her first name again. "Sometimes there is neither right nor wrong...there is only victory and defeat."

"That sounds like something *he* would say," she said, giving him an unhappy glare.

"And he would," Snape replied, looking at her earnestly. "He may be a mad man, but he is not a stupid one."

She nodded. "How much longer until the potion is completed?"

"Just tonight," he said, flipping forward a few pages in his notebook and pointing to the last phases of the potion, "and tomorrow morning. We should have it completed by 3 P.M."

"Well, let's get to work then, shall we?" she asked brightly, pulling a hair elastic off of her wrist and tying her bushy curls back in a loose bun.

"Indeed," he replied. "Hand me the silver dagger, please."

The evening was nearing midnight before the duo took a break. Hermione sat back on her stool, wiping the beads of sweat from her brow with the sleeve of her sweater. Snape followed her lead, though he didn't really look as if he'd been perspiring at all.

"Tea?" he asked generally.

"Iced, I think," she replied distractedly, glancing around the room. "I'll just call for Dob..."

"Please," he cut in, "leave the elves alone... especially that one."

"What have you got against Dobby?" she asked crossly.

"Other than the fact that his incessant squeaking reverberates against my eardrums like nails on a chalkboard, nothing at all," he said, arching a sarcastic brow.

"Well I'm not walking all the way down to the kitchens at this hour," she answered, shaking her head adamantly.

He rolled his eyes, standing from his stool. "I *do* live here, you know," he said, walking past her.

She leaned her elbow on the table and placed the left side of her face in the palm of her hand, facing away from the door. She didn't know why he was bothering to fetch the drinks himself...Dobby would have been so much quicker.

"Well?" she heard him say irritably from behind her. "Are you coming or not?"

"Oh," she said softly, hopping off her stool and taking long strides across the room to reach him.

She followed him down the hallway, through dungeon number five and into his quarters. "I will be back in a moment," he said, continuing his path forward toward the door at the far end of the room.

She took a seat on the couch, and minutes later he returned carrying two tall glasses of iced tea. After handing one to Hermione, he conjured up a comfortable-looking armchair and sat across from her.

"Hermione," he said, and she nearly cringed at his tone. She knew where this conversation was heading.

"I know," she answered quietly, looking up at him. "I guess we need to talk."

"Yes, we do," he answered, conjuring up a side table next to his chair and placing his glass on it slowly. "Hermione," he began and then paused, eyes toward the ceiling in contemplation, before looking at her again. "You were upset the other night, and I believe I took advantage of that, though I remain adamant that such an act was not my intent."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. *He* had taken advantage of *her*?

"No, you didn't," she replied. "I initiated the kiss. *I* wanted to kiss you."

He gave her an *are you sure you haven't been eating potions ingredient*s sort of look, which made her feel the need to elaborate further. "I did," she repeated, staring at him seriously. "If anything, I was the one who took advantage of *you*."

He snorted, clearly amused by her version of the events. "Either way, Hermione, it cannot happen again. The fact of the matter is that I am a teacher at this school, and you are my student. There were boundaries crossed that should not have been, and I will not be doing so again. If I had had a clear head..."

"You would have pushed me away?" she said crossly. "Told me to sod off?" she finished angrily.

He shook his head warily. "No, Hermione, I do not think that I would have done any such thing," he replied, surprising her. "And that is what frightens me. It cannot happen

again. There is too much at stake."

She sighed, shaking her head. What was it with her and complicated relationships? First Ron, then Viktor, now Snape...

What a mess.

"And our sessions?" she asked suddenly, a little alarmed. Whatever happened between her and Professor Snape, she certainly did not wish to discontinue her tutoring lessons.

"Will continue as planned," he said reassuringly, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, sir," she replied, smiling.

"Severus," she said, looking up, and then corrected herself, "er...I mean, sir..."

He waved a hand toward her. "Severus is fine," he said calmly, "in private."

She gave him a wan smile and then feigned interest in the books on the wall to her right. "What about after I am no longer your student?" she asked slowly, her eyes remaining fixed anywhere but on him.

After several moments of silence, she finally turned back to look in his direction.

"If I survive the war?" he asked seriously.

"If we both do," she replied, her eyes glued to his, her heart beating rapidly in her chest.

"If we both survive this war," he said slowly, articulating each and every word slowly and carefully, "you will not want to acknowledge that you even know me, Hermione."

She scrunched up her face, taken aback. "That is not a very nice thing to say," she argued. "Of course I will admit that I know you."

He sighed. It was more than evident that something was weighing heavily on his mind and that he had no intention of clueing her in anytime in the near future.

"You cannot be sure of that right now," he said quietly, staring at his iced tea. "You have no idea how you will feel when this is all over."

"And how will *you* feel?" she asked softly, watching him carefully.

He broke his gaze away from his glass and faced Hermione, frowning slightly. "If this war reaches its conclusion and your opinion of me does not change, I will come for you."

She smiled sarcastically. "You say that now."

He rose purposefully from his seat and walked out of the room, back behind the door he had retreated past previously. She was left feeling a bit flabbergasted, wondering where he had gone. Perhaps he was angry with her...

He returned less than one minute later and halted beside her, rigid. "Hold out your hand," he instructed.

She did as she was told, and he dropped a large coin into her palm, fingering her hand closed into a fist when she held the object firmly.

"What is it?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Surely you recognize an invention of your own design?" he said, smirking.

"It's like the galleons..." she said, awed. "How..."

"We teachers pick up on a lot more than you give us credit for. Besides," he added, walking back over to his chair and sitting down lightly. "The house-elves know all about your liberation tactics... *Spewy Lady*," he finished, a shit-eating grin etched into his face.

Her mouth dropped open. "They don't *really* call me that, do they?"

"Not all of them," he said, shaking his head. "Just the ones that are not named ~~Dobby~~."

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 8

HBP--the way it should have been written. Written for the January '08 SS/HG Exchange. Canon-compliant all the way through DH, sans the epilogue.

Christmas break came to its conclusion far too quickly in Hermione's opinion. She was glad to see Harry and Ginny again (she still wasn't speaking to Ron), but she would miss her uninterrupted time with Snape. Nonetheless, classes awaited her, and she found herself buried under her already overfilled schedule once more.

It seemed as though Harry's paranoia had increased ten-fold over the Christmas holiday. He was absolutely convinced that Snape and Malfoy were plotting something evil, based on a conversation he'd heard taking place between the two on the night of Slughorn's Christmas party.

She'd tried to reason with him, but he would hear nothing of it. He'd even taken to having Dobby and Kreacher follow the younger Malfoy around in an attempt to catch him at something sinister. Personally, Hermione thought that Malfoy *was* up to something inappropriate, but felt that Snape was more than capable of controlling a member of his own house. She'd mentioned Draco to him once, at which time Snape had given a shrug that clearly told her he thought Draco to be little more than harmless.

The first day of term brought with it Harry's next lesson with Dumbledore, and of course, he told Hermione all about it afterwards. He'd been assigned by the Headmaster to

retrieve a memory from Slughorn...something about Horcruxes...and something that the seasoned Potions professor dearly wished to keep private. She made a mental note to ask Severus about these so-called *Horcruxes* during one of their future lessons. Surely he would have some information on the subject...

Hermione packed up her things after breakfast and made her way down to their first Potions lesson of the new term.

"Antidotes," she whispered to herself, smiling, when Slughorn announced their assignment. There was no such thing as cheating when deciphering an antidote from a finished potion. The only avenue to take was hard work and applied knowledge, both of which she was far more capable of doing than any of the other students in the class.

Just as she'd thought, the Prince did not have even one line of instructions for Harry, and Hermione thought her antidote for the poison with which she had been presented would surely be the best in class.

She smiled, stirring her potion and snipping off a lock of her own hair to throw into it. *Let's see Slughorn fawn over him now...* she thought viciously.

"Time's... UP!" Slughorn called genially.

After sniffing several cauldrons along the way (and nearly retching twice), he stopped in front of Harry, eyeing him expectantly.

"And you, Harry," he said. "What have you got to show me?"

Hermione watched as Harry held out his hand, palm-up, to the professor. A twisted smile marred her face when she saw what he'd had hidden inside his fist.

Unfortunately, the Prince had left one small, incredible tip: *Just shove a bezoar down their throats.*

A bezoar, she thought in disbelief. *There is no way that Slughorn is going to fall f...*

"You've got nerve, boy!" Slughorn boomed, roaring with laughter. "Oh, you're like your mother.... Well, I can't fault you... A bezoar would certainly act as an antidote to all these potions."

"And you thought of that bezoar all by yourself, did you, Harry?" Hermione asked through gritted teeth, unable to contain the fury that she knew would be evident in her eyes and flushed cheeks.

Before he could answer, the bell rang, and Hermione cleaned her mess the lazy way and stalked out of the classroom.

"The nerve of him," she said angrily, followed by a series of whispered swears.

"Tell me about it," a voice agreed from behind her, and she found herself at a loss when she saw that it was Ron.

So, she wasn't the only one who was angry with the way Harry was besting everyone at Potions. Though, she still wasn't quite at the point of speaking to Ron again, and so she continued down the hallway, not stopping until she reached her Arithmancy classroom.

"... and Slughorn just gave it to him! Just like that! Gods, he is so infuriating..."

As Hermione finished filling Snape in on the Great Bezoar Tragedy during their next tutoring session, Snape chuckled lightly.

"Yes," he answered, "his mother used to try the same things when we were in school, and she always got away with them as well."

Hermione stopped her stirs, hanging on his last words. "You had Potions with Harry's mother?"

Snape's face shifted from one of mirth to one of regret, and he quickly turned away from her to peel the boiled Ashwinder eggs.

"What?" she asked, stunned by his reaction, wondering what she had said that was so wrong.

He glanced over at her cauldron, but did not look at her. "You need to add the chestnuts, or the brew will be ruined."

She did as she was told, then turned back to Snape, arms folded across her chest.

"Severus," she called softly, and he put down the black beetle parts that he had been sorting. "What did I say?"

"Nothing," he bit back, and she let the matter drop, searching her mind for a topic with which to change the subject.

Grasping at straws, because she knew he wouldn't care, she moved the topic back to Potions making. "It's all because of that stupid book," she said, turning her fire up twenty degrees.

"What book?" he asked distractedly, now re-sorting the black beetle parts.

"Harry's Potions book. He keeps getting all of his tips from some person who calls his or herself *The Half-Blood Prince*."

Severus dropped his silver dagger on the table and whipped around, his eyeballs bulging out of their sockets. Hermione found herself taking a step back, a little intimidated by the fiery look in her cohort's eyes.

"Where did he get that book?" he asked her, his voice dangerously low.

"From Slughorn, the first day of class," she answered quickly. "Why? You know who it is?"

He stopped staring at her like a hungry wolf and physically shook his head before he returned to his normal demeanor. "I apologize," he said, stepping forward and placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I just never tolerated cheating in my classroom when I taught the subject."

She looked at him timidly, her stance still relatively stiff, her mind still wrapped around how he had just completely flipped out on her.

"Hermione," he said softly, both his eyebrows rising up toward his hairline, a gentle smile gracing his lips. He placed a hand on either side of her face and bent his head low to look at her. It was all she could do to not allow her eyes to flutter shut in utter content. She nodded, turning back to her potion. It looked as though it would be another restless night without sleep for the Gryffindor sixth-year prefect...

The early stages of spring were upon them all before she knew it. She realized that her schedule had been much too full as of late to notice the slight shifting of the seasons.

Her weekends were crammed with studying, homework and Apparition lessons, and her weekdays were full enough already with her regular classes, homework, studying

and extra lessons with Snape.

Harry still hadn't worked up the nerve to ask Slughorn for the elusive memory, and his suspicions about Draco had increased yet again.

Hermione found herself having to sleep during her free period between Ancient Runes and Potions, and she had already almost been late to the latter three times. If she didn't manage to find some time to herself soon, she was surely going to lose her mind...

White-faced and red-eyed from lack of sleep, she was just about to enter the Great Hall for breakfast when a nearly breathless voice called her name from behind.

"Her...my...nee!"

Hermione turned around to find a very distraught-looking Ginny Weasley bounding up behind her, tears shining in her eyes.

"Ginny, what's the matter?" she asked urgently, placing a hand on the younger girl's shoulder when she had come to a halt in front of her.

"Ron. He's...hurt."

As Ginny refused to speak further on the subject, Hermione followed the weeping redhead up the staircase to the third floor, turning off at the Hospital Wing. Madam "Bulldog" Pomfrey was standing guard outside of the doors, her eyes narrowing suspiciously at the approaching girls.

"No, no, no!" the matron said sternly. "Absolutely not! It's bad enough that Molly and Arthur won't leave his side. I'm not about to let you lot in as well!"

"But—" Ginny began to say, but was cut off shortly.

"You can wait out here if you'd like," the nurse said, waving her wand in an absent motion toward the wall to her right. Two long, orange couches appeared in the middle of the corridor and backed themselves up against the stone, outer walls of the ward.

Ginny looked mutinous, her hands balled into fists as she stared down the older witch. The fresh tear tracks that were still visible upon her cheeks, belied her turbulent emotional state.

"Sit," Poppy commanded in her no-nonsense way, and Hermione gently placed a hand on Ginny's arm, guiding her toward the sofa.

The minutes ticked by like hours, and Hermione found herself regretting the past few months' enmity between her and Ron. Yes, he could be a prat at times. Hell, he was a prat *most* of the time. That still didn't negate the fact that she, Harry and Ron had been close friends for six years and that she loved Ron dearly, despite his many faults.

"Harry," Hermione breathed, jumping up from the sofa and approaching her friend quickly as he exited the Hospital Ward. "What happened? Tell me everything."

Harry proceeded to tell her the story, and it seemed by his annoyance at retelling it that he had repeated it numerous times that day.

He and Ron had been in their dorm room, discussing Ron's birthday presents and preparing to descend to the Great Hall for breakfast, when Ron began acting strangely. He had eaten a batch of poisoned Chocolate Cauldrons...spiked with love potion, and intended for Harry...and had fallen hopelessly in love with Romilda Vane.

In an effort to rectify the situation, Harry had dragged Ron down to Professor Slughorn's office seeking a cure. Things had gone well enough until Slughorn had pulled out a bottle of mead he had intended for Dumbledore as a Christmas present. One sip was all it had taken, and Ron had fallen to the floor in a fit of convulsions.

"This is just awful, Harry," Hermione said softly when he had finished telling the story.

"Figured that out now, have you? Done with your stupid feud?" Harry bit back irritably.

Hurt by his words and admittedly a little guilt-stricken over the events of the past few months, Hermione could do nothing more than sit back down on the settee, glancing up at Harry like a hurt puppy.

Harry sighed, taking the seat next to her and placing a pacifying hand on her knee. "I'm sorry, 'Mione. We're all so tired lately... and then Ron... well, it's just a lot to take, you know?"

She glanced over at Ginny, who had apparently cried herself to sleep on the other couch. Hermione lowered her voice to a whisper, facing Harry seriously.

"You realize what this means, don't you?" she asked nervously.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. But I don't think we should talk about it here," he said, glancing over at Ginny himself.

"Nor do I," she agreed, "but we need to talk about this later, Harry. Whoever managed to sneak that bottle into Hogwarts..."

"Probably gave Katie the necklace as well," he finished for her.

She smiled at him, glad that they were on the same wavelength.

"Exactly," she said quietly.

They sat in amiable silence over the next few hours, during which time Molly and Arthur retreated up to Dumbledore's office and Fred and George joined them in the queue. At eight o'clock on the dot, Poppy Pomfrey opened the doors to the ward and let them all inside, but only after they had all sworn...under threat of a punishment of Filch's own choosing...not to disturb her patient.

"Blimey," George said quietly so as not to disturb the slumbering Ron. "It was lucky you thought of a bezoar," he finished, glancing up at Harry.

Harry, in turn, immediately looked over at Hermione, who gave him a reassuring smile and reached her arm across Ron's body to pat his hand lightly.

Of course she was still angry that Harry had used someone else's notes to outdo her at Potions. But there were more important things to consider at the moment...first and foremost, figuring out who could have snuck that bottle of mead into the school.

Before she could consider the matter further, Hagrid burst through the doors to the room and stomped up to Ron's bed, leaving massive, muddy footprints in his wake.

"Bin in the forest all day!" he panted. "Aragog's worse..." Hermione shuddered at the name. "...I been readin' to him." Hagrid stared down at Ron. "Who'd want ter hurt him, eh?"

The question spurred a lengthy discussion among all those present, during which Hermione sat and listened quietly. When the clamor had died down, she decided to voice her and Harry's theories, her reasoning being that a group discussion just may help to bring the puzzle pieces closer together.

"I think there's a connection between the attacks," she said quietly.

"How'd you work that out?" asked Fred.

"Well, for one thing, they both ought to have been fatal and weren't, although that was pure luck. And for another, neither the poison nor the necklace seem to have reached the person who was supposed to be killed. Of course," she added broodingly, "that makes the person behind this more precarious in a way because they don't seem to care how many people they finish off before they actually reach their victim."

Her hopes for an enlightening discussion were dashed when the dormitory doors flew open again, and in bounded Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"Out. Out, all of you!" Madam Pomfrey chided in a high-pitched voice from the doorway. "Only six visitors at a time!"

Feeling a bit awkward in the midst of the family reunion, Hermione nudged Harry softly and motioned him toward the door. Hagrid followed them out, and the three walked through the castle toward the Gryffindor common room with limited conversation.

Hermione had spaced out, thinking about all of the terrible events as of late. Somewhere, through her sub consciousness, she heard Hagrid say Dumbledore's name.

"Does he have any ideas, Hagrid?" she asked quietly.

"I 'spect he's got hundreds of ideas, brain like his," Hagrid replied. "Wha' worries me," he continued, his words as soft as his giant voice box would allow, "is how long Hogwarts can stay open if kids are bein' attacked. Chamber o' Secrets all over again, isn' it? There'll be panic, more parents takin' their kids outta school, an' nex' thing yeh know, the board o' governors'll be talkin' about shuttin' us up fer good."

"Surely not," Hermione countered worriedly.

"Gotta see it from their point o' view," Hagrid replied heavily. "Yeh expect accidents, don' yeh, with hundreds of underage wizards all locked up together, but attempted murder, tha's diff'rent. 'S'no wonder Dumbledore's angry with Sn..."

Hermione froze. He hadn't been about to say...

"Dumbledore's angry with Snape?" Harry said quickly, and Hermione's heartbeat quickened. "Hagrid," Harry repeated, "why is Dumbledore angry with Snape?"

Hermione looked quickly from the giant to the young wizard, hoping beyond hope that her worry was not etched all over her face. Hagrid was looking around as if he was planning a quick escape, and Harry was staring up at the half-giant murderously.

"What's Snape done?" Harry nearly yelled, and Hermione looked anxiously up at Hagrid.

Hagrid slumped his shoulders, bending his head down between Harry and Hermione. "I dunno, Harry, I shouldn'ta heard it at all! I...well, I was comin' outta the forest the other evenin', an' I overheard 'em talking...well, arguin'. Didn't like ter draw attention to meself, so I sorta skulked an' tried not ter listen, but it was a...well, a heated discussion, an' it wasn't easy ter block it out."

"Well," Harry urged him, and Hagrid shuffled his enormous feet uneasily.

"Well...I jus' heard Snape sayin' Dumbledore took too much fer granted, an' maybe he...Snape...didn't want ter do it anymore..."

"Do what?" Harry cut in.

"I dunno, Harry, it sounded like Snape was feelin' a bit overworked, tha's all...anyway, Dumbledore told him flat out he'd agreed ter do it and that was all there was to it. Pretty firm with him. An' then he said summat abou' Snape makin' investigations in his House, in Slytherin. Well, there's nothin' strange abou' that!" Hagrid added hastily when Harry gave Hermione a significant look. "All the Heads o' Houses were asked ter look inter that necklace business..."

Hermione gave Harry an admonishing look, which he pointedly ignored.

"Look," Hagrid said tiredly. "I know what yeh're like abou' Snape, Harry, an' I don't want yeh ter go readin' more inter this than there is."

Just then Filch was whipping around the corner, Mrs. Norris leading his way. The disturbance, followed by a second interruption...courtesy of Peeves...put a prompt end to their conversation with Hagrid. Harry and Hermione walked in silent contemplation back to Gryffindor tower, each with worried looks on their faces, though for entirely separate reasons.

After bidding Harry goodnight, Hermione waited until he had ascended the steps to his dormitory room, then threw on her cloak and made her way determinedly down to the dungeons. Snape had some explaining to do.

"Professor," she called into the darkness as she entered Snape's dungeon laboratory. "Professor?"

Silence was her only answer, and she made her way down the hall, through Dungeon Number Five and up to the door leading to Snape's private quarters. She couldn't care less if he were angry at her for disturbing him unbidden at such a late hour. There were so many questions running through her mind...why had Snape had a row with Dumbledore? What did Snape not wish to do anymore? She had been in on so many of his secrets this year... Why hadn't he confided in her about this one?

She knocked twice, loudly, but did not receive an answer.

"Professor! I need to speak to you!" she yelled at the door, which remained sealed.

She sighed, allowing her forehead to fall forward against the oak with a loud *bang*.

"What are *you* doing here at this hour?" an annoyed voice asked from behind her.

She jumped at the unexpected noise, the sensitive skin above the bridge of her nose scraping sorely against the grain of the wood. She rubbed her forehead contemptuously, hissing at the burning feeling the motion elicited.

"Well?" he asked, arching a brow at her when she looked up at him.

"I need to speak to you," she said, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Yes, I heard that. As did, I am sure, the rest of the castle," he said crossly. "What is this little chat in regards to?"

"Can we talk inside?" she asked, motioning toward the door.

"Very well," he drawled, waving his wand toward the door and unlocking it silently. "I am surprised you did not just enter of your own accord," he added snidely as she entered the room, and he shut the door behind her.

"Not at this hour," she commented distractedly, glancing around at the disheveled condition of his den. Books were strewn about all over the place, and there was a pile of robes in the corner of the room. "Besides, you told me to knock."

"Indeed," he said, taking his traditional seat and waving a hand at the couch across from him, motioning for her to sit.

She lowered herself carefully onto the couch, rethinking her intentions entirely. Perhaps she should just leave well enough alone...

"Well," he snapped, raising his palms impatiently toward the sky. "I do not have all night."

She narrowed her eyes at him, her bitterness returning. "Why have you been keeping things from me?" she asked steadily, though her heartbeat increased once the words were out. His face was indiscernible, and she realized she may have gone too far.

"What *things* are you referring to?" he asked slowly.

"I know about your conversation with Dumbledore," she said boldly, and his face remained impassive. "I know you've been assigned something," his face faltered a bit, "and I know you don't want to do it anymore."

"Knave!" he roared dangerously, jumping to his feet and rising to his full height the moment she had spoken her last word. "Do you think yourself a voyeur? You have been *spying* on me!"

"No, I haven't!" she shouted back, jerking up onto her own feet, challenging him. She was offended beyond belief and felt as though she could sense her blood boiling at the accusation. "Someone overheard you. Perhaps you should be more careful where you hold your conversations, Double-O-Seven!"

He was furious now...his face remained steady, but she could see it in his eyes. "Who?"

"I am not at liberty to say," she replied provokingly, a smug look on her face. "Suffice it to say I know this person to be ingenuous...nearly incapable of lying."

"I am warning you, Miss Granger..."

"Sorry, Professor, but if you aren't willing to...hey, put that down!"

He had withdrawn his wand from his robes and was pointing it at her legs, staring at her with unmasked rage. "Tell me, or I will retrieve the answer on my own," he said formidably.

"You wouldn't," she said, her countenance steady, but there was a slight tremor evident in her voice. "You can't, it's against school poli..."

"Watch me," he said, raising his wand a little higher.

At this point, she was, for lack of a better phrase, severely pissed off. She couldn't believe he would dare to threaten her with force. *He will have to pry the memory from my cold, dead body*, she thought defiantly.

"It can be arranged," he answered her, and she realized she hadn't said that last sentence out loud.

"Get out of my head, Severus," she said as calmly as she could, squeezing her eyes shut tightly.

"You leave me no other options, Hermione," he replied.

He sighed, piquing her curiosity, and she opened her eyes to look at him.

She squeaked nervously when she saw he had stepped forward and was now mere inches from her, his arm raised above his midsection and his wand pointed at her temple.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and she felt her defenses drop at the words. *Legilimens...*

The experience was worse than she ever could have imagined. Harry had described Legilimency to her many times, but no words could have prepared her for what she was feeling now. It was as if her mind was being raped.

He shifted through her memories effortlessly, pushing aside those that were irrelevant to that which he was searching for, and settling finally on the recollection of Hagrid's tale.

She couldn't explain how he had found it, but somehow she was aware that he had been able to sense her guilt as he had glossed over the image. It was as if their senses were mingled with one another's while he was inside her head, and she was powerless to stop him.

He didn't stop searching when he had finished viewing the images, and she felt panic flood through her. By some means she was aware of what he was searching for...a later conversation with Harry regarding the story they had been told.

Ha, nothing in there, she thought wryly and was shocked to hear his reply echoing through her mind.

We shall see, he thought, and she panicked as he began ravishing her memories.

"No," she thought...or said...she really couldn't tell the difference anymore.

He saw himself in one of her ruminations and grabbed it greedily. He was angry for some reason and used no restraint in sifting through her mind.

When she saw which memory she had chosen, she actually did yell out loud this time. "No!" she cried, but it was too late...he was already viewing it.

She is in his Potions lab late at night, taking a break from her notes as she watches him brew. She observes as he stirs his draught...once...twice...three times. She is mesmerized by his actions, entranced by his movements. It is hot in the lab that night, and he removes his robe, leaving nothing above his waist but a button-down black oxford. He pauses in his stirring, rolling up his sleeves and unbuttoning the topmost buttons below his collar, revealing just the tiniest amount of bare skin and sparse hair. She swallows hard.

He continues his stirs, slowing only to add the powdered root of asphodel to the mix. Gods, he's beautiful...He seems to notice her staring at him and glances to his left, giving her the smallest of smiles, one that is only detectable on the normally emotionless face of the Notorious Black Bat of the Dungeons. She is startled by his notice of her and returns to her notes, blushing.

The scene changes...

She is in her dorm room later that night, reliving the earlier scene in her mind. The memory warms her to the core in the most erotic way, but before she can do anything to satisfy herself, Lavender rolls over in her bed to face her, snoring loudly. She sighs, and her thoughts return to Severus, though they take a different path this time round.

She wonders what will happen to them when the war is over and if...when, she admonishes herself...Voldemort is defeated. She contemplates telling him the truth about her feelings... that she has never known anyone quite like him... that he is brilliant, and that she truly, really feels as if sh..."

"GET OUT!" she screamed, and an unnatural power coursed through her veins, exploding out of her fingertips.

She opened her eyes to see her arms raised in front of her, fingers pointing outward. Snape was lying on the floor in front of her, a stunned look on his face. She glanced

down at her hands. She could sense them burning, the power she had felt before slowly receding back into her. She panicked, dropping to the floor, landing in a sloppy, Indian-style position.

Snape was still lying on the ground, his eyes so wide she thought they would pop out any second. They stared at one another for several moments before she remembered that she couldn't stand the sight of him after what he had just done to her.

Angry tears sprung into her eyes, and she moved to get up off of the floor, placing a palm on the carpet. An odd noise reached her ears, and she looked down only to see that the scorched feeling in her palms had not been imaginary...there was a burnt-in handprint on the carpet.

Alarmed, she cried out and kicked her legs wildly, using her heels to push herself back up against the foot of the couch.

"Relax," Snape said calmly, rising up and walking toward her, only to bend down at her side. He took her hands in his own and examined them thoroughly. She tried to pull away, but he held her steady, eventually placing his palm atop her own and staring her into her eyes.

"They are cool now," he said softly, and she bowed her head, sobbing quietly.

"Hermione, look at me," Snape nearly whispered, and after a few calming breaths, she complied.

"Do not speak to me," she said, her jaw tight. "Leave...me...alone."

She rose from the carpet, her eyes glued to the exit as she marched away from him.

"Hermione," he called loudly after her.

"Fuck off," she replied as she left the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

Defense class was not easy that week. She was furious with Snape for invading her mind without her permission, and the very sight of him brought angry tears to her eyes.

She felt betrayed, unsure and naked. Her mind was the one place where no one could touch her, and that safety zone had been breached. She hated him for what he'd done, but her feelings of affection for him remained strong, and the contrast was slowly driving her mad. She didn't know who she was anymore.

She skipped their scheduled lesson the following Wednesday, but was determined to attend the one subsequent to that. *He* was in the wrong, not her, and he needed to know that. So when the time came for their session, she loaded her schoolbag and made her way down to the antechambers of the castle as per usual.

To his credit, he appeared to be slightly surprised when he saw her enter the Potions laboratory, materials in tow. She set up as she usually did, taking a seat on the stool nearest the edge of the table and waiting for instructions.

"I believe we need to have a conversation," Snape said after several minutes of silence, approaching the table and standing next to Hermione.

"Regarding?" she asked coldly, eyes on the table.

"You know the matter of which I speak, Hermione."

"No. Sorry, nothing comes to mind, Professor Snape."

"Do not attempt to be coy, Hermione. What happened on..."

"Can we just get on with the lesson?" she asked in mock boredom, twirling her wand absently between her fingers.

"Look," he said, his voice taking on a waspish tone, "I am attempting to remain civil, but if you..."

"I don't have time for this," she said nastily, hopping off the stool and reaching for her book bag.

"What you achieved the other day...*wandless magic*...is a very rare and unique gift," he said seriously. "It will take time to grow accustomed to it."

She began to toss her lab items into her bag, and he stepped forward. "Hermione..." he said, touching her arm in a forestalling gesture.

She jumped at the contact, inhaling sharply as her eyes turned to Snape. He pulled back as if burnt, his brow furrowing. She watched as his facial expression took on that of a wounded puppy, and she felt her rage begin to boil within her.

"No," she said harshly, balling her fists. "No, you *do not* get to look at me like that!"

She began breathing heavy, tears welling up in her eyes. *You did that to me!*

Still he said nothing, an unmoving fixture in the room.

"Why did you do *that*?" she said harshly through clenched teeth. "Why did you have to do *that* to me? It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. It was a horrible thing to do."

His eyes remained focused on hers, but he looked somewhat ashamed of himself. "I know," was his only reply.

"How could you betray someone that cares about you so?" she asked, holding his stare. "Do you have any idea what I've been through these past two weeks? You invaded my mind and made me feel unsafe. Who am I without my defenses, Severus? Those memories were private. What you did was unforgivable."

"I am required to do a lot of things that I am not proud of," he answered, looking away from her.

"Well, now you have your answer. You saw the memories. I don't suppose you want to give me an explanation for what I was told?" she asked, a nasty undertone to her words.

"No," he answered.

She gave a hollow, sarcastic chuckle. "Big surprise."

"Hermione," he called, his voice meek, as she turned away from him.

"What?" she bit back, whipping around to face him.

"It is simply not my secret to divulge," he said, his gaze holding hers.

"Neither was the one you ripped from my mind," she countered bitterly, her form stiff, "but I didn't have a choice, did I?"

He sighed, waving a hand toward the stool. "Sit," he said authoritatively, and she glared at him. "Please, sit," he corrected, and she reluctantly complied.

He took the seat next to her, his eyes facing forward instead of toward her as he began to speak.

"I was not lying when I said that I could not reveal to you the contents of the conversation. That remains solely between myself and the Headmaster, and *will not* break his confidence."

She shook her head bitterly, her jaw set stiffly.

"I will, however, tell you everything that I can without going into specifics. That shall have to suffice," he said, turning his head toward her.

She looked at him carefully for a moment before nodding, her countenance unchanging.

"I have been charged with an undertaking that I never would have considered carrying out under normal circumstances," he paused, thinking. "I never thought anyone would have to complete. I would give anything to be released from my obligation, and that is why the Headmaster and I were arguing."

"And you can't tell me what it is?" she asked, her anger subsiding.

"No. It would put you...not to mention the Headmaster and myself...in danger," he said, shaking his head and looking back at her.

She pondered his predicament for a few moments. "If this task is so terrible, just don't do it," she said finally.

"I do not have a choice!" he snapped, though she thought it was more at himself than at her. He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

"Can I help?" she asked eventually.

"No," he replied obviously, scrunching up his face and looking at her as if she were Neville Longbottom.

"Your life will be in danger afterwards, won't it?" she asked softly, looking away.

"My life is already in danger. I am used to it."

She considered his predicament for a moment, her mind trying to wrap itself around the concept of living in constant, never-ending danger. He had probably been sleeping with one eye open his entire life...it was no small wonder that he didn't trust anyone. Her heart ached at the thought.

"I'm still angry with you," she commented offhandedly.

"You should be."

"Severus?" she said quietly, both of them still facing forward instead of looking at one another. "I love you."

"I know," he answered, his demeanor unchanging.

She reached over to where his hand was settled on his knee and placed her own on top of it. He didn't respond to the gesture, nor did he move away. They sat that way in silence for what seemed like an eternity until she was quite sure that the hour was well past midnight.

Eventually she rose from the seat, gave Snape a soft kiss on the cheek and left the room silently.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 8

HBP--the way it should have been written. Written for the January '08 SS/HG Exchange. Canon-compliant all the way through DH, sans the epilogue.

Hermione had only glimpsed Professor Snape four times since the night she'd divulged her true feelings to him, and he hadn't shown any indication that he reciprocated her feelings. After many restless nights spent contemplating the matter in lieu of sleeping, she decided simply to move on and lay the entire incident to rest.

Her lessons had turned from Potions to wandless magic, a subject in which she was surprised to find that her professor was extremely well versed. It turned out that he could execute spells, sans wand, as well...he was extraordinarily superior at it, as a matter of fact.

After a particularly exhausting tutoring session with Professor Snape, Hermione was sitting in Gryffindor common room correcting one of Ron's essays.

"It's one of Fred and George's Spell-Check ones," he said, pointing from his quill to the plethora of misspelled words on his Potions essay, "but I think the charm must be wearing off..."

"Yes, it must," Hermione replied, shaking her head. "I don't remember you changing your name to 'Roonil Wazlib'."

Ron gave an awkward sort of squeak, and Hermione shook her head. She had just finished correcting the mistakes when...

Crack.

Kreacher appeared in the center of the room, bowing low before Harry.

"Master said he wanted regular reports on what the Malfoy boy is doing, so Kreacher has come to give..."

Crack.

A second Apparition, and in popped Dobby. Hermione would have smiled at the sight of the little elf in his tea-cozy hat, but she was too flustered over Kreacher's initial greeting.

"What is going on, Harry?" Hermione said accusingly, glaring at her friend.

"Well... they've been following Malfoy for me," he replied sheepishly.

Hermione looked slack-jawed at the little house-elves, outraged at the use to which they were being put.

"Harry Potter, sir," Dobby squeaked, his eyes wide, "the Malfoy boy is breaking no rules that Dobby can discover, but he is still keen to avoid detection. He has been making regular visits to the seventh floor with a variety of other students, who keep watch for him while he enters..."

"The Room of Requirement!" Harry shouted, performing what could only be described as a *facepalm*.

Hermione spent the next few minutes arguing with Harry over whether or not he would be able to get into the room while Malfoy was in it. She had a feeling the room would be Unplottable and enterable only if one knew what they were supposed to be asking for.

They also decided that the *variety of students* were most likely Crabbe and Goyle under the influence of Polyjuice Potion.

Harry vowed to find a way into the Room of Requirement, no matter what Hermione had said, at which time Hermione simply shook her head and retreated to her dorm room, wishing Harry would concentrate more on his assigned task regarding Slughorn and less on Draco Malfoy.

The next morning, Harry was late for their Defense Against the Dark Arts class with Professor Snape.

"Late again, Potter," Snape said coldly as Harry hurried into the classroom. "Ten points from Gryffindor."

Hermione shook her head exasperatedly, reaching down into her backpack and extracting her Defense book. Harry deserved that one, she knew, but wished that Professor Snape would quit targeting him nonetheless.

"Now, if you will all open your books to page...what is it, Mr. Finnigan?" Snape said irritably.

All eyes moved to Seamus, and Hermione regarded her fellow Gryffindor curiously.

"Sir," the boy answered, "I've been wondering, how do you tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost? Because there was something in the paper about an Inferius..."

"No, there wasn't," Snape replied in a bored voice.

"But, sir, I heard people talking..."

"If you had actually read the article in question, Mr. Finnigan, you would have known that this so-called Inferius was nothing but a smelly sneak thief by the name of Mundungus Fletcher."

"I thought Snape and Mundungus were on the same side," Harry muttered to the other members of the trio.

Hermione was curious about the disdain as well and looked oddly at Snape, who caught her stare and proceeded to glare at Harry.

"But Potter seems to have a lot to say on the subject," Snape said, pointing at the dark-haired member of the trio. "Let us ask Potter how we would tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Snarky Snape didn't affect her anymore, and she actually found herself amused at the banter between her tutor...or whatever he was...and her best friend.

"Er...well...ghosts are transparent..." Harry replied.

Hermione let out an involuntary giggle/snort and quickly covered it up with a cough.

"Oh, very good," Snape interrupted, his lip curling in a twisted smile. Hermione stared longingly at her professor's mouth. "Yes, it is easy to see that nearly six years of magical education have not been wasted on you, Potter. '*Ghosts are transparent*.'"

Hermione was on the verge of a giggling fit now, and she tucked her head below the desk in an attempt to look as if she were searching through her book bag. When she sat back up, Snape gave her a pointed look, his eyebrow raised in amusement.

At the end of the lesson, Harry, Ron and Lavender took off, abusing Snape vehemently. Hermione broke away from them swiftly and lingered behind, waiting until the classroom had cleared out before retreating back into it.

"Come to get your ten points back?" he asked casually as she approached him from behind.

"I swear you have eyes in the back of your head," she retorted, perching herself atop one of the desks at the front of the room.

"Now, that is a rumour I think you should put into circulation," he replied, straightening out the essays the class had handed in and turning around to face her.

Snape's eyes swept toward the door, then back to Hermione, at which time he looked admonishingly at her. "You should not be seen here unless it is absolutely necessary," he said, crossing his arms casually in front of him.

"It is," she replied.

Technically, she was sort of lying... She *did* have something she wished to tell him, but she doubted the subject even came close to bordering on ~~an~~ *absolute necessity*.

When his eyebrow rose impatiently, she sat further back on the desk and began her explanation.

"Have you noticed anything funny about Draco lately?" she asked casually.

Snape's reaction surprised her. He straightened himself up and uncrossed his arms, taking a few steps toward where she sat. Waving a wandless hand at the door, he locked it and turned back to Hermione.

"Why are you asking me this?" he said seriously.

Hermione's face had fallen, and she looked up to find her worried expression mirrored in Snape's face.

"I...well, I didn't think it was serious," she replied, her eyes examining his face intensely. When he made no further comment, she continued. "Harry found out that Draco has been hiding out... doing something... He's doing it a lot actually. And he has Crabbe and Goyle stand guard for him. Only they are always Polyjuiced as someone else...usually first-year girls."

Snape nodded. "Anything else?"

"Severus," she said, sitting up slightly so that he would give her some room to breathe. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," he replied quickly, taking a step back. "You should be leaving," he added, unlocking the still-sealed door, but using his wand this time.

"No," she replied adamantly, shaking her head. "I just told you something that you were obviously surprised to find out, and now I want some answers. Why the piqued interest over Draco's activities?"

"You know I cannot comment on that matter," he replied semi-casually.

She let his words sink in, thinking them over. So his task had something to do with Draco... but what? Harry had been saying all year that he thought Draco had taken the Mark. She had always put the assumption up to Harry's hatred and obsession with the Slytherin boy, but now she wasn't so sure...

She sighed. "He's joined, hasn't he?" she asked softly, reluctantly looking up at Snape.

He looked as if he was going to change the subject, but after a pointed glare from her, he shook his head in defeat. "Yes, he has joined."

"And the task? It has something to do with Draco?" she added, and he nodded in the affirmative.

"I see," she said, thinking the situation over. "Harry's onto him," she said eventually, looking up. Snape snorted, but Hermione shook her head in protest. "I know you think he is an idiot," she said, eyeing him earnestly, "but he has been following him all year, and I would not be at all surprised if he found a way into the Room of Re..."

She paused in mid-sentence, throwing her hands up to cover her mouth.

"The Room of Requirement?" he said, and his face moved as if he had just found the hidden location of Atlantis. "Of course..."

"Wait, you know about the room?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"You are not the only one in the school who has read *Hogwarts, A History*, you know," he said, giving her a half-hearted glare. "Now, moving on," he continued, "you have your Apparition examination in a couple of weeks, do you not?"

"Yes," she answered brightly.

"Well, I would imagine it to be in your best interest if we suspended our lessons until after the test," he replied.

Her face fell, her jaw slackening in surprised disappointment. "But, why?" she nearly yelped. "It is not as if I can practice inside school grounds!"

His voice was casual when he answered her. "No, you cannot. However, one is supposed to perform their Apparition test *with a wand*. It would seem counterproductive, therefore, to confuse you with wandless magic with your test right around the corner."

"I will be fine," she protested.

"Two weeks from now, your lessons will resume," he said with inarguable finality.

She opened her mouth to argue further, at which time a knock on the door made her jump up off of the desk. He shuffled her quickly to the front of the room, opening the door and admitting a group of first years.

"I have already told you that I do not give extensions, Miss Granger," he bellowed, causing a blonde first-year Hufflepuff to jump and squeak as she scurried past him. "The next time you ask, it will be twenty points from Gryffindor. Last time I checked, your house could not afford the loss."

She shook her head as she rounded the corner. *Smartass*.

"For the last time, just forget about Malfoy," Hermione told Harry firmly.

They were sitting in the courtyard with Ron after lunch, and Harry had been talking about Draco obsessively for the majority of the afternoon. His suspicions now confirmed to her by Professor Snape (though she had no intention of divulging said information to Harry), she felt it best to let Severus deal with the problem. Harry had other tasks ahead of him, retrieving Slughorn's memory for one (a fact that she had reminded him of several times that afternoon), and she felt he should be concentrating his efforts in that direction.

A small girl with black pigtails approached the trio, looking uneasy, and handed Harry a note. The three of them crowded together to read it, Ron smacking his head into Hermione's and apologizing profusely.

The gist of the note was that Aragog the spider had died, and Hagrid wanted the trio to sneak out after dark to attend the giant beast's funeral.

"Aragog's dead," Hermione said firmly, protesting the request. "If it were a question of saving him..."

"...I'd want to go even less," Ron cut in.

They all agreed that Hagrid would simply have to conduct the funeral on his own.

"Look," Hermione said, attempting to switch subjects before the boys changed their minds. "Potions will be almost empty this afternoon with us all off doing our tests... Try and soften Slughorn up a bit then!"

"Fifty-seventh time lucky, you think?" Harry responded bitterly.

"Harry, that's it...get lucky!" Ron squealed.

Hermione's jaw dropped as she began to form a mental picture of Harry propositioning random girls while she and Ron were away. Ron gave her a withering look, turning back to Harry.

"Use your luck potion!"

It was as if a light bulb went on above Hermione's head. "Of course! Why didn't I think of it?"

"I dunno... I was sort of saving it..." Harry replied, drifting off into a world of his own.

Hermione watched him with dumbfounded look on her face for a few moments before shaking him lightly by the shoulder. "Harry? Are you still with us?" she asked.

"Wha...? Yeah, of course," he replied, apparently coming to his senses. "Well... okay. If I can't get Slughorn to talk this afternoon, I'll take some Felix and have another go

this evening."

The amplified bell rang overhead in the castle and surrounding grounds, and Ron and Hermione hurriedly packed up their things, bidding Harry goodbye and good luck. They were headed off to their Apparition tests, and Ron looked like he would surely spit up green if they didn't get them over with soon.

"You'll do fine, Ronald," she said consolingly on the walk down to the school gates. "Stop worrying yourself."

Ron nodded, though Hermione was quite sure he hadn't heard a word she'd said. While Ron was nervous about passing his test, Hermione was anxious to see Professor Snape outside of class again for the first time in over two weeks. He'd looked well enough in class, but he'd seemed a bit paler than usual over the past few days, and she wondered if he was getting enough sleep at night. His assigned task seemed to be weighing heavily on him, and she found her curiosity regarding the subject increasing by the day.

Unfortunately, Ron didn't *do fine*, as she'd anticipated he would. He'd splinched an eyebrow, causing him to fail the test.

"He *just* failed," Hermione whispered to Harry before Ron had a chance to enter the common room that night. "The examiner spotted that he'd left half an eyebrow behind... How did it go with Slughorn?"

"No joy," Harry answered sourly, changing the subject back to Apparition when Ron entered the room.

Later that night, after darkness had fallen, the trio waited until the boys' dorm was empty and proceeded up to Harry and Ron's bedroom.

After measuring out a small amount of Felix Felicis, Harry drank it quickly, and Ron and Hermione watched on in anticipation.

"What does it feel like?" Hermione asked, searching for signs of any mal reaction.

Harry jumped suddenly to his feet, smiling.

"Right... I'm going to Hagrid's," he said confidently.

Hermione was appalled by his lack of judgment and gave him a sour look. "No, Harry...you've got to go and see Slughorn, remember?"

"No," Harry protested adamantly. "I'm going to Hagrid's. I've got a good feeling about going to Hagrid's."

Hermione was concerned and took the bottle in her hand, turning it over carefully. "This is Felix Felicis, I suppose?"

She held the vial up to the candlelight, swirling it carefully. Harry was acting very strangely, and she wondered if someone could have replaced his prize with something sinister.

She couldn't grab her wand with the boys watching her, and alerting them to her currently forming plans would arouse much too much suspicion about her relationship with Snape.

She lowered a wandless hand to the floor, her palm facing Harry's unlatched backpack underneath his bed. Shutting her eyes tightly and picturing Harry's Potions kit in her mind, she thought clearly, '*Accio* empty vial.'

Several seconds passed, and she was just about to forego the effort when she felt something small and smooth meet the underside of her hand.

She smiled. Glancing down quickly, she thought, '*Aguamenti*.'

The glass turned cool against her skin, and chancing another fleeting look down at her palm, she confirmed that the little bottle was now filled with a chilled, translucent liquid. She dropped the new vial on the side table next to Harry's bed, tucking the one filled with Felix Felicis into her pocket.

Harry grabbed his Invisibility Cloak out of his trunk and practically sprinted out the door, and after a significant glance in Ron's direction, the two of them followed quickly after him.

Without so much as a peek back in his friends' direction, Harry threw on the cloak and slipped through the portrait hole unnoticed by anyone in the area.

"Listen," Hermione said to Ron after the Fat Lady had swung snugly back into place. "I am going to the Library for a bit." Ron rolled his eyes. "I'll be back shortly."

At that moment, Lavender sauntered up to Ron, looking cross. Hermione took the opportunity to leave before he thought to ask any further questions.

When she reached the dungeons, she proceeded directly to Snape's quarters, knocking quickly before letting herself in.

Snape was drawing out a sarcastic remark before she even had the door shut behind her. "Normally one would wait for the recipient of said knock to answer the do..." He stopped mid-sentence when he looked up at her, noticing the distraught expression on her face.

"I need your help to figure out what is in this," she said quickly, striding up to him and holding the bottle of Felix out in front of her.

He walked over to the wall nearest to them and held the vial up to the torchlight, swirling it slowly.

"You know what this is," he said, glaring down at her, "though I have no idea where you were able to find it."

"Slughorn gave it to Harry as a prize for the best potion in our first class. The thing is," she continued, walking around to stand directly in front of him, "after he took it tonight, he began acting very strange."

"Why on earth would he have taken this *tonight*?" Snape replied, looking at her curiously.

"He was going to see if he could get that memory from Slughorn," she answered, shaking her head. "But once he had taken it, he just ran off quickly, saying something about going to Hagrid's hut for Aragog's burial."

"Aragog?" Snape asked skeptically.

"Hagrid's pet spider," Hermione answered dismissively. "He died. Anyways," she continued quickly, barely taking a breath between words, "I want to make sure that no one has put anything undesirable into it."

"It is fine," Snape said in a bored voice, handing the vial back to her.

"But you didn't even test it," Hermione whined in protest.

"No need," Snape said, retreating behind his desk and organizing a stack of exam papers. "My wards are set to alert me when any Dark magic is brought into the room. That includes potions, and therefore, your solution is fine." He looked down his nose at her. "Tell Potter not to waste that," he added significantly.

"Why?" Hermione asked, brow furrowed.

"Just do it," he answered exasperatedly.

Now that she could content herself with the fact that Harry hadn't been poisoned, she took a moment to observe Snape for the first time out of class in weeks. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his skin seemed, if possible, paler than usual.

He was being short with her tonight, which would not usually phase her, but there was something bitter in his sharp tongue this evening that made her think there was more going on than met her eye.

"Severus?" she asked gently, approaching his desk and watching him carefully. "Are you quite all right?"

"I am fine, Miss Granger," he bit back without looking up.

"Fine," she echoed quietly, tucking the vial of Felix back into her robe pocket. "You don't look fine."

"What did I just say?" he spat harshly, his face snapping up so that his eyes met hers.

She cringed at his tone, and he sighed, shutting his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

"I apologize," he said quietly, eyes still shut.

"It's okay," she answered softly, wandlessly conjuring up a chair in front of his desk and perching herself carefully upon it. His eyes had opened slightly at her movements, and he smirked at her when she sat.

"You are progressing nicely," he commented, sitting in his own chair behind the desk.

"I have an *excellent* teacher," she replied nonchalantly, smiling at the positive mood change. He gave her a small smirk in return, and she added, "Yes, I'm quite fond of Professor McGonagall, actually."

He raised a brow at her, and she let out a small chuckle.

"Honestly, you do not look well," she said worriedly.

"Says the woman with the black bags under her eyes," he replied blandly.

She scowled at him. "Yes, but I manage to sleep every once in a while. Can you say the same?"

"No," he replied, his irritation evident in his tone.

"Look," she said bluntly, leaning forward in her seat, "I'm just worried about you. You have been so snarky lately. *more so than usual,*" she added at his amused grin, "...and given the state of things..."

His loud hiss interrupted her comment, and her eyes widened when she saw him place a death grip on his arm with the curved palm of his other hand.

"Now?" she asked, jumping up from her seat.

He nodded and ran for the door, grabbing his cloak before exiting without a word. She stood in silence and watched the door shut of its own accord behind him, eventually finding herself staring blankly around at the empty room.

He had seemed in more pain than the last time he'd been summoned. His instantly reddened face had been sweating by the time he had made his way to the exit, and she realized that Voldemort must have been either very angry or very pleased.

It dawned on her that there were many unseen similarities between Professor Snape and Harry. Both had an unwanted connection to Voldemort. Both could feel when the Dark Lord was extremely happy or extremely upset. Both just wanted to live out their lives in peace...

She looked at the sealed door to Severus' quarters, considering leaving for the night and speaking to him after class the next morning. She had no idea how long he would be gone or in what state he would return. That last thought made her shiver, thinking about the consequences that he would face if he had displeased his Dark master in some way. She decided to stay put, if only for a few hours, just in case Severus needed her when he arrived back at the castle.

After plucking a book off of one of the shelves...*Henson's Guide to Proper Wand Work*...she made her way over to the settee and settled in for what she believed would be a long night.

A loud bang ripped her from her slumber, and she rolled crudely off of the settee and onto the floor, her head smacking against the leg of the couch roughly.

Stars were clouding her eyes behind her lids, and she blinked rapidly into the darkness, attempting to regain her vision.

As she stood from the ground, a hard, blunt object was suddenly sticking sharply into her neck, and she inhaled quickly at the pressure.

A deep, raspy voice reached her ears from behind her in the unyielding darkness. "Who...the fuck..." he coughed, "are you?"

She swallowed hard, her body quaking. "Severus..." she whispered.

He released her at once, and she fell forward onto the carpet, turning her head in the direction where his voice had been. The lights flared to life just in time for her to see him lowering his hand from the wandless spell.

"Holy shit," she breathed loudly, scurrying up off of the floor and running toward him. "What happened to you?"

His face was covered in blood, dry, flaking mud caked into his hair and onto the skin and above his brow. His Death Eater robes were torn in several places, and his right eye was barely visible underneath the massively swollen black and blue bruise that now covered the socket.

He wavered slightly on his feet, and she placed an arm around his back, tossing his elbow behind her neck and guiding him over to the settee. He'd passed out before his head touched the cushion.

She felt like crying at the sight of him. No one deserved this, no matter what they'd done or whom they'd displeased. Pulling her wand shakily from within her robes, she pointed it at his face. "*Tergeo.*"

She spent the next hour-or-so cleaning Severus up and mending his wounds. She tried to tell herself that the wetness on her face was due to the perspiration from all the work she was completing and was not in any way a sign that she had been crying over his pain. When he was healed, comfortable and sleeping, she pulled his customary chair up beside the couch and transfigured it into a second settee. After climbing onto the cushions and lying down, she grabbed hold of the base of Severus' couch and

pulled her divan closer to his.

She lay there for some time, her body inches from his, tracing the lines of his face lightly with her fingertips*So many lines on such a young face...*

She yearned to be closer to him and scooted forward slightly. His face was screwed up in what looked like slumbering concentration, his eyes moving rapidly beneath their lids. He looked utterly disturbed and saddened even whilst he was dreaming. Her heart ached at the sight, and she ran a lone finger over the freshly healed cuts on his upper and lower lips, captivated by the vision of him.

The movement did not stir him, and she leaned her face forward, driven by some unbidden force within her. Allowing her eyes to flutter shut, she pressed her lips against his, stroking lightly and gently, eliciting a rhythmic wave of butterflies in her stomach.

She sighed contentedly as she parted her lips from his mouth, opening her eyes. He was now very much awake, his large, black irises staring unflinchingly into her eyes between widely opened lids. She inhaled sharply at this unexpected surveillance, her heartbeat quickening beneath her ribcage.

She had nothing to say for herself and found that the only thing she could think to do was apologize for her intrusion. "I..."

But before her justification could continue, her voice was stifled by his mouth covering her own. The pressure he placed on her lips was steady and full of emotion, and she moved herself closer to him, her body aching for his warmth.

She reached out first, boldly placing her hand on his waste and scrunching up the material of his robes in a tight, urging fist. His kiss deepened at the motion, and she felt his arm snake around her back to pull her flush against him.

She moaned when she felt her body collide with his and was rewarded with something akin to a growl rumbling from his throat and chest until it finally escaped into her mouth, causing her to tremble.

Oxygen, at the moment, was highly overrated in the midst of their kiss. He held her tightly, and Hermione thought...in a brief moment of lucidity...that she would gladly comply with his every wish. In truth, she'd probably allow him to swallow her whole, if he only asked.

She shifted her position, and his hand fell onto her thigh closest to the cushions. He made to move it away, and her fingers flew to his, pressing his palm against her leg and holding it there firmly.

He let out a lustful moan, the noise amplified by his cavernous vocal chords. The sound was incredibly sexy, and she sighed deeply into his mouth. Apparently her actions were to his liking, as he snaked his hand upward, winding up and around to the back of her thigh, pulling her into him.

The evidence of his arousal was pressing sharply into her hip, and she broke their kiss to look at him. His eyes were clouded over with desire, his lips swollen from the fervent fondling of her tongue and mouth.

"I want you, Severus," she breathed huskily, entwining her fingers in his hair and pulling his face back down to hers. She kissed him greedily, delving into his mouth, licking along the bottom of his tongue before sucking on it seductively.

She felt a twitch against her stomach, and she removed her hand from the hair at the nape of his neck without breaking their kiss, bringing her palm between them and rubbing his covered chest roughly. Her fingers played lightly across his torso before she moved to the lower regions betwixt them, rubbing his erection through the thick material of his trousers.

He hissed into her mouth, and she paused, pulling away slightly and hoping she had not grabbed him too roughly. Her concerns were answered immediately when he ground his covered endowment against her, his lips crashing back down upon hers passionately.

Encouraged, she inched her hand up to the waist of his pants, stretching the band out and draping her fingers over the hem. He bucked forward, and she realized that her shirt must have come untucked at some point during their foreplay, as his belt buckle now pressed against her bare midriff. The cool metal was a significant contrast to his steadily warming skin, and she cried out at the sensation it delivered, purring with pleasure.

Pulling back and delving her hand down further beneath his trousers, her fingers brushed against the sparse, coarse hair that she had had a preview of oh so long ago...when he had emerged from the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel. The picture spurred her on, and she sighed sensually, remembering how appealing a half-naked Severus Snape could be.

She ran her fingertips along his skin just above where his briefs were sitting snugly against his pelvis, relishing the series of grunts and erotic twitches the motion brought from him.

In a wholly unrestrained motion...quite uncharacteristic of the man lying next to her...he tugged sharply on the bottom of her blouse, distancing it from her body.

His hand climbed boldly up under her shirt, and he pushed her brassiere up over her breasts, letting the wire rest on her collarbone. She moaned receptively as he took one of her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, rolling it. The feeling was so erotic that it was bordering on painful, and she reflexively snuck her way under his briefs and stroked his erection fervently.

He quivered at her touch and removed his hand from her chest. She whimpered at the loss, but he quickly replaced it on her thigh, prying her legs apart slightly and running his index finger along the outer cotton of her damp knickers.

With her legs parted, she could feel the cool air hit her warm center. The feeling, combined with the agonizingly slow teasing Severus was performing with his fingertip, was steadily driving her mad. She let out a noise she hadn't thought herself capable of, a sound that belonged somewhere between "I" and "O" in the alphabet.

She lunged forward and latched onto his neck hungrily, his sweat meeting her taste buds with appetizing sweetness. He removed his finger from between her legs and pulled his other arm out from underneath her, placing his hands on her waist and shifting her back away from him.

She gave him a confused look, and he smirked, running one finger down between their torsos, tracing the line of the front of her blouse from afar. The buttons popped open and flew across the room with a loud *zing*, exposing her displaced bra and bare chest to the air around them.

She looked up at him in wonderment, impressed. "Smooth," she commented.

"Naturally," he replied suavely with a raised brow.

Before she could make a reciprocating move, his head dove forward, his lips latching onto the same nipple that his fingers had previously abandoned.

She was beyond thinking at this point and wriggled on the spot, her toes curling inside of her shoes. She let out an almost inaudible, "Gods, Professor, yes..."

And he stopped.

She was panting heavily, his head still tucked close to her chest, though he had released her nipple from his lips.

He sat back, looking at her with confusion in his eyes, and she furrowed her brow, perplexed.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly.

"We cannot do this," he said, breathing heavily, his eyes dropping as he looked away from her.

"What?" she squeaked. "Why ever not?"

He shook his head regretfully, his nose pointed at the wall to their right. "Get dressed, Hermione."

"No!" she cried childishly, grabbing his face with her palm and turning him towards her. "What did I do wrong?"

His face went from determined to compassionate, deflating like an untied balloon. She lowered her hand to his arm, grabbing the material of his sleeve in a loose fist. Raising both palms to cup her face, he looked at her seriously through apologetic eyes.

"It would not be appropriate," he said gently, "while I am still your teacher."

She could feel the tears attempting to spring into her eyes and suppressed them vehemently. "It *was* appropriate about thirty seconds ago," she spat out.

He shook his head lightly, holding her gaze. "No, it was not. I should not have led you to believe..." He released her face and glanced away, sighing. "Hermione," he continued, turning back to her, "you must understand..."

"I understand," she said spitefully, dipping her shoe into the crevice between their adjoining couch cushions and kicking forward, propelling her divan away from his. "I understand perfectly."

After summoning her severed buttons and replacing them wandlessly to their rightful place on her blouse, she did up her shirt and stood, walking over to his desk and grabbing her bottle of Felix Felicis.

"Where do you think you are going?" he asked.

"Fucked if you care," she said nastily, grabbing her cloak up off of the floor.

"Hermione," he said, and she pointedly ignored him, using her wand to transfigure the second settee back into its former 'chair' state.

"Hermione," he said again, this time more loudly, as she tucked her wand into her waistband and made for the exit.

"MISS GRANGER!" he bellowed, and she halted her steps, staring resolutely at the door in front of her.

She could feel the wetness seeping from her lower lids, hot tears streaking hurt trails down her cheeks. She didn't care what he had to say at this point. He could have apologized until he was blue in the face, and she still wouldn't...

"I believe it would be best if we discontinued our extra lessons," he said calmly.

What? she thought, incensed.

She balled her hands into fists, and if she had been holding her wand, she surely would have snapped it in two.

"Fine," she said softly, venomously, and resumed her trek toward the door.

"Hermione," he called softly, and she paused once more, her hand on the doorknob. "I am sorry," he said quietly, his tone guilty. "You have no idea," he continued, and Hermione had to strain her ears to catch the whispered words.

She blinked rapidly, attempting to clear the tears from her eyes. Turning to him as she opened the door, she said cruelly, "Hmmm. Two 'sorrys' in one day *Professor*." She emphasized the term, the word rolling off her tongue like venom from a fang. "You are losing your edge," she added hollowly and slammed the door behind her.