

Broken Enigma

by Tygerlily

In a post war Hogwarts Hermione discovers a devastating secret that shakes her world and causes her to take a step back and re-evaluate everything within her life.

Shattered Stars

Chapter 1 of 10

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Spoilers: None - Takes Place Fifth Year [just to give you an idea of the time]

Author Note: This is my FIRST "Harry Potter" Fanfiction; however, this is not my first Fanfiction ever. I am also working on my first total "Harry Potter" Alternate Universe. [Where I basically change... almost everything, it will be Hermione/Severus Centric] So be on the look out for that some time in the future.

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Chapter One Shattered Stars

A thunderous crash sounded before a bright light lit up the darkened sky, as the rain continued to fall and hot, spicy tears continued to slip down her chilled cheeks. Only hours before she had been so excited and happy she could've burst from it all. That evening was the Halloween feast; and what was usually a joyous time within the magical world had turned out to be one of the most devastating days of her life.

What was worse was that she couldn't figure out which was more detrimental: the fact that her boyfriend of almost a year and a half was cheating on her or the fact that her best friend of almost five years had been helping to keep her lying boyfriend's secret. Sniffing softly, she couldn't help but curl in on herself as similar thoughts continued to race through her mind.

Tears continued to burn and blurred her vision as she stared sightlessly out the window and at the storm raging outside. Uncurling her fist, glassy eyes glanced down at the now warm piece of metal lying innocently in her upturned palm. What had been a precious gift was now nothing more than a mere mockery of what once was. She could remember clearly the day he'd given it to her as if it had just occurred.

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All that could be heard was the gentle scuffling of their shoes as they slowly made their way down the cobble-stone path that wove all throughout one of Hogwarts many rose gardens. After the events of previous years, it had been decided that Hogwarts' three most infamous students should arrive just a few days ahead of schedule just to

allow them to get settled... for safety's sake.

Gentle cinnamon-colored eyes looked over at her companion, who was obviously a complete bundle of nerves, though he was doing his best to hide it. Shrugging to herself, she decided, for once, to not push. It was he who had invited her out here, so she figured he'd say whatever it was he had to say when he was ready.

Inhaling sharply, the young Gryffindor nodded shakily toward a stone bench. It was hidden in an intimate corner of the maze. The fragrant scent of roses and greenery surrounded them as they slipped past a few mossy vines. Settling down on the cool stone, the same gentle eyes settled on his rattled form.

"Ron... what's the matter?" Hermione asked softly when he still hadn't said anything.

"Huh... oh nothing, I just... well, I wanted to talk to you," he stammered nervously.

Giggling softly to herself, she smiled up at him though she couldn't for the life of her figure out why he was so adorably flustered. Ever since her first year, she'd had something of a crush on Ronald Weasley, and it had only grown and taken on a life of its own over time.

"Well, okay then... what about?" she asked.

"...About what?" Ron asked curiously.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" she asked while giggling softly.

The youngest Weasley boy flushed brightly before coming back to himself. Clearing his throat nervously, his eyes darted to the thick grassy ground before jumping back up to his companion's face.

"Well, you see hum... I've been doin' some thinkin' and uh... gods, this is hard! It shouldn't be this hard. I mean I should just be able to take a breath and just come right out and tell-"

"Ron! ... Ron, calm down and just tell me," she said softly.

Inhaling slowly, his soft blue eyes fluttered shut before opening again.

"I like you, Hermione... in fact, I like you a lot. I know this may seem like it's coming out of nowhere... but that's not exactly true. I... I've felt this way for a while now..." He then began to trail off, unsettled by her silence.

Stunned into silence, Hermione stared at Ron, who had been one of her best friends for the past four years, in complete and utter shock. It was Ron's nervous babble about taking back his recent declaration that finally pulled her from her stunned state.

"Gods, Ron... don't you dare take it back!" she exclaimed.

"... You mean?" he asked hesitantly but, his eyes were ever hopeful.

"... I like you too Ron, a lot. In fact I've had a bit of a crush on you since our first year," she admitted, a bright blush staining her cheeks.

As realization slowly began to dawn on the youngest male Weasley, a large goofy smile broke out over his face and his eyes lit up. Sitting up a little taller, he then squared his shoulders for the second reason of this excursion to the rose gardens. Reaching into the folds of his robes and with a shaky hand, he produced a small battered looking box.

"I have something for you... it's not much but as soon as I saw it... well, here, just go on and open it," he stammered nervously before thrusting the box out towards her.

Quietly, she gently ran her fingers over the battered box before slowly opening it with a soft click. What she found there caused her eyes to widen as she gasped softly. Licking her lips nervously, she gently lifted the delicate chain, holding it up in front of her. It was nothing more than a simple silver chain linked together with moderately thick links, but knowing the Weasleys' financial situation, Ron's especially, she couldn't have asked for anything better. Looking up she saw that Ron was fidgeting quite a bit and watching her anxiously, giggling softly she smiled up at him and offered her wrist.

"Put it on me?"

Smiling nervously, the redhead shakily reached out and took the light piece from her and gently, placed it on her wrist. Fingertips gently caressed her wrist for a moment before they fell back into his lap. Still smiling a bit nervously, he then leaned down at gently brushed his lips against hers...

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A loud crash outside her window ripped her from the memory. It seemed as the evening wore on, the storm outside became all the more violent. Shivering involuntarily because of the icy chill that had crept into the room, she moved from the large four poster bed and reached out for one of her thicker cloaks. Silently, she dropped to her knees and rooted around until she found her shoes, and just as quietly, she pulled them on.

When she caught her reflection, she couldn't help the shuddering breath that escaped her. She was still dressed for the Halloween feast—beautiful deep maroon robes adorned her body, cut to fit her, specifically. They hugged her bust and waistline, snugly, before flaring out in a swirl of skirts around her ankles. Her hair had long ago lost its unruly, bushy curls and now fell around her shoulders in soft waves. In a word, she was beautiful... except for the puffiness of her eyes and the redness of her nose.

Sniffing softly, she did her best to keep the fresh tears burning the backs of her eyes at bay. Inhaling a shuddering breath, she reached up with shaky hands and gently raised the dark hood of the cloak and silently slipped from her rooms. Entering the common room, she wasn't surprised to find that it was empty and all that could be heard was the soft crackling of a fire. Everyone was more than likely at the feast, and if they weren't at the feast, they were off in the halls somewhere, trying to get some alone time with the opposite sex.

And, although she was in no mood to break up young lovers, she was still a Prefect and it was time to patrol. Sighing softly to herself, she quietly stepped out into the halls of Gryffindor Tower and slowly began to make her way down into the main portion of the castle. As she got closer to the Great Hall the sounds of laughter and the gentle roar of conversation could be heard. Coming slowly to a stop, she stared longingly at the large, ornate double doors before shaking her head, before turning on heel, and making her way to the dungeons.

She knew her heart wasn't really in this particular patrol, nor was her head in reality. The gentle click of her shoes as she made her way down the stone steps along with the gentle hum of her voice as it echoed softly against the cool stone. Hermione wandered the halls aimlessly; her only company the gentle click of her feet and the sound of her voice as she sang softly to herself, a lullaby from her childhood.

It was those two very sounds that drew Severus from his personal lab and out into the halls. What he saw before him caused him to pause and look on in great curiosity. Dark eyes darkened all the more as he watched the young girl only a few yards away from him practically glide across the halls, singing softly to herself. Although he normally would have made his presence known and reprimanded her for wandering his dungeons, her face caused him to pause. It was empty and devoid of any emotion.

It was almost as if she wasn't really there.

Pursing his lips and silently cursing himself for what he was about to do, he murmured softly and slowly he shimmered from sight. A few more whispered words, and a cushioning charm had been cast on his shoes. It was then he fully stepped out into the hall and began to silently follow the young Gryffindor. For a long while, he believed they were just going in circles as they made their way all throughout the dungeons, even down corridors that he hadn't been down in ages.

Suddenly, she changed her direction and began to quietly make her way out of the bowels of the castle. For awhile, he again thought they would wonder the halls aimlessly. That was, until she began to make her way up a narrow stoned stairway. She was headed up to the Astronomy Tower. His brow furrowed in confusion, why on earth would she want to go there? More than likely all she would find would be some couple in the middle of some heavy petting.

Shaking his head, he sighed silently to himself but still kept up after her. Much to his surprise, the tower was empty. His eyes scanned the small space curiously before they settled on the huddled form of the young Gryffindor. She was sniffing softly and her shoulders were shaking uncontrollably. It was then that he knew she was crying; rolling his eyes heavenward, he wondered if this evening could get any worse.

Though, as soon as the sobbing started it stopped. Rising on shaky legs, Hermione made her way over to one of the large open windows within the tower. Sniffing softly, she looked out into the night and inhaled the crisp and cool night air, still totally unaware of the company she kept. Reaching up, she pulled down the hood that adorned her head and shook her hair free, running a shaky hand through her thick locks, she reached into her robes and pulled out the once precious bracelet.

Licking her lips nervously, she held up the glittering piece of jewelry in front of her. Silently, she studied the piece for a moment, and then, with a flick of her wrist, she tossed it out the window and into the air. With a few whispered words the bracelet never made it to the ground, for it burst brightly into numerous glittering shards before shimmering harmlessly from sight.

Dark eyes widened in shock and surprise as they took in the sight of the bracelet exploding into the night before slowly disappearing from sight. Tearing his eyes away from the space where the bracelet had once been, he took in the sight of the still tearing young woman in front of him, and he was more confused than he had ever been in his entire life.

Here she was, Gryffindor know-it-all, out all alone a stream of tears constantly coursing down her cheeks. On the night of the Halloween feast no less, and her bodyguards were nowhere to be seen. Let alone the fact that this Muggle-born had just done a somewhat impressive display of wandless magic.

No, something was not right here at all...

End of Chapter One

Shadowed Conversations

Chapter 2 of 10

Severus reveals himself and the result is a small confrontation.

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Chapter Two Shadowed Conversations

Sighing softly to himself, he decided enough was enough and with a few whispered words, his form slowly shimmered into view. Pulling himself up to his full height and regally crossing his arms over his chest, he demurely cleared his throat. Spinning around, lightly colored cinnamon eyes widened in shock and surprise as Hermione began to stammer nervously.

"Pro... Professor Snape. You startled me," she said softly.

"Well I don't quite see how, with your incessant whimpering," he intoned softly.

Hermione stiffened immediately, and unbidden tears began to sting her eyes. Swallowing visibly, her body began to tremble with suppressed tears as she sniffled softly. Obsidian colored eyes widened in fright and his arms dropped swiftly and stiffly to his sides.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor if one more tear slides down your cheeks while in my presence... Do not push me, Miss Granger. I mean it," he said in all seriousness.

Sucking in a shaky breath, her eyes darted to the floor as she nodded jerkily, trying desperately to compose herself. Shakily, she brushed her hair back, sniffing. Nodding to herself after a moment, she shook her shoulders slightly and looked back up at the Potions master's face, a stoic mask showing no emotion.

Pursing his lips slightly, he nodded in acknowledgement before sucking his teeth softly. Stepping forward, he slowly began to circle her, eyeing her curiously.

"Tell me, Miss Granger... tonight is the Halloween feast, and yet here you are in the Astronomy Tower all alone. In the five years that you've attended this school, I think I can count the number of times I've seen you *without* your bodyguards on one hand... why?" he asked simply.

"Why what, sir?" she rasped softly.

"Why, on tonight of all nights, do I find you here instead of the Great Hall?"

Her eyes widened slightly, not wanting to divulge that she had been crying over the fact that Ron had basically screwed around on her because she wouldn't put out, and that Harry had been helping to keep the lying snake's secret.

Especially not to Hogwarts' resident evil Potions master.

"I uh... well, the other Prefects are enjoying themselves this evening, some of us had to sacrifice the evening to patrol and perform..."

"That is sheer and utter nonsense; you and I both know that on occasions such as this Prefect duties fall upon the professors unless the circumstances are extreme... For example, what occurred during your first year... Let alone the fact that you were so loud you could have woken the dead..." he trailed off with a raised brow.

Inhaling sharply, she realized that she probably wouldn't make it out of this without a detention; he had already threatened to dock her twenty House points if she cried anymore in front of him.

She'd be damned if she was going to tell him what kept her from the Halloween feast, let alone the Great Hall itself. Swallowing visibly, she lifted her chin a bit defiantly and squared her shoulders, almost as if she were preparing for a battle of some sort.

"I just didn't feel like attending the feast this year... sir," she finished quietly.

Severus's lips quirked in amusement before a scowl settled on his features once more.

"Be that as it may, you are out wandering the halls after hours. You are not within the walls of the Great Hall or the safety of Gryffindor Tower," he said with a sneer.

"You have two options: one, you make your way to the Great Hall and join the rest of the students in the festivities, or two, you take yourself back to Gryffindor Tower and spend the rest of the evening there. Either way, you will leave this tower; you will *not* be wandering the halls this evening. Whatever you choose, ten points from Gryffindor for wandering the halls after hours," he finished with a smirk.

Hermione's eyes widened and she began to sputter angrily.

"I suggest you do not push your luck, Miss Granger. I spared you twenty points earlier, and you are escaping this *witbut* a detention. You are lucky that it is ten points alone that I am taking from you."

Hermione's cheeks flushed with anger, but she knew better than to try and take the greasy git to task. She had really pushed her luck far enough as it was. If she kept at it, the end result would more than likely be more House points lost and a detention with Filch if she were lucky... detention with him if he was in a foul enough mood.

"Get moving, Miss Granger... unless you'd like me to dock those twenty points," he said pointedly.

Not needing any more encouragement, and with one last glare thrown in his direction, Hermione slipped past him and down the narrow stone stairway.

She began to mutter obscenities under her breath all pertaining to the Slytherin Head of House. He knew damn well that even though the professors did assume Prefect responsibilities during festivities, Prefects, and even the Head Boy and Girl were still allowed the same privileges. They were also still expected to perform at least some of their duties.

She shook her head; she knew that it was no use mulling over the subject now. Severus Snape would always be the slimy disgusting little snake that everyone claimed him to be. He always favored his House over all the others even if his darling little Slytherins were the cause of the incident in the first place. Of course there was his work for the Order and everything else he had done to help defeat the Dark Lord, but gratitude could only go so far.

The harsh click of her heels, the gentle brushing of her robes against the stone and her rhythmic breathing was all that could be heard as she continued to make her way back towards the Great Hall. She knew that there was a shorter way but she'd then have to pass Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, which was now usually flooded because it had been awhile since anyone had been by to visit her.

Hermione then made a mental note to stop in and see the usually contemplative and solitary ghost before the weekend was out. As she continued on her way, her thoughts floated back to the always sarcastic and sometimes just this side of nasty Potions master.

It just occurred to her that he had threatened to take twenty House points from her if she shed one more tear in his presence, but she had been alone in the tower... hadn't she? Her steps began to slow as she began to mentally retrace her steps.

She had left Gryffindor Tower and had made her way down and out into the main portion of the castle. Deciding to patrol, she had made her way towards the ground floor and passed the Great Hall before heading down into the dungeons. After wandering around the darkened hallways of the dungeons for a little while, she'd headed up one of the back staircases and back up to the main floor. She had then headed up the narrow stone stairway that lead up to the Astronomy Tower.

Sucking her lower lip in between her teeth, she tried to remember if she'd felt as if anyone had been following her at the time, but her mind was coming up empty. Her eyes widened, and she growled softly when she realized that he had probably been following her ever since she exited *his dungeons*, as he so affectionately called them on occasion.

Rolling her eyes, she was completely disgusted with herself. How could she not have realized that he had been spying on suddenly her eyes snapped open with a newfound fear if he had been following her that entire time... then that had to have meant that he witnessed her little display with Ron's bracelet?

Her hands came up to cover her face as she whimpered softly. There was a good chance that he had been witness to her little trick earlier. A low groan escaped her throat. The day had started out so wonderfully, and ever since her discovery earlier that afternoon, it had just gotten progressively worse.

This, not being an exception to any rule, sadly...

There was only one other person who knew of her ability to perform *controlled* wandless magic. She cursed herself for not taking care to guard her secret better. Suddenly, one of the large ornate double doors to the Great Hall flew open and two giggling yet very amorous fifth year Hufflepuffs came stumbling out.

Inhaling sharply, Hermione did her best to right her appearance and suppress a few snuffles. The young man continued to paw clumsily at the young girl until she suddenly stopped short at the sight of Hermione. This caused the young man to look up, both of them staring at Hermione with frightened eyes.

"Just go," Hermione said with a sigh.

Not needing to hear anything else, both scurried across the corridor and down the stairs, presumably headed to the Hufflepuff dormitories. Hermione just shook her head as her eyes fell on the now closed doors leading into the Great Hall. The feast was still going on though it would more than likely be ending soon.

Growling underneath her breath, she couldn't help the fresh wave of anger that seemed to flood her at that moment in time. She knew that she probably shouldn't have let Ron and Harry keep her from the feast; it wasn't as if she was the one at fault. However, the hurt was still there and still too new, she'd have to deal with them come Monday. *Might as well enjoy the weekend* - she thought to herself.

Giving the doors one last longing glance she then turned and made her way towards Gryffindor Tower. Arriving at the staircases, she couldn't help but look at them wearily before resigning to climb them while praying that they didn't decide to change while she was on them. She had no desire to play musical staircases that evening in order to get back to Gryffindor Tower.

As she stepped up to give the password, she heaved a heavy sigh when she found the woman within the painting dozing lightly. Rolling her eyes heavenward, she tried clearing her throat politely, and the painting still slept on. Growling softly under her breath, she tried it again only a little louder. She knew from past experience that one had to handle the lady within this particular painting carefully. If you got her angry enough, she'd lock you out for the night.

After a few more minutes of trying, the fat lady snorted an un-lady like snort as she came awake. Sniffing demurely, she shifted and settled herself before deciding to take notice of Hermione who was trying to wait as patiently as possible to give the password.

"Pass... my, my... dear girl, have you taken a look in the mirror lately?" she asked snottily.

"I'd just like to get inside...please," Hermione gritted out, not really looking to get into an argument with the painting that particular evening.

"You look as though you've been dragged through the mud girl..." she continued on as if Hermione had never spoken until she was abruptly cut off.

"I am in no mood for you to critique my looks this evening, so if you would just please allow me inside, I'll be on my way."

"Password," the painting drawled, her eyes rolling heavenward.

"Balderdash."

And with that, the painting swung open, and Hermione made her way into the Gryffindor common room. Scanning the space quickly, it was easy to see that no one had returned yet from the feast which suited her just fine. Sighing softly, she slowly made her way across the room and headed up the winding stairs to the girls' dormitories.

When reaching the fifth level, instead of entering through the main door which would lead into the fifth year dormitories, she moved to a fairly well hidden door just to the right. No one would even take notice to it unless they knew it was there. Stepping up to the door and with a few whispered words, it swung open.

She was greeted with a soft mew from Crooks who had decided to take up residence at the foot of her bed. Sighing softly, she dropped her cloak right onto Crookshanks who mewed and hissed angrily before finding his way out from underneath the heavy cloth.

Hermione barely paid him any mind as she continued to undress. Switching out of her dress robes, she tugged on a pair of Muggle track pants and tank top. She then gently tugged on her hair and it tumbled from her carefully done plaits to fall around the column of her throat and shoulders in soft thick locks. Flopping down on the bed, she let out a breath and patted the space next to her. After a moment's hesitation, Crooks hopped up on to the bed, accepting her silent apology.

Turning to lie on her back as she lazily ran her fingers through her familiar's thick fur, she couldn't help but be grateful Halloween fell on a Friday this year. The weekend meant not having to deal with professors but her peers as well. That weekend was also a Hogsmeade weekend. Hogwarts would blessedly be almost student free during the day as all years were allowed to go to Hogsmeade except for the first.

She then began mentally making a list as to what she'd need in town that weekend. It was mostly sweets from Honeydukes, as she was running low on her study snacks. It was funny really, being that her parents were both dentists, yet she had a terrible sweet tooth that could rival Dumbledore's any day of the week. Her eyes widened when she remembered that she had received another package from her parents that morning when the post had arrived at breakfast.

She'd have to stop in at Dumbledore's office tomorrow morning and request a special pass to make a short trip to Diagon Alley. Sadly, she had to now make a trip to Gringotts; perhaps she could stop in at Flourish and Blotts while she was there. The last time she had been there, she hadn't been able to purchase anything but the required reading material.

It was Crooks' soft purring as he snuggled up against her side that broke her train of thought. Sighing, she rolled onto her side and curled her body around him. Whispering a charm, the lights dimmed before flickering out, leaving only the low light of the night sky that shimmered in past the gossamer-like drapes.

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Dark eyes glittered thoughtfully as he continued to contemplate the young Muggle-born witch. For the longest time, she had been nothing more than the annoying, bushy-haired, large-toothed, glory-seeking Gryffindor.

Now, suddenly that was all changing. Her actions earlier as he followed her through the halls were peculiar at best. She was literally singing softly to herself as she all but floated down the corridors. If it weren't for the gentle click of her heels and the quick breaths she took as the melody flowed from her lips, she could've been mistaken for a spirit.

Then, of course, there was her rather impressive display of wandless magic. It wasn't as if wandless magic was completely uncommon. Far from it, when emotions were running high almost any witch or wizard was able to perform some variation of wandless magic. It was just that it was totally uncontrolled and beyond unpredictable, but judging from the Miss Grangers' performance earlier, that wasn't so in her case.

It really shouldn't have come as too much of a surprise though. Even from the moment the young girl stepped foot in Hogwarts, she had been reading and soaking up knowledge like a proverbial sponge. Her first Potions lesson should've been a clue as to the potential lying within the young witch. Even after his favoritism towards his own House and the downright harassment and mockery of Gryffindor House, she still was genuinely very interested in Potions.

He never really made himself available to any student let alone her outside the classroom. Yet, she still managed to have a firm grasp on all of the material, even the extra material he provided on occasion. When most would just not comprehend it at all, nor would they really make the effort to, she absorbed all of it and was still hungry for more.

His train of thought began to shift and bend, thinking about the different possibilities of making himself more available to her. *Of course, it would only be to her alone. It might even be refreshing to have someone to converse with that actually had a decent understanding of the subject*, he thought to himself, when suddenly, his head jerked back in something akin to disgust. *Just because she has a good mind and has the makings of a great Potions mistress doesn't mean that I should have to change my teaching methods for her. Her intellect is something to respect and even perhaps be in awe of but in the end all she is a glory-seeking Gryffindor*, he thought disdainfully.

Sighing heavily, he cursed himself for spending so much of the evening contemplating one of his students, one of his least favored at that. However, he couldn't help but be concerned about her more than peculiar behavior. Her wandering the halls alone on the night of the Halloween feast was strange in itself. Then her body language and facial expressions were empty at best. It was almost as if she wasn't really there, as if she had escaped to some place deep within her mind, and she was merely going through the motions.

Then of course there was her tears and magical display in the tower when she believed she was alone, followed by her conversation with him not to long after. It wasn't as if she was talking back to him, but she did have somewhat of a defiant quality in her voice and stature. Although he was the head of Slytherin House and supposedly "*The Evil Potions Professor*," she still spoke to him with a modicum of respect.

Giving one last fleeting glance to just past the tower's large windows where the small fireworks display had erupted earlier, he swept from the room in a swirl of darkened robes. He knew that though the feast was still going on, Albus was more than likely locked within his office wading through paperwork or whatever else needed to be taken care of.

He quickly made his way down the stone spiral staircase only to be stopped by a large mewing cat at the bottom: Mrs. Norris. He couldn't help but roll his eyes heavenward, that could only mean that Filch wasn't that far behind, and sure enough, the Squib of a caretaker appeared with two very contrite looking fifth year Hufflepuffs at his heels.

"Ah, Professor Snape, I've been lookin' for ya. I found these two down near your dungeons. Gettin' a bit hands on they was... if ya know what I mean," he said with a sneer that passed for something akin to a sinister smile on his lips.

Severus brought himself up to his full height while regally crossing his arms over his chest. He had to suppress the overwhelming urge to roll his eyes. Filch's favorite past time was to find students who were looking for a little alone time and humiliate them. Normally, he would've just sent him and his mangy looking cat on their way but since he had more pressing matters to deal with than two hormone driven teenagers, he decided to let Filch handle their punishment.

"Twenty points from Hufflepuff each, and you will not return to the feast. You will spend the rest of the evening doing whatever Mr. Filch tells you. I trust you will not repeat this act in the future," he said with a heavy sigh before stalking off into the shadows down the hall.

Arriving in front of the large stone gargoyle, Severus couldn't help but roll his eyes as he spoke the password, *candy coated cockroaches*. Not waiting for the passage to open all the way he ducked his head and slipped inside. The office was dimly lit as his eyes quickly scanned the space; to his surprise, Fawkes was dozing lightly. Clearing his throat politely, Albus Dumbledore's eyes found his as they twinkled brightly.

"Good evening, Severus, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" he asked calmly.

"I fear something might be wrong with Miss Granger," he said, deciding there was no sense in dancing around the issue.

This seemed to gain the Headmasters' full attention, and he put down his book before folding his hands together in his lap. Nodding to the younger man, he indicated for him to take a seat and then continue on with his story.

"This evening as I was working in my lab I heard strange sounds coming from the corridors. I shrugged it off at first every student was supposed to be at the Halloween feast. However, it wasn't just the sound of someone walking around, I stepped out into the hall to reprimand whomever it was but what I saw caused me to pause... It was Miss Granger, but, there was something very off about her. She was dressed quite formally, almost as if she should've been in attendance at the feast but, then decided not to go; but, it was her singing that truly has me perplexed..." He trailed off lost in thought.

"Why is that?" Albus asked quietly his eyes now contemplative.

"Well it was... the song was extremely sad sounding, mournful almost. As if she had lost something very dear to her. Her facial expression was one that could've frightened the dead, it was blank... empty... almost as if she had retreated somewhere deep in the recess of her mind. I don't know why, but I followed her. She finally ended up in the Astronomy Tower where she just began to sob uncontrollably... but then as soon as she started, she stopped again..."

"What happened next, Severus?" Albus prompted when he saw that the Potions master had become lost in the memory once more.

"She had a piece of jewelry... looked almost like a bracelet, a simple silver bracelet. Though she held it as if it was once her world, suddenly she just tossed out the window, and with a few whispered words and the wave of her hand, it burst and shattered... like bright falling stars... I've never seen anything like it." He finished with a tinge of awe in his voice.

Albus leaned back in his seat and just hummed softly to himself. He had a good idea as to what was going on, but it was Hermione's story to tell. He knew he'd have to give the Potions professor something to keep him quiet and calm but not too much, it just wasn't his place.

"What do you think is going on, Albus?" he asked point blank.

"I fear that is Hermione's story to tell; just know this, Severus, right now, Miss Granger is going through a bit of a rough spell. It'll pass... eventually. She may not act herself for a little while yet. I know she is... how shall I put this? Less than one of your favorite people but, she is still a person... don't push her too hard," Albus said softly.

"Albus... what on earth is going on?" he asked now more curious than ever. He figured it might be some spell or some ridiculous adolescent melodrama but from the way the Headmaster was talking, it sounded as if some very serious problems were surrounding Hogwarts' resident know-it-all.

"Severus... why are you suddenly so concerned with Miss Granger's well being?" Albus asked, a small smile curling on his lips. Severus' eyes widened as he stiffly jumped to his feet.

"I do not know what you are implying, sir, but I can promise you that you are off the mark," he hissed angrily before sweeping from the room, leaving an icy air lingering behind him.

He continued to berate himself as he swiftly made his way down and back into his dungeons. Coming to a halt in front of a large ornate painting of one of Salazar Slytherin's assistants, Damien Fitzwater, who smiled cruelly and hissed out, "*password*."

Severus rolled his eyes and bit out, "*Pureblood, now open up, you bloody painting*." Not wanting to have a Stunning Spell cast on him for the evening, the painting immediately swung open.

Stalking inside, he carelessly let his thick cloak slide off his shoulders and onto a nearby chair where it fell in a rumpled heap. Sighing heavily, he retrieved a bottle of firewhisky and a tumbler before settling himself in front of the hearth. With a flick of his wrist, a burst of flames appeared before they settled back down creating a comforting fire.

Pouring the amber liquid into the glass, he stared at it for a moment, before knocking back the glass and filling it again. Dark eyes stared thoughtfully into the dancing flames in front of him. His tongue darted out to lick a few stray droplets that had lingered on his lower lip.

It was then he remembered the few outside ventures brewing in his private lab. Groaning softly, he unfolded his large frame from the chair. He slowly made his way into the next room moving about with ease. He still had a few days yet before he could bottle the concoction, needing a full thirty days to ferment and it being only day twenty.

He just needed something to do with his hands, something to keep his mind occupied. Frustrated with himself for not being able to remove the young Gryffindor from his head, he stormed out of his lab in a huff. He began to pace the floor, growling softly to himself. There was no need for him to go see Albus so quickly; he just wasn't thinking straight, but there was just something so very off with the girl.

He couldn't help but groan loudly at his train of thought *Gods and goblins, I'm doing it again, I've got to get out of here* and with that he stalked out of his rooms and out of the bowels of the castle. With quick, sure steps, he made his way across the lush lawn and towards the Forbidden Forest.

He knew that he was out dressed only in his frock coat and robes, having left his cloak in his chambers. Whispering a few charms, his long shoulder length hair tied itself into a loose ponytail at the nape of his neck. Smiling softly to himself, he took off at a run into the trees disappearing from sight.

When suddenly, a beautiful large black bird broke free from the forest canopy and made its way into the darkness of the night, never noticing the smiling eyes watching him the entire time.

End of Chapter Two

Author Note: Yes, Severus has an Animagus form for those of you that didn't get that. As to whether or not he's registered with the Ministry remains yet to be seen. As to what's going on with Hermione, we'll find out little bits of information as the chapters go on. I promise you, it'll all eventually fall into place ^_^

Next: It's the morning after [Saturday]. We catch up with Harry and Ron while Hermione makes a list and has a meeting with Dumbledore.

The Morning After

Chapter 3 of 10

Harry and Ron have a conversation, and Hermione has a meeting with Dumbledore.

Chapter Three The Morning After

As the sun crested over the horizon, the sky was painted with varying hues of gold and rose. The sun's dappled rays filtered through the room's gossamer-like drapes, creating light shadows that danced along the walls and across the floor.

Groaning softly, Hermione rolled over in her sleep, burying her face in the softness of the bed sheets. The gentle sound of Crooks' mewing caused a cinnamon-colored eye to crack open. Growling sleepily, she eyed her familiar for a moment before rolling over and burrowing even deeper into the bed than before. Not to be deterred by his mistress' morning brush-offs, Crooks hopped over her lithe body and began to nudge his nose against her cheeks and neck.

Determined to get in a few more hours of sleep, Hermione did her best to ignore Crooks' incessant nudging and pitiful whining. After about ten minutes and three not-so-accidental scratches later, Hermione gave up. With a frustrated growl, she kicked down the duvet and sent a heated glare in her familiar's direction.

Bleary eyed, she reached up to fluff her already wildly tangled hair. A glance in the mirror caused her to grimace at the thought of untangling the mess... even with magic. Sighing heavily, she headed over to the fireplace and Flooed the kitchens. A few scant moments later, a small house-elf popped in with Crooks' breakfast. Hermione greeted the timid female house-elf with a warm smile.

"Good morning, Koki," she said brightly.

"Mornin', ma'am," she whispered softly while cooing to Crooks.

Hermione couldn't help but chuckle silently at the way Koki and Crooks interacted with one another. The young house-elf was absolutely fascinated with the feline mix, and it seemed that the interest was more than mutual.

"Koki, I was wondering; could you do me a favor?"

At this, Koki looked up from her silent exchange. She ducked her head shyly, dragging a pointed toe through the plush carpet; she asked shyly what that might be.

"Well, I'm not really feeling all that well..."

"Oh, Koki should be going to gets someones?" the young house-elf asked, alarmed for her mistress' welfare.

"No, no, I just don't feel like dining in the Great Hall this morning. I was wondering if you could go to the kitchens and fetch me some breakfast; I'd rather eat in my rooms this morning," Hermione explained.

The young house-elf contemplated this for a moment before smiling brightly. Without a word, she took off with a bounce through the Floo, only to return a few minutes later with a piping hot plate filled with eggs, bacon, toast, various breakfast pastries, and a large container of pumpkin juice.

"Just call for Koki when done," the house-elf said after placing the large platter up on the desk in the far corner of the room.

"Thank you, Koki."

With that, Koki smiled shyly before scampering back over to the fireplace and disappearing as quickly as she'd appeared. Hermione couldn't help but shake her head at the house-elf's antics. *It really is a shame that such loyal creatures have such a lot in life,* she thought to herself. It was then that she decided to perhaps do something nice for her resident house-elf.

Putting together a plate of bacon, toast, and what looked to be something akin to a cinnamon bun, she poured herself a goblet of pumpkin juice before settling herself on the edge of the bed. Having already finished his own breakfast, Crooks hopped up on the bed and looked at his mistress imploringly, hoping to catch a few nibbles of hers.

Giggling at her familiar's antics, she couldn't help but feed him a few bits of bacon before sending him on his way. Crooks continued his adorable tactics for a few more minutes, but when he saw that he'd gotten his fill, and that his pursuit was fruitless, he turned up his nose and hopped off the bed. Trotting across the room, he found a nice warm section of thick carpet where the sun was breaking through the drapes. He circled the small section of space a few times before settling down for a morning nap.

Finishing up her breakfast, Hermione sent back the leftovers with a dismissive wave of her hand. Sighing softly, she realized that she was going to have to shower and dress before heading anywhere. There was another door within the room just set off to the side of the bed that led to the bathroom. Once inside, she waved her hand over the large sunken spa-like tub, causing it to fill magically with water.

Normally, she'd have just used the faucets, but there wasn't time. She wanted to be washed and dressed quickly to catch Dumbledore before he left the school to run errands. On Saturdays, the Headmaster was hardly ever in, usually leaving Professor McGonagall in charge. Stepping into the tub, she hissed softly at the heat of the water before settling in. Quickly dunking her head beneath the water, she began to wash her hair and scrub herself clean.

Finishing up quickly, she removed herself from the tub, and with another wave of her hand, the remaining water quickly made its way down the drain. Casting a drying spell on herself eliminated the tedious use for towels, though she wrapped one around herself anyway.

Crossing the room, she headed to her bureau and chose a dark blue sleeveless dress. Slipping out of her towel, she tossed it onto the bed before pulling on the garment. Pulling it over her head, it slid down to settle on her shoulders, the bodice hugging tightly to her bust and down her slim torso before flaring out around her hips to fall softly around the rest of her body.

Smiling at her reflection, she gave an experimental twirl as the skirt swished and swirled around her ankles. She then reached for a pair of dark blue boots that complemented the varying blue hues on the dress.

Her eyes widened as she suddenly remembered her need for a quick list before heading out for the day. Grabbing a spare piece of parchment, she picked up her quill and dipped it in some ink. She already knew that she had to stop in Honeydukes. Her sweet tooth wouldn't allow her to go without until next month.

For Honeydukes, she wrote: *Chocoballs, Fizzing Whizbees, sugar quills, half a brick of chocolate, and lemon drops.* She knew it sounded like a lot, but the sugary lot would probably last her a couple of months at best. *I won't have to make another trip to the shop until almost Christmas and the Headmaster does enjoy lemon drops... It really is the least I can do for him.* Her train of thought trailed off there, not really wanting rehash bad memories.

Shaking her head slightly, she also realized that she'd have to work out a way with Dumbledore to make a short trip into Diagon Alley. She had put off speaking to him about the need for a trip to Gringotts long enough; perhaps she could even stop in Flourish and Blotts while there.

With that in mind, she gently blew across the parchment, helping the ink to dry faster, before folding it over and pocketing the list. Crossing the room, she then reached into the same bureau and pulled out a long flowing dark blue cloak.

Surprisingly enough, the fabric it was made of was fairly light and perfect for the autumn-like weather. She then settled the cloak on her shoulders before securing the brooch just below her neck. Spying her wand on the bedside table, she merely reached out and called for it, "*Accio wand*," before pocketing the item within one of the hidden pockets on the inside of her cloak.

Silently, she slipped out of her private rooms and made her way down the narrow, spiral stone staircase. Entering the common room, she was more than relieved to find that it was completely empty. Finding the clock tucked in the far corner, she noticed that it was a bit earlier than she'd anticipated. Shrugging it off, she swiftly made her way out of the common room and out of Gryffindor Tower.

Being that she had already eaten, there was no need for her to go to the Great Hall. That also meant that Dumbledore hadn't had breakfast yet. Sighing softly to herself, she turned on her heel in the opposite direction and made her way out onto the grounds.

Knowing that the giant squid was most active this time of year just before the lake froze over, which caused it to sleep for the duration of the winter, she made that her destination. It was early morning, and all that could be heard was the bright chirping of the birds and the sound of her feet gently brushing against the grass beneath her feet.

Silently, she settled herself along the banks before playing a warped game of 'hide and seek' with the giant squid and one of its tentacles.

It was one way to spend early morning.

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"Monsters, what was I thinking?" he asked miserably.

"I haven't a bloody clue," a voice responded blandly.

"That was a rhetorical question, thank you very much," he said dejectedly.

"Yeah, well, you did ask... We really hurt her, Ron."

At that moment, stormy blue eyes looked up and locked on Harry's distraught face as they both began to remember the events of the evening before. Two-thirds of *the Golden Trio* sat at the far end of the Gryffindor table; it was clear by their body language and hushed tones that they wanted to be left alone. All were too happy to oblige.

Last night had been a disaster for Gryffindor House; Ron had shown up with Harry, but Hermione had been conspicuously absent. The night had only gotten progressively worse. Ron and Harry were constantly questioned as to Hermione's whereabouts and if she was all right. The questioning had done little but grate on Ron's nerves. As for Harry, it caused him to stammer nervously before darting across the room in hopes of dodging any more questions anyone might have had.

The crowning jewel of the night was when Samantha Reese, the curvy Hufflepuff who Ron had been bedding for the past few weeks, decided to try and stake her claim. Remembering the devastation on Hermione's face and how Ron didn't run after her caused Samantha to come to the conclusion that he wasn't interested in the prudish Gryffindor and that his affections toward her were genuine.

She couldn't have been more wrong.

There, in front of all within earshot, she'd heard how she was nothing more than a piece of flesh to him. What they'd had was fun, but it wasn't worth losing Hermione over and that he was going to do his damn best to get Hermione back. In order to do so, he couldn't have a clingy little girl hanging around. The young Hufflepuff had bitten her lip harshly to keep the tears at bay before turning on her heel and returning to her own House table.

She'd sent scathing glares his way for the rest of the night.

"You don't think I know that? Gods, Harry... when she saw us in the shed near the Quidditch pitch, I thought my heart was in my throat. She looked so devastated... and disappointed, but I couldn't tell if it was in her or me. All I know is at that very moment I knew that none of what I was doing was worth it... I almost wanted to die..." Ron whispered miserably.

"Did you even go after her?"

"Course I went flying after her. I mean, at first I was so shocked I couldn't even move, but somethin' just snapped me out of it. With that, I went runnin'. Though it didn't do me any good... The second I caught up to her, she basically said that if I said one more word to her that she'd hex the protruding parts of my body right off. Then she just turned and stalked off back towards the castle. What was I supposed to do?" he asked rhetorically.

"All I know is that when she caught sight of me yesterday, she backed me into a corner and just asked flat out if I knew what you had been doing. I tried to play it off but... but then all the anger just seemed to drain out of her. I couldn't lie to her anymore, Ron."

"What did she do when you told her that you had known what was going on the whole time?"

"She smacked me clean right across the face," he said, turning his cheek to the side; his left cheek was still a bit red and forming a slight bruise.

"Merlin! I was the one that mucked this all up, and you're the one that gets smacked!"

"We both messed up... big time; you for doing what you did and me for lying to her about it. I should never have agreed to keep your secret."

"I shouldn't have asked you in the first place."

"You know what? You're right; this is all your fault," Harry said with a small smile.

"Gee, thanks," Ron responded while rolling his eyes.

Both boys suddenly fell silent as they continued to pick and prod at their breakfast. Neither felt moved to eat anything; the mere thought of consuming any of the rich food caused both their stomachs to turn.

"What are we going to do, Harry? Hermione wasn't just my girlfriend. She was our best friend, and we both lied to her. She's done nothing except been a good friend and a great ally during the war. I mean, if it wasn't for her, we would've lost a lot more people than we did."

"I have no clue. We really bollixed this one up," Harry said miserably.

"Look, we've already made a mess of things. We just have to try and contain it as best as possible. If what really happened gets out, Hermione will be beyond humiliated and then that'll just knock out any chance we have for fixing things with her."

"Yeah, you're right... and speaking of keeping this quiet, have a look see," Harry said nodding his head toward the Hufflepuff House table.

There was Samantha Reese staring longingly at Ron. Despite his harsh words the evening before, it seemed the young Hufflepuff had gotten it into her head that he was just upset over hurting a friend and that once he calmed down they could be together.

Ron couldn't help but roll his eyes heavenward at the sight; before he could even turn back around, he saw her rise from her seat as she slowly made her way over to them. She began intentionally swaying her hips in some clumsy form of seduction.

"What in Merlin's name is she doin'?"

"I... I have no idea, but you had better put a stop to it."

Taking a breath, Ron rose from his seat, and before Harry could even blink, he grabbed his arm and half picked him up, dragging him from the Great Hall. Harry had no choice but to follow as Ron continued at his speedy pace with Harry in tow through the corridors and back up to Gryffindor Tower. The youngest male Weasley didn't stop until he reached the Gryffindor common room.

"Whoa, Ron, slow down... What on earth was that all about?" Harry asked before flopping down in one of the overstuffed chairs tucked in a darkened corner of the room.

"I don't know... I just panicked; she looked like she was happy to see me, even after last night and what I said to her, which can only mean that she wasn't really listening. She just took and twisted my words, trying to find a hidden meaning behind them."

"Well, it's not like you can avoid her forever," Harry said reasonably.

"Yeah, but Hermione should be top priority... Don't you think?"

"Of course I do; Hermione should always come first and foremost... but I doubt that Hermione would appreciate our efforts at mending our relationship with her if you had Samantha hanging around all the time."

"I guess you're right... but I can deal with Samantha a little later. It's not like Hermione is going to come running back to either of us, but we've got to make the first move."

"What did you have mind?"

"I was hoping you had an idea," Ron said with a grimace.

"Oh, this weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend... right?" Harry asked suddenly excited.

"Uh, yeah, so what... I don't think this is the time..."

"Ron! What's in Hogsmeade?"

"Well, there's the post office, Scrivenshaft's, Gladrags, Zonko's, the Three Broomsticks and... oh... oh, and Honeydukes! Of course, why didn't I think of it before? Hermione has a sweet tooth that rivals Dumbledore's!"

"Exactly! And just a few days ago, she was saying that she was low on some of her favorite sweets. You know how Hermione gets. Once she goes into studying overdrive, she forgets to eat; we were always wondering why she wasn't nothing but skin and bones and..."

"That was when she shared her little secret!" Ron exclaimed as both boys collapsed in a fit of laughter. Though, Ron's good mood didn't last when his mind began to be plagued with doubts.

"But what if she doesn't show?"

"Oh, c'mon, Ron, Hermione is like Fluffy on one of his bad days if she doesn't have her sweets; she'll be there. We may have to wait around a bit, but she'll show," Harry said reasonably.

"Okay, great, now we have a plan. Now what?" Ron asked, looking to Harry.

"Well, it's early yet, but I think we should get to Hogsmeade as soon as we can. We don't know what time she'll be heading down into town, and we don't want to miss her."

"So it's off to Hogsmeade then," Ron said as he climbed up out of the chair.

The two exited the common room, never noticing the slight shadow in the stairway that lead up to the boys' dormitory, its eyes widened in shock.

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Humming softly to herself, she swiftly made her way down the corridor, only to come to a halt in front a large stone gargoyle. She giggled softly as she gave the password, *candy coated cockroaches*, before slipping in past the opening and into the large, yet cozy-feeling office.

She smiled brightly at Fawkes' cheerful greeting before settling herself in one of the large overstuffed chairs in front of the large, ornate desk. The gentle click of a door opening, and then closing, caused her to look up as the Headmaster entered the room.

"Good morning, Headmaster."

"Ah, good morning, Hermione, how are you this morning? I trust you slept well."

"Oh, as well as can be expected I suppose."

Sighing softly to himself, Albus slowly made his way over to his desk and settled himself behind it. He then looked up and took in the forced smile on the young Gryffindor's face in front of him, and at that very moment, he could've very well smacked both young Mister Weasley and Mister Potter. It was then he knew that things would more than likely never go back to the way they had been. There was also the fact that relations and situations between all parties involved would be strained at best before any form of normalcy was acquired once more.

Shaking his head slightly, he knew that wasn't something he could think about now. The war was now over, and though Harry was a celebrity within the Wizarding world, he was no longer Dumbledore's sole responsibility. It was time he focused most, if not all, of his attentions, on the young witch in front of him.

"Well, as much as we enjoy one another's company, I gather this isn't a social visit."

"Ah, no, it's not... My parents sent another package yesterday morning. I know I should've probably spoken to you about it yesterday but...well, yesterday was a bit hectic. I know that it's the weekend and that Hagrid has other things to do than just make a special trip to Gringotts for me... so I thought if it was all right with you and if I had a special pass, I could just make the trip myself, saving everyone the trouble."

"Of course, that sounds reasonable enough; you know I'll provide you with the proper paperwork in order to make such a trip," he said softly.

"Oh, I was also wondering if it'd be all right if I stopped in at Flourish and Blotts on my way back. The last time I was there was in the beginning of the school year, and I was only able to purchase the required reading at the time."

"Of course, of course... you do know that this weekend is a Hogsmeade weekend. Will you be heading in to town either today or tomorrow? Or are we staying in this particular weekend?"

"Oh, yes, I'll be going into town after I finish up my business in Diagon Alley," she said matter of factly.

"Well, feel free to use the Floo here; have it take you to the Leaky Cauldron, and go about your business. I'm sure Tom will have no problems letting you use it to get back. Once you return, I'd like to know how your trip went, and then you are free to spend the weekend as you see fit," he said, smiling serenely.

"Thank you, Headmaster."

And with that, Hermione checked her robes to make sure she still had the items she needed before tossing some Floo powder into the fireplace and requesting the destination of the Leaky Cauldron.

In a puff of powder, she was gone, leaving Dumbledore to look on with haunted eyes.

End of Chapter Three

Author Note: Thank you to my betas; you know who you are. Your corrections make my work flow much better and make it easier to read! Most, if not all, punctuation and grammar errors have now been corrected... hopefully! Also, thanks go to Southern Witch for giving this a look over.

Next: Harry and Ron catch up with Hermione at Honeydukes and get a bit more than they bargained for.

Additional Note: I know that Hermione seems to have a few extra powers here, not using her wand for some things, but the reasoning will be explained in due time.

Southern's Notes: I'm quite curious as to what that "shadow" was doing listening in on the boys. Ron and Harry have a lot to learn, don't they?

Honeydukes Hazard

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione runs into a few people she deems rather unpleasant.

Chapter Four Honeydukes Hazard

Sighing softly to herself, she stepped out of the fireplace and quickly brushed herself off, the Floo powder clinging to her dark, blue robes. She reached up to gently brush back a few stray strands of hair that fell out of place before reaching to raise her cloak's hood.

"Good morning, sir." Hermione swiftly greeted the proprietor of the Leaky Cauldron, not waiting for a reply before making her way out of the back of the establishment and into a small alleyway.

Reaching into her robes, she withdrew her wand and tapped the worn, moss-covered bricks in front of her in a rhythmic series of taps. Within moments, the bricks began to shift and split apart, revealing the entrance into Diagon Alley. She couldn't help the awe and excitement that seemed to wash over her every time she was here. Even though she had been submerged within the Wizarding world for almost five years now, it had not yet lost its luster for her.

Stepping out into the alley, she began to easily stroll down the cobblestone paths, taking in all the people around her. Witches and wizards alike milling about, going about their day; she couldn't help but notice how they were so much like Muggles and yet so different.

She then took notice of a small gap in the crowds of people; one storefront seemed to be fairly open to the street while the others had hoards of people in front of them. It was then she realized it was the Apothecary. Her eyes lit up when she saw a small sign tucked in the corner stating that there is a sale on unicorn's hair and firewire. She decided to make a quick stop in before heading back to Hogwarts.

Continuing on her way, she was more than content to observe her surroundings and the people around her. Ever since she was young, she had enjoyed what some might call *people-watching*. Passing Flourish and Blotts, she realized that Scribbulus Everchanging Inks was right next door, and though it was a practically a little hole in the wall, it contained some of the finest parchment and ink Galleons could buy. Again, she made another note to not only stop in the Flourish and Blotts but also Scribbulus and the Apothecary on the way back.

Easily weaving her way down the narrow cobblestone path and through the crowds, she finally arrived at Gringotts. Stopping just in front of the massive building, she couldn't help but look up and take in its rickety and odd-shaped pillars. The structure reminded her of the Burrow in a lot of ways. Her eyes darkened when she realized that there would probably be no more holidays or summers spent at the Burrow or with the Weasleys. *No don't go thinking about that now*, she chided herself silently.

Suddenly, she was roughly shoved forward and fell gracelessly to the ground, which jarred her back to the present. Some street peddler was swiftly making his way into Knockturn Alley, his parcels clinging and clanging behind him. It soon became clear why when an irate wizard came barreling down the path, tripping over Hermione who was still sprawled out on the ground, though that did nothing to deter him, as he was still hot on the vendor's heels.

Sighing heavily to herself, she clamored to her feet and began righting her robes once more. Reaching up, she went about fixing her hair, though much to her surprise, there wasn't all that much to fix, thankfully. Her eyes widened in fright when she didn't feel the thick envelope that had been pressing up against the underside of her breast, hidden within one of her cloaks' many pockets. She immediately went about shaking out her robes, and after a moment or two, a thick envelope made of heavy stock came tumbling forth.

Catching the package with shaky fingers, she swiftly turned her back to the crowd facing the wall. She opened the envelope, making sure that everything was accounted for before breathing a sigh of relief. She then quickly pocketed the envelope once more. Once settled, she looked up, and she couldn't help but notice that she was no longer in Diagon Alley per se.

Through all the jostling and movement, she had been pushed underneath a small overpass that led right into Knockturn Alley. That was the moment she should've immediately turned around headed back toward the bank, which in reality was only a few feet away, but her natural curiosity had gotten the better of her.

And with that, she stepped fully into Knockturn Alley.

The entrance to the Knockturn was shrouded in shadow and quite narrow. Surrounded by nothing but dark, damp, moss-covered bricks, it was fairly silent except for what

was now the dull roar of people passing by from Diagon Alley. The gentle click of her heels and her steady breathing only seemed to intensify the sound of her own heart pounding within her ears.

Then, out of a small hidden alcove, a shadow appeared, causing Hermione to yelp in surprise. Hermione eyed the shadow warily before it stepped into the light, revealing a tiny, old, yet haggard-looking woman. She was fairly short in stature, barely five foot one, and her long, silver hair fell around her wrinkled and pinched-up face in stringy strands. Catching the look on Hermione's face, her cracked and dry lips curled up into what might be considered a smile, which revealed a few dirty, yellow, rotten, jagged teeth. Hermione couldn't help but recoil back, not in disgust but more in fear than anything else.

"Mornin', dearie," she rasped out.

"Ah... good morning, ma'am... If you'd excuse me, I really must be going," Hermione said as politely as possible, already figuring on a polite way to make a mad dash back to the relative safety of Diagon Alley.

"Why the rush, dearie... I'm sure I've got somethin' here that could..."

"I don't think so, but thank you. Now, if you'll excuse me," Hermione said quickly before turning on heel in an attempt to escape, suddenly realizing that this little adventure wasn't such a good idea after all.

A startled yelp escaped her throat, as the old woman was suddenly standing in front of her. Hermione's hand curled tightly around her wand just in case; it was times like these when Hermione cursed her Muggle upbringing.

"Dearie..."

"Excuse me, but you will remove yourself from my path this instant if you know what is good for you," Hermione said hotly, brandishing her wand.

The old woman's eyes darkened considerably, but all she did was nod her head and bow in a form of mock submission. She hitched up her parcels and then slowly stepped to the side keeping her eyes cast on the ground. "I be beggin' your pardon, ma'am," she murmured softly.

Hermione eyed the woman warily before swiftly making her way past the woman and down and back out of the alley. Her steps slowed slightly when she looked back over her shoulder and found the woman melting back into the shadows. Reaching the entrance back into Diagon Alley, she collapsed weakly against the cool stone. Panting heavily, she shakily placed her wand back within the fold of her robes.

She began to shake her head at her reaction to the old woman. *Merlin, that was foolish of me; it wasn't like she was trying to hurt me or anything... probably just wanted to sell me some useless bauble or charm, and I was downright rude to the poor woman.* When she looked back down the alleyway, it was empty, all evidence of the woman gone.

Biting her lower lip, she then resolved to make another trip into Knockturn Alley, and then she wouldn't let herself scare so easily. Perhaps she might even run into that old woman again. Shaking her head, she realized that she had better get about her business before Dumbledore became concerned.

Swiftly, she made her way out of the small alcove and back into Diagon Alley and Gringotts Bank. Slowly, she made her way into the large ornate building. When she first had been accepted to Hogwarts, her parents had traveled with her to Diagon Alley to exchange their Muggle money into Galleons and to purchase the needed items for her first year.

Shaking off the melancholy feelings, she squared her shoulders and swiftly made her way over to one of the Goblin tellers.

"State your business," he said with a bored look on his face, obviously not happy with having to look up from a roll of parchment, which previously had all of his attention.

"Ah, yes, I need to have this amount exchanged," she said politely while pulling the thick stock envelope from her robes and placing it up on the high counter.

The goblin grunted in response and removed the contents of the envelope. He didn't even blink at the large amount of Muggle money that was in front of him. He merely went about counting the large bills, and when he was finished, he recounted them again before placing it all back in the envelope. With a snap of his gnarled fingers, it was gone, and in its place were two fairly large black velvet pouches.

He then began writing out a small piece of parchment noting the transaction. Again with a snap of his fingers, it duplicated itself. He then asked for her signature on each, and with a flick of her wrist, her signature appeared on both pieces of parchment. He quickly scanned them, then suddenly his eyes glowed briefly, and with a swift nod of his head, one of the copies disappeared.

"Will that be all?"

"No, sir, I'd actually like to deposit half of it and take the rest with me."

He nodded curtly, and once again, his eyes glowed for a brief moment. It wasn't too long after that that another goblin was at her side looking up at the teller for his orders. The two pouches shimmered from their place on the desk before appearing in the other goblin's hands. A silent exchange occurred between the two before the one summoned jerked his head and muttered, "*This way, please.*" Hermione was left to simply follow.

For having such short legs, goblins moved fairly fast, Hermione thought, as they moved deeper into the bank. Suddenly, the goblin stopped in front of a large ornate door with an even more complicated-looking lock. There was a large desk off to the right, which he made a beeline for, and with a jerk of his head, he indicated for Hermione to follow. It took the creature a moment to clamor up onto the seat, but once settled, he was all business.

"Now, you wish to deposit half of what is here... yes?" he asked brusquely.

"Yes, sir."

"Your name," he murmured.

"Hermione Jane Granger"

"Ah, yes, here we are: Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, vault 3980 in trust for Hermione Jane Granger. You are not of age yet..." he said, trailing off, the question clear.

"Oh, no, not as yet, but it clearly states that the account is mine. Just because I am not of age yet doesn't mean that I am not able to deposit and..."

"Yes, yes, of course. I was just checking to make sure that everything was in order."

He then rose from his seat and handed the parchment receipt and both pouches to Hermione. Moving as swiftly as his short legs would carry him, he moved back in front of the large double doors, and after a moment, they swung wide open; he then stepped inside with Hermione hot on his heels.

Once both were inside, the doors slammed shut, and torches flared brightly with life. "*Follow me please,*" came the high-pitched yet authoritative voice of the goblin in front of her as they slowly made their way down a short spiral stone staircase.

He then stopped at the bottom on what looked to be a platform. It wasn't long before what could be considered a trolley car pulled up, and the goblin climbed in before

waiting patiently for Hermione to follow. Once both goblin and witch were settled, they were on their way.

The trolley shot out of the station with surprising speed. After a few twists and turns, the trolley came to an abrupt halt before announcing that they had arrived at vault 3980. The goblin then climbed out of the car, then turned to Hermione and requested the key. Reaching into her robes, she produced a large gold skeleton-like key.

Nodding in response, he swiftly made his way over to the vault, and the large door swung open. Hermione slowly made her way out of the car and into the vault. Sighing softly, she looked around at the contents of the vault before tossing one of the pouches in with the rest of the lot. She then turned around and quickly made her way back to the trolley stating that her business was indeed finished.

They then quickly headed back the way they came. Hermione bid the goblin a good day and quickly exited the bank. Heaving a heavy sigh, she hadn't realized that entering the vault would cause such a reaction. Shaking it off, she again realized it wasn't the time or the place for such thoughts.

Double checking to make sure that she had everything she needed, she stepped fully out of Gringotts and back into the street, only to slam directly into a dark solid wall, causing it to let loose a curse. While apologizing profusely, she looked up, and her eyes widened considerably at the sight before her:

There stood a very annoyed and irate-looking Professor Snape.

"Pro... Professor Snape," she stammered.

"You seem to be stuttering quite a bit as of late, Miss Granger," he drawled softly.

"Oh, well, yes hold on a second... What are you doing here?" she asked curiously.

The Potions master's already stiff stature stiffened all the more before he drew himself up to his full height. Crossing his arms over his chest, a brow rose in question as he looked down at her disdainfully.

"What am I doing here? I think the real question is what *you* are doing here. Though this is a Hogsmeade weekend that does not give Hogwarts students the right to make their way into Diagon Alley whenever they see fit... I suggest you start explaining yourself."

"I had some business to attend to; Professor Dumbledore gave me permission to use the Floo from his office to the Leaky Cauldron. I was just finishing up and was about to make my way back to Hogwarts. ... I have the identifica..." she said, already reaching into her robes.

"No, that won't be necessary. However, I suggest that you do not linger for too long."

"Of course, sir," she said.

Giving her one last lingering glance, he bid her good day before brushing past her. Curious as to where he was going in such a hurry her eyes widened in shock and surprise as she watched her professor swiftly make his way through the entrance to Knockturn Alley. *What on earth could he want in there?* she thought silently.

Shrugging it off, she turned and quickly made her way back up Diagon Alley. Once at Flourish and Blotts, she popped inside and quickly purchased her book, *Great Potions Masters Through the Ages*. She smiled politely at the proprietor of the shop before dropping two shiny Galleons on the counter and taking her leave. As soon as she had stepped out of the bookstore, she entered the stationery shop right next door.

Wandering the isles, she picked out two new large rolls of parchment. She spent so much of her time note taking and studying that extra writing materials always seemed to be needed. Heading up to the counter, she paused when she noticed a display of beautiful ornate bottles containing some high-quality ink.

Normally, she'd never think of buying something so frivolous since she could easily charm her quills with an everlasting ink spell. However, she had just broken up with her first long-term boyfriend. Shopping was supposed to be some sort of therapy... right? She did have a few extra Galleons swimming around in her robes that morning. Shrugging and smiling to herself, she picked up two large bottles and placed them up on the counter with the two rolls of parchment. Smiling brightly up at the merchant, she dropped six Galleons on the counter before heading back out into the street once more.

As she made her way back up Diagon Alley, she realized that contending with her rather large packages all the way back to Hogwarts was probably not the best way to go. She whispered a charm softly, and the packages shrunk down to such a size that she easily slipped the book, rolls of parchment, and ink into one of the many folds of her robes.

Coming up on the Apothecary once more, she quickly made the decision to bypass the shop; she had spent enough time in the alley as it was that morning. It was time to get back to Hogwarts; she still had to meet with Dumbledore upon her return before she could head into Hogsmeade.

Again, she repeated the pattern on the brick wall before it cracked and shifted, allowing her back into the Leaky Cauldron. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting of the pub before she could make her way over to the fireplace. Just as she was about to toss some Floo powder into the hearth, she heard a raspy voice calling to her from the direction of the bar. Turning, she was surprised to see Tom, the owner of the establishment, waving her over.

"Sir?"

"Aye, I've got somthin' here for Professor Dumbledore. I'd normally just owl the damned thing, but since you're headed straight back to him, I figured you could just take it instead... You can do that, can't ya?" he said passing an envelope over to her.

"Of course, sir, I'll see he gets this," she promised.

"Well, off you go then." And with that, he went back to wiping down the bar.

Eyeing him for a moment, she turned and headed back toward the fireplace. Tossing in a fair amount of powder, she announced her destination. *Hogwarts: Headmaster's Office.* And in a puff of powder, she was gone.

Within moments, Hermione reappeared in the Headmaster's Office. Stepping out of the fireplace, she brushed off her shoulders and shook out her robe. Sighing, she reached up to fluff out her hair. *The Floo is definitely not the way to travel,* she thought. Once settled, she looked up and smiled in greeting.

"Hello, Hermione, I trust your trip went well," he asked serenely.

"Oh, yes, I made it to Gringotts just fine. I exchanged the full amount and made the deposit. I did, however, keep half; I had a few things I needed to get, and I still would like to head into Hogsmeade... if that's all right?" she asked.

"That's all more than fine; go and enjoy the rest of your day."

Hermione smiled in thanks and began to take her leave when she suddenly remembered the letter she had received from Tom at the Leaky Cauldron. Turning, she walked back to the desk and removed the envelope from her robes.

"I almost forgot... Tom from the Leaky Cauldron asked that I give this to you."

"Thank you," he said simply as he accepted the envelope from her.

At her look of concern, he merely smiled and said that it was only a social letter and nothing more. Even with the war being over, it wasn't that long ago simple letters caused great worry. Hermione lingered a moment longer before heading out of Dumbledore's office. Making her way down the halls, it was surprisingly silent. Although it was a Hogsmeade weekend, first years were still restricted to the castle and Hogwarts grounds.

She quickly made her way into Gryffindor Tower and to her rooms. Crooks greeted her with a soft mew before returning to his mid-morning nap. Sighing, she pulled the miniaturized book, parchments, and ink from her robes, and with a few whispered charms, they all returned to their normal size. She left them on the bed to be dealt with later before exiting her rooms once more.

Soon she had made her way out of Gryffindor Tower, out of the castle itself, and onto Hogwarts grounds. As she made her way down the dirt path towards the school's gates, a large tentacle came up out of the lake and waved merrily at her. She giggled in response and waved back before continuing on her way. The gates to the school were already wide open, just as they were every Hogsmeade weekend since the students were allowed to come and go as they pleased.

It wasn't long before she crossed the tracks of Hogsmeade station and entered the small Wizarding town of Hogsmeade itself. As she came up upon the Three Broomsticks, she quickened her steps in hopes of avoiding just about everyone. Though Honeydukes usually had a student or two inside, it was the local tavern that most students flocked to. Making it past with no problem, she began to breathe a bit easier and made a beeline for the sweets shop.

Once inside, she soon lost herself in the isles of sweets. Her eyes lit up at the sight of the large display of Chocoballs. Grabbing a pouch, she reached into a bin and took out three or four scoops of the sweets...in the end taking about a quarter of a pound. Continuing on her way, she grabbed three large packages of Fizzing Whizbees and five canisters of sugar quills. She then reached up and grabbed a sixth canister deciding that she did go through them rather fast when studying.

She continued to wander the isles, eyeing each and every one of the sweets with bright eyes. Coming upon a large display of bricks of chocolate, she greeted the bouncy house-elf who cut the piece of the rather large slabs. The young elf eagerly hopped up and took Hermione's order of half a brick, which equated to about half a pound. The brick of chocolate was quickly wrapped up in Honeydukes signature paper. Hermione was once again making her way through the shop.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a sale on lemon drops and just couldn't resist. She reached for another pouch and filled it up till she had nearly a pound of the sugary sweet and sour candy. Now loaded down with more candy than a girl her size should know what to do with, she headed up to the counter to purchase her findings. She quickly paid the woman and bid her a good day with a bright smile.

Just as she had done in Diagon Alley, she whispered a few charms, and once again, her packages were small enough to place in the folds of her cloak. Settling herself, she realized that there was nothing else for her to do in Hogsmeade and that she was rather hungry. It was then she decided to just head back to the castle and get something to eat from the kitchens.

"Hermione..."

Her eyes fluttered shut as if in pain when she heard her name being called and the hesitancy that colored the voice calling for her. She looked up and came face to face with the two people she hated most at that particular moment in time. Squaring her shoulders, she merely looked at both of them defiantly, refusing to even acknowledge them with words before she quickly brushed past both of them.

"Hermione... please wait!" Harry cried out.

Her steps didn't falter; if anything, she began to walk faster.

"Mione, please!" Ron's distress could clearly be heard.

At the use of the once affectionate nickname, Hermione turned to face both boys, her eyes aflame with a furious fire. She stalked up to Ron and smacked him clean across the face.

"Don't you dare ever refer to me as *Mione* again," she bit out.

She then again turned on heel and began to make her way back toward Hogwarts. Once out of the village, she thought herself free, and her steps began to slow once more, though her anger was still present. However, when she heard the sound of quick moving feet behind her, she realized that she just couldn't be that lucky.

Without a word, she turned and waited for the two obviously distressed boys to catch up. They stopped, panting heavily as they leaned against one another, both trying to catch their breath. They stared at her longingly, searching for the words which would supposedly magically right everything between the three former friends.

"Mione..."

He never got to get out the rest of his plea. For with a few quick fluid movements, Hermione drew her wand and cast a Jelly-Legs Jinx on both boys, leaving them to collapse against each other and down to the ground from the sheer strength of the curse. With a satisfied nod, Hermione made her way back up the road and into Hogwarts.

End of Chapter Four

Author Note: Again many thanks to my betas who make my ideas flow better; you guys know who you are. Also, thanks go to Southern Witch for giving this another read through.

Next: We follow Snape and see how he spends his Saturday

Southern's Notes: I'm quite intrigued by all this business she's conducting and these powers she has. I do hope she gives Harry a chance, but I don't know that Ron deserves one...at least not yet.

Bird's Eye View

Chapter 5 of 10

Professor Snape enjoys his Saturday.

Suddenly before my eyes Hues of indigo arise With them how my spirit sighs

As the sun began to rise, varying hues of rose and gold colored the horizon. If one looked up high enough, the rest of the sky was painted in a deep indigo. The usually bright stars had long faded as the early morning began to arrive. Most everything was still and locked in a peaceful slumber. All that could be heard was the gentle beat of a bird's wings as it made its way through the Forbidden Forest.

Smoky puffs of air appeared, but evaporated just as quickly into the chilled early morning, as the bird continued to make its way through the forest. Suddenly, it dived beneath the forest's thick canopy, quickly weaving its way in and out of the gnarled branches and lush foliage. Noticing a break among the trees, it propelled its body forward and up, breaking through the canopy once more.

Dark eyes glittered sadly at the sight of the oncoming dawn before bringing its wings in close to its body as it turned around and headed back toward the way it came. The edge of the forest soon came into view and the beautifully manicured lawns and gardens of Hogwarts lie just ahead of it. Stretching out its wings, the bird slowed down to a glide before landing on one of the higher treetops right at the edge of the forest.

Shimmering ebony feathers rustled with and against the cool winds that whipped throughout the treetops. Heaving a heavy sigh, the bird stretched out its wings before hopping off the branch and dropping easily back into the winds. Flying high above the school grounds, the bird soon brought its wings in close to its body once more as it quickly barreled toward the ground below. Suddenly its wings flared, allowing it to easily glide alongside the castle before landing gracefully on one of the windowsills in the outer corridors.

Fluttering its wings a bit, it then took off at a glide once more and quickly made its way inside through one of the open windows. It swiftly made its way down the corridors before heading down the narrow stone staircase that led right into the dungeons. The occasional gentle beat of its wings was all that could be heard throughout the otherwise silent dungeon halls. It then came to a stop in front a large ornate wooden door. It continued to beat its wings as it hovered in front of the door before it let out a loud squawk.

The slumbering painting snorted in response before settling itself once more. The bird angrily flapped its wings as it moved forward to peck at the painting sharply before squawking even louder. The painting finally jerked awake and eyed the bird curiously just before a sinister smirk crossed its lips.

"Password," it rasped softly.

Squawking loudly the bird moved forward and continued to peck angrily at the painting. A few small tears and numerous obscenities later, the painting swung open in response, allowing the bird enough space just to pass through before slamming shut.

The bird's wings fluttered like mad before they gave way to long flowing dark robes. Heaving a heavy sigh, Severus Snape pulled himself up to his full height, smoothing out his outer robes and running his fingers through this wind blown hair. Pursing his lips, he sneered silently as he pulled a few twigs from his hair before shrugging off his heavy robes.

It was still early yet, but he was in desperate need of a shower. Groaning, he threw himself into one of the wing-backed chairs before going to work on his boots. Kicking both off, they fell carelessly near the hearth, his socks soon following the same path. Heaving himself out of the chair, he padded softly toward the bath. Long, elegant fingers deftly undid the numerous buttons on his frock coat before it fell onto the floor in an ungraceful heap. His customary white shirt, trousers, and undergarments soon joined the coat on the floor.

Kicking the pile of clothing to the side, he padded across the room to the mirror and gave his face and upper body a critical glance before shrugging and heading over to the shower. Stepping right underneath the showerhead, water suddenly began to cascade out of the nozzle, over his head and shoulders before running down the rest of his body.

Bringing up his hands, he placed both palms flat against the wall in front of him, his long sinewy arms stretched out in front of him, as he bent his head down. Yawning, the water slipped through his hair causing it to fall and form a curtain around his face. Suddenly he flicked his head back before slicking back his hair and reaching for the shampoo nearby. He leisurely went about the task of washing his hair, long fingers running through the soft locks while gently brushing against his scalp. However, by the end of the day it would all be for naught, hanging greasy and limp around his shoulders. Spending all day in the damp dungeons with all the steam and exhaust from the potions projects did a serious number on his hair.

Sighing, he stepped back underneath the spray and went about the task of rinsing all the soapy suds from his hair. Reaching for the soap, he went about the task of cleansing his body. He quickly worked the soap into a frothy lather before scrubbing at his chest and arms. His ministrations slowed when he gently ran over what once was the Dark Mark on his forearm, now nothing more than a pale scar that would more than likely fade, given enough time. He jerkily shook his head, as if to clear it, and quickly finished bathing before removing himself from the shower.

He snapped his fingers, and one of the towels moved swiftly across the room and directly into his hands. Drying his hair and upper body quickly, he then wrapped the towel around his waist before heading over to the vanity on the opposite side of the room. Whispering softly, he cast a quick drying charm, causing his hair to dry instantly. Running his fingers through the thick locks, he brushed it back with a sigh before exiting the bathroom.

Stepping out into his bedroom, he crossed the floor and walked up to his closet. He then began to dress, pulling on his undergarments and a fresh pair of black trousers. This was quickly followed by a black linen button down shirt, the cuffs flaring a bit at the ends. As he went about the tedious task of buttoning up the numerous buttons, he heard the fireplace within his bedchambers flare with life.

Cursing silently, he turned and crossed the room only to find Albus Dumbledore's face hovering back and forth gently in the flickering emerald-colored flames. Rolling his eyes heavenward, he threw himself into one of the wing-backed chairs and raised a brow in askance.

"Ah, good morning, Severus, I trust you slept well," the Headmaster said delightfully.

"What is it you want, Albus?" he asked, deciding to skip the pleasantries.

"Yes, well... I'm glad I was able to catch you. As you know, this is a Hogsmeade weekend, and like most of the children, Hermione will be making her way into town. However, I believe she will also be making a trip into Diagon Alley. Since it is a Saturday, and I know how you..." Dumbledore was instantly cut off by a snarling Snape.

"If you expect me to play the part of a *babysitter* for that Gryffindor, you've got..."

"Oh, no, no, Severus... I was merely informing you of Miss Granger's possible trip into Diagon Alley later today. I didn't want you running into one another accidentally and then having you jump to the wrong conclusions," he said reasonably.

"Really, Albus, I don't just jump to conclusions; you know that I'd give the girl a chance to explain herself," Severus responded silkily.

"Be that as it may, you and I both know that Hogsmeade weekends can sometimes bring out the adventurous side in certain students; they think just because they're allowed into town that they're also allowed to make impromptu trips into Diagon Alley. I just wanted to prevent an unnecessary confrontation."

"Is that all, Albus?" he drawled lazily.

"Yes, it is... Enjoy your day, Severus."

With that, the Floo connection was cut, leaving Severus alone once more. Sighing, he stared sightlessly into the empty fireplace for a few lingering moments before rising up out of the chair. Walking back over to the closet, he resumed buttoning up his shirt. When finished, he then pulled on a pair of dark socks and topped them with his

customary boots. Once finished, he gave himself the once over and was pleased with the result. Weekends were about the only time he indulged in dressing in something other than his customary teaching robes.

Giving the clock on the wall a quick glance, he saw he had already missed breakfast within the Great Hall. He quickly shrugged it off, never really eating breakfast in the hall on the weekends anyway. Snapping his fingers, his outer robes instantly flew to his fingertips as he made his way to his private lab. Satisfied that everything was either brewing properly or still fermenting, he quickly made his way out of his rooms and out into the dungeons. He swiftly made his way out of the bowels of the castle and onto the grounds. Most of the students had already begun to make their way into town, so his walk to the gates was fairly quiet. Once past the gates, he scanned his surroundings quickly before disappearing with a quick snap.

Moments later, he reappeared in a small alcove right near Gringotts bank. Stopping a minute, he righted his robes and ran his fingers through his hair. Satisfied with the result, he stepped out of the shadowed area and fully into Diagon Alley. Although his business today was entirely in Knockturn Alley, it was best to Apparate into Diagon Alley first. One really never knew what they might stumble upon. He swiftly made his way through the crowds until he felt something or someone slam directly into him. He let out a muffled curse, and when he looked down, he couldn't help but wonder if someone up there hated him. The young thing standing before him began to apologize profusely; that is until she caught sight of the person who she ran into.

"Pro... Professor Snape," she stammered.

"You seem to be stuttering quite a bit as of late, Miss Granger," he drawled softly.

"Oh, well, yes hold on a second... What are you doing here?" she asked curiously.

He stiffened immediately and pulled himself up to his full height. *Where does this nosy little Gryffindor get off? She's the student wandering about Diagon Alley, on Hogsmeade weekend no less,* he thought to himself. Crossing his arms over his chest, a brow rose in question as he looked down at her disdainfully.

"What am I doing here? I think the real question is what you are doing here. Though this is a Hogsmeade weekend, which does not give Hogwarts students the right to make their way into Diagon Alley whenever they see fit... I suggest you start explaining yourself." He knew very well what she was doing in Diagon Alley, recalling his conversation with the Headmaster only a few hours before, but it was always enjoyable to see a student squirm, especially the Hogwarts resident know-it-all.

"I had some business to attend to; Professor Dumbledore gave me permission to use the Floo Network from his office to the Leaky Cauldron. I was just finishing up and was about to make my way back to Hogwarts. I have the identifica..." she said, already reaching into her robes.

"No, that won't be necessary. However, I suggest that you do not linger for too long," he quickly reassured her, not wanting to be subject to one of her lectures. It was moments such as these that he almost felt bad for Potter and Weasley.

"Of course, sir," she said.

Giving her one last lingering glance, he bid her good day before brushing past her. He quickly made his way toward Knockturn Alley's entrance, even though he could still feel her eyes fixed upon him. It probably wasn't the best idea to just casually stroll into an alley devoted to Dark Arts items with a student watching him, but with the war over and all known Death Eaters locked up in Azkaban, he figured he'd risk it.

Even though it was about mid-morning, the residents of Knockturn Alley were in top form. Severus had already been on the receiving end of offers from two different witches that were ready to give him 'a good time.' Not bothering to respond to either of them, he ignored the obscenities that flowed past their lips as he continued to make his way deeper into the alley. Finally arriving at his destination, Borgin and Burkes, he quickly made his way inside. The silence of the shop was deafening as Severus slowly made his way through the establishment, his booted foot causing the old floor to strain and creak underneath his weight. Severus headed straight for the counter in the back, not even giving the rest of the store a second glance. He was here for one item and one item alone.

"Mister Borgin," he greeted politely.

"Ah, Professor Snape, what can I do for you today?" he rasped softly.

"I've come to pick up the book I had you order a few weeks back," Severus replied.

"Oh, yes, I remember now... Be just a moment," Borgin said as he shuffled his way toward the back of the store. He soon returned with a rather small leather-bound book with some discreet faded gold lettering that ran down its spine.

"Here we are," Mister Borgin said, placing the book up on the counter, leaving it for Severus's inspection. Severus silently reached for the book; he began flipping through the pages before nodding once, obviously pleased with what he saw. He then reached into his robes and tossed a small pouch of Galleons onto the counter. Then, slipping the book into the folds of his robes, he left the shop and headed back out into Knockturn Alley.

He swiftly made his way down the narrow alleyway before making a left, which brought him even deeper into Knockturn Alley. As he rounded the corner, the only tavern in the alley came into view. *The Gilded Serpent*; he couldn't help but chuckle silently at the name. Gilded, or gild, was basically another name for gold. He always came to associate gold with Gryffindors, all loud and blustering. It never failed to strike him funny that a primarily Slytherin establishment, as it were, would associate themselves with such a color. Severus entered the darkened pub and quickly headed directly to the bar.

"Shot of firewhisky," he requested silkily.

The bartender nodded and pulled out an already open bottle of the amber liquid.

"Open a new bottle," Severus ordered quietly.

"Ah, right... I be beggin' yer pardon, sir," the bartender said, already putting back the opened bottle and reaching for a new one. He then retrieved a glass and was about to pour out the liquid when Severus spoke again. "*Leave it,*" Severus rasped out, dropping a few Galleons onto the bar. He then picked up both, the glass and bottle, as he headed back toward one of the more secluded corners of the establishment.

Severus set the bottle and glass down on the table top as he dropped into a chair nearby. He then lazily poured out a glass of the drink, bringing it to his lips. His eyes fluttered shut, enjoying the slight burn as the alcohol made its way down his throat. Though it was fairly early in the day, he didn't really indulge in drinking while school was in session, so he felt this guilty pleasure was justified. Sighing, he settled back in his seat, his eyes scanning the establishment as he let his mind wander.

Even with the war over, his life remained painfully complicated. It wasn't as if he thought everything would instantly right itself after so many years of fighting and lies. At the very least, some things should have simplified themselves. It had been a little over a year since the Dark Lord's demise, and yet a large aspect of his life was still tethered to the mad man. The book in his pocket was proof enough of that. Shaking his head slightly, a hand came up to gently rub at his temples, as he could feel the beginnings of a headache coming on.

Knocking back another shot, his thoughts then turned to the young Gryffindor, Hermione Granger. Severus couldn't help but groan silently as his mind began to wander back to the previous evening. *This is bloody ridiculous; she's a student for Merlin's sake and a Gryffindor at that. All her blubbing was probably over some teenage melodrama that will more than likely sort itself out before the weekend is over.* However, as his thoughts continued, he still couldn't help but be bothered by her actions in the Astronomy Tower. Angry with himself for even giving this girl a second thought, he rose abruptly from his seat and quickly exited the tavern without a backwards glance. Pulling himself up to his full height, Severus began to quickly weave his way through the narrow passages of Knockturn Alley and back out into Diagon Alley.

Severus made his way back to the Apparition point, giving the small alcove a quick glance; he cast a charm and was pleased to find that no one else was in the immediate

area. His eyes fluttered shut; long dark robes gave way to shimmering blue-black feathers. The gentle beat of the bird's wings was all that could be heard in the small alcove. He easily made his way up and out of the alcove and into the open air. Not even giving Diagon Alley one last glance, Severus made his way towards Muggle London.

He soon came upon a rather old and abandoned looking building, and he brought his wings in close to his body. Severus spotted a broken window and swiftly made his way inside. Hovering for a moment, he allowed his eyes to adjust before weaving his way through the darkness and down to the ground floor of the building. Once again, feathers gave way to long dark flowing robes. Pulling himself up to his full height, Severus smoothed out his robes as he made his way across the large floor. Just a few yards away at the opposite end of the building were a series of small enclosures, one of which hopefully would be occupied. Reaching the largest of the makeshift doors, he raised a sure hand and knocked soundly. After a few minutes of waiting, Severus raised his hand to knock again when suddenly the door swung open. The Potions master was greeted by a small, older Indian gentleman, who looked up at him with wide eyes before nodding silently and gesturing for him to come inside.

The old man slowly, but confidently, made his way about the small space. He headed toward what looked like a kitchen. Severus looked around the small room with a clinical detachment. A soft croaking voice coming from the opposite side of the room offered him a seat; without a word Severus settled himself in one of the nearby chairs. The old man then returned with two cups of scalding hot black tea, setting one of the delicate pieces of china down on a pedestal table near Severus' chair.

Severus nodded his head in thanks, but never made a move for the cup.

The old man then seated himself; Severus looked on with watchful eyes as the old man began to silently sip at the hot beverage. It was then he took in the old man's appearance. The old Indian man stood at about 5'3" tall, if that, dressed in long, flowing, white linen robes. His dark, olive-colored skin was a stark contrast to his long, flowing white hair, which fell around his shoulders softly. However, it was the man's eyes that drew you in, such a deep color of brown they looked almost black. Licking his lips thoughtfully, the old man looked at Severus with expectant eyes.

"Well, we both know that this is not a social call. As we've only spoken briefly in the past, allow me to introduce myself. You may call me Abhijat... Mister Snape," Abhijat said politely.

Severus quirked a brow and nodded his head in acknowledgement.

"I see no reason to bother with inane pleasantries then. According to your last letter, you said you had something of great interest to me," Severus said, getting right to the point.

"Ah, yes, but of course... everything comes with a price," Abhijat said breathily.

"I'd like to see this... grand artifact first, if you don't mind," Severus replied silkily.

Abhijat eyed the wizard across from him, not an expression marring his face before a small smile began to curl around his lips. He slowly got up out of his chair and then toddled over to a small closet, tucked away in the corner of the room. When he returned, there in his hands was a small wooden box.

The craftsmanship of the piece was magnificent; it was a dark cherry wood polished to a high gloss shine. Around the outer rim, on top of the piece, was thin silver leafing. Whereas the four corners on top contained four rather large rough emeralds, the center of it all was an ancient Wizarding family crest. Severus' dark eyes widened at the sight of the small box; he then looked up at Abhijat in askance. The man nodded once before handing the box to Severus and taking his seat once more.

"As you can see, it is clear as to who the original owner was. This is only a piece of the puzzle that you are attempting to put together... but it is a rather large piece," Abhijat said cryptically.

"Name your price." Severus looked up at the old man before him and asked.

Abhijat eyed the young man in front of him. He knew that whatever amount he requested, he would receive it. However, there was something that held him back; a strange emotion swirled in the obsidian eyes in front of him, which in turn caused him to make this particular decision.

"All I ask for is that you keep in mind as to who the original owner was... I also ask that you remember who sought out this particular item; remember his teachings and beliefs."

"That's all you would ask of me in exchange for such an object?" Severus asked skeptically.

"Ah, but this is not just any object; you and I both know that. Yes, it does hold great value, but in reality, I have no use for it, nor could I make it work for me in any way except to sell it, as was my original intentions with you. However, I feel as though giving it to you as a... gift of some sort would serve both of us better. At least in the long run, anyway," Abhijat finished with a small smile.

"Why do I feel as though I'm possibly making a deal with Satan himself?" Severus muttered softly.

"I assure you, young man, I am not Lucifer in disguise... though I suppose that's something he himself might say, so as not to draw attention," Abhijat said with a laugh.

Severus's eyes kept darting between the box and the old man. In reality, he could just get himself together and leave this place as quickly as he came, leaving the box behind. Though in his heart of hearts, he knew that really wasn't an option. Keeping his eyes trained on Abhijat, Severus slipped the box into his robes and quickly rose from his seat. It was clear that this visit was rapidly coming to an end.

"I'm afraid that I must be going, but I thank you for this," Severus said, gesturing the breast of his robes where the box was hidden.

"No need to thank me, just keep my words in mind," Abhijat intoned softly.

Severus nodded once before slipping out the makeshift door and back out into the large open ground floor of the abandoned building. Crossing the large concrete floor, he once again made his way to the opposite side of the building. His steps quickened, and it wasn't long before his robes again gave way to large black wings. With a loud squawk, Severus slipped back through the open window and out into the open air. His body soared upward, and he landed gracefully on top of the abandoned building. Wings fluttered wildly when again feathers gave way to long flowing robes. Giving his surroundings a quick glance and security charm, he was satisfied that it was safe, and without a word, Severus disappeared from the rooftop with a quiet snap.

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Cinnamon-colored eyes fluttered shut as a gentle wind picked up and caressed her face. Sighing softly to herself, Hermione slowly made her way through one of Hogwarts' more obscure gardens. Though Professor Sprout was absolutely meticulous when dealing with the gardens, this one really only contained night-blooming plants; it was known that Professor Snape frequented such gardens when collecting plants for certain experiments. So, of course, all gardens of the like were avoided by all students, and normally, that also included Hermione. However, it being Saturday, and during the day, there wasn't much of a chance of running into the Potions master in that particular garden among the numerous ones littering Hogwarts grounds.

Silently making her way through the rows of rose bushes and deeper into the garden, she found a bench tucked away underneath a weeping willow. Deciding to stop there, she settled herself on the bench, placing her bag on the ground beside her. She took out a small, non-descript book from the side pocket. Hermione then placed the book on the bench beside her while she retrieved the lunch she had tucked away in her bag. She then began to nibble absently on the chicken sandwich before picking up her book and beginning to read.

She could have just as easily taken lunch in the Great Hall, but more than likely that's where Harry and Ron would be. After the incident in Hogsmeade that morning, Hermione wasn't looking forward to running into either of them anytime soon. Then of course there was the fact that she basically had hexed two Hogwarts students. Now

that didn't equate to expulsion, but it did mean a major loss of House points followed by a severe punishment if a staff member discovered what had happened. She truly doubted that Harry and Ron would go running to tell on her, but one never knew.

For a long while she was surrounded with the comforting sound of outdoor silence when suddenly a loud snap, followed by an even louder squawk filled the air. Her head jerked up, and she was greeted with the sight of a black bird lying pitifully on the ground near the snapped branch. Hermione's eyes widened when she caught sight of the poor thing struggling to right itself on the ground. Setting her lunch and book aside, she quickly made her way over to the animal and dropped to the ground. As gently as she could, she took the bird into her hands. That seemed to help the bird untangle itself, and it instantly looked up at her with its piercing dark eyes. Smiling softly, she ran a finger down its breast, brushing against its soft feathers.

"Well, hello there, that was a bit of a nasty fall, wasn't it?" she asked rhetorically.

The bird merely cocked his head to the side and let out a low croak, sitting docilely in Hermione's palm. Rising from her kneeling position, she walked both of them back over to the bench and placed the bird gently in her lap. Breaking off a piece of her sandwich, the young witch then offered the small morsel to the bird seated comfortably on her legs. A clipped squawk escaped the bird's throat as it turned its head away from the offered food. Hermione looked down at the bird, genuinely perplexed as to why it wouldn't take the bit of food. Shrugging, she murmured, "Suit yourself then," before popping the small piece into her mouth.

Hermione continued to eye the bird curiously, still nibbling on her lunch. She couldn't help but be curious about the bird that seemed content to just sit in her lap while she finished her lunch and yet not have any of it for itself. Finishing her sandwich, Hermione brushed away a few stray crumbs and picked up her book once again, content to just have the bird continue to sit docilely in her lap.

As the afternoon wore on, the bird began to wiggle and twist about in the young witch's lap. Hermione tore her eyes away from the book she had been reading and looked down at the bird curiously.

"What's gotten you so excited?" she asked.

In response the bird fluttered its wings and cocked its head to the side before letting out a low croaking sound.

"If you're hungry now, it's your own fault, you know?" she said matter of factly, a small smile curling on her lips.

Again the bird fluttered its wings a bit in response.

"Well, I can't very well read your mind, now can I?" she asked, rolling her eyes heavenward *l've really gone and lost it, talking to a bird as if he can actually carry on a real conversation*. She was pulled from her thoughts when she felt the tiny bird waddle up a bit higher on her thighs before turning its back to her in order to face the book she was holding in her hands.

"I'm sorry; I'm still not following you," Hermione said, chuckling softly.

The bird then leaned forward and began pecking at the book softly.

"You... you want to read with me?" she asked curiously.

Dark eyes turned to stare directly at her. Hermione's breath caught in her throat as she continued to stare down at the small bird in her lap. Licking her lips, she nodded her head, and a sunny smile soon curled on her lips.

"Well, alright then... *Creighton James Ethan Pryce was one of the first wizards to be internationally recognized as a Potions master.*"

So there they were, a young witch and a small bird, soaking up the last of the autumn sun before winter truly set in, never noticing the shadow that slowly began to slither away, keeping this particular new development in mind.

End of Chapter Five

Author Note: Once again thank you to my betas, you really do make the story flow better *Abhijat* is an original character that you may be seeing more of in the future.

Southern's Notes: There's that shadow again! I'm wonder if it was Snape or if the bird was Snape or what. I'm intrigued about the old bloke he went to visit and about the object he received. Looking forward to more.

Next: It's now Sunday, and everyone decides today is a good day to talk...

Confrontations

Chapter 6 of 10

Talking is highly over-rated.

Chapter Six Confrontations

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

A slender arm reached over and jerked the pillow lying next to her head firmly over her ears. Groaning, the diminutive form burrowed even deeper into the bed sheets in hopes of escaping into the cover of sleep once more.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Growling in frustration, Hermione slowly emerged from her little cavern of pillows and blankets, all the while glaring venomously at her familiar, who was seated at the foot of her bed, his head cocked to the side with what could only be considered a satisfied smirk curling on his lips. Yawning loudly, she stretched before letting out a soft, satisfied sigh.

"It's Sunday... You do know that, right?" she asked rhetorically. "Well, I suppose with a wake-up call like that, you're hungry," Hermione said, turning her eyes back toward the Kneazle half-breed.

Crooks' response was nothing more than a soft mew.

Shaking her head and letting out another yawn, Hermione quietly made her way over to the fireplace and flooed the kitchens. It wasn't long before Koki appeared and entered her rooms.

"Mornin', ma'am," Koki greeted shyly; already her large, wide eyes were fixated on Crookshanks.

"Oh, good morning, Koki. Could you please bring Crooks his breakfast?" Hermione asked politely. The young witch couldn't help but laugh at the house-elf's fascination with her cat. If allowed, the two could occupy each other for hours on end.

"Do you be wanting anything for breakfast, ma'am?" Koki asked.

"Yes, please. I'm actually quite hungry this morning. Perhaps some eggs, bacon with a bit of toast... oh, and some orange juice as well, please," Hermione asked politely.

"Of course, ma'am."

Koki then disappeared without a sound before reappearing just as swiftly and silently. She returned with two large silver platters, one containing Crooks' breakfast, which she set down first. The small house elf then quickly crossed the room and set the larger tray down on the desk near the window. Hermione smiled in thanks when she noticed the pot of tea also on the tray and poured herself a cup of the scalding hot black tea.

"You be needing anything else, ma'am?" Koki squeaked.

Taking a sip of the warm, caffeinated beverage, Hermione sighed in pleasure, licking her lips; she then set the cup down and shook her head.

"No, thank you. This is more than enough."

Koki smiled brightly, nodding her head in understanding. She then turned and gave Crooks one last longing glance before disappearing. Hermione just shook her head at the house-elf's antics and settled in for breakfast. Once again, she knew her presence in the Great Hall was probably missed, but she just wasn't ready to deal with Harry and Ron, let alone all the questions that were bound to be tossed her way.

Just seeing those two the other day got me so upset. Walking past them without saying a word was one of the hardest things I've ever had to make myself do. Gods, hexing them like that was wrong... but they just made me so angry, she thought to herself. Hermione listlessly began to push the remainder of her breakfast around the plate, suddenly not feeling so hungry anymore. *Ack, I cannot let just the thought of them do this to me. This is ridiculous; none of this is my fault. Ron was the one cheating, and Harry was the one helping to keep his secret. I've been nothing but faithful to the both of them, both as a friend and a girlfriend.* Suddenly disgusted with the situation and herself, Hermione pushed the tray away, and with a jerky wave of her hand, the tray was gone.

Pulling out a small piece of parchment, Hermione then reached for her quill and began to write out a short note. Finished, she cast a quick drying charm and called for Koki.

"Something is wrong with breakfast, ma'am?" Koki asked timidly, frightened that she had somehow not made her mistress happy.

"Oh, no. No, it was wonderful. I just need you to take this to Professor Hagrid for me."

Koki brightened considerably at this; she then took the folded piece of parchment and disappeared without a sound, leaving Hermione and Crooks alone in the room once more.

Hermione then noticed that Crooks had finished his breakfast and was sunning himself at the foot of her bed. With another wave of her hand, the dish vanished. She then began to strip out of her nightclothes, heading toward the bathroom. Deciding that a shower would be faster, Hermione stepped underneath the showerhead, and a steady stream of water soon began to pour out. Reaching for a bottle of shampoo, she quickly worked it into a frothy lather and went about the task of washing her hair. Finished, she stepped out from underneath the spray. Softly padding across the room, Hermione reached for one of the large bath sheets.

Wrapping the large bath sheet around her diminutive form, she then headed back over to the vanity and brushed her teeth. Finished there, the witch headed back into her room to pick out her clothes for the day. First, she pulled out some undergarments before moving down a few drawers and extracting a pair of low rider blue jeans. In a way, the weekends were a godsend, allowing the students to wear some forms of Muggle-looking clothing. She then pulled out a pale blue tunic-like shirt. It had belled sleeves, hugging her bust and the top of her torso before flaring out and falling over her hips to about mid-thigh. Hermione then let the bath sheet slip to the floor and pool at her feet. She then pulled on her undergarments, which were quickly followed by her jeans. Her shirt followed soon after. Padding across the room, she headed back into the bathroom and seated herself at the vanity.

Casting a few small charms, causing the brush to easily slide through her newly dried locks, she brushed it until it fell around her shoulders in soft waves. Satisfied with the look, Hermione set the brush back down and headed back out into the other room. Crooks was still sprawled out at the foot of her bed, soaking up the morning sun. As she walked past, she ran her fingers across his belly and through his thick fur.

"I've got to go to the library this morning, Crooks, so you'll be on your own for most of the day. I want to get further ahead with some of my reading assignments; I also have some research to do for Hagrid," Hermione explained to the half-breed as she moved about the room, packing up her bag and pulling on her boots.

Giving the room one last glance, satisfied that she had everything she needed, she pulled on her school robes, grabbed her bag, and with that, she was out the door. The gentle click of her boots against the stone steps and the rhythmic sound of her breathing was all that could be heard. It was still a Hogsmeade weekend, but it was still early yet and a Sunday at that. Most of the students would either be in the Great Hall or still in bed. Just as she had hoped, the common room was completely empty. She then swiftly made her way out of Gryffindor Tower and into the main portion of the castle. The stairs seemed to enjoy the positions they were in at that particular moment in time, since none of them moved as she made her way down to the fourth floor.

Entering the library, she greeted Madam Pince, who just stared back at the young witch stoically. Hermione quickly scurried to one of the more secluded tables within the library and away from the frigid librarian. Sighing, she flopped down into one of the chairs and began to spread out her books and parchment across the table. Today, she wanted to get at least three more chapters ahead in her reading for Potions and read up on a few different Transfiguration theories. Then there was her small side project that she was working on for Hagrid.

Deciding it best to get ahead in Potions first, she opened up to chapter six, page forty-five of *Potent Components of Potions Fifth Edition*. Flipping open to the chapter, she found that it talked about different antidotes to varying poisons. *'Bezoar comes from the Persian word, "pá zahar," meaning antidote against poison (pa-cure, zahar-poison). It is a generic term for concretions to be found...'* A loud crash rumbled throughout the normally silent library. Hermione looked up to see a Ravenclaw first year apologizing profusely to Madam Pince as he helped her pick up the stack of books he had knocked over. Shaking her head, she immediately went back to her book.

Almost four hours and ten pages of notes later, Hermione let out a yawn and placed the Potions book back down on the table. Having gotten three chapters of Potions

reading finished instead of the original plan of only two, she decided to skip the extra reading for Transfigurations since she was already ahead by two chapters anyway. Taking out her copy of *'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them'* she soon realized that she was going to need a book with more in depth information. Setting her books and papers aside, she stood up and made her way toward the section devoted to large magical creatures. She began wandering up and down the large aisles until she came across an old and rather thick looking tome. Lugging the large book back to the desk, Hermione was more than surprised to see Madam Pince standing beside the large study table where all of her books and papers resided.

"Is there a problem, Madam Pince?" Hermione asked politely.

"No, but you've been here for a number of hours now. It's almost time for lunch, and you know that *you* are not allowed to miss meals. So pack up your things and drop them off at your dormitory before getting something to eat... and don't let me find that you snuck back in here," Madam Pince said in a no nonsense tone, while sauntering back to her desk near the library entrance.

Hermione's eyes darkened in frustration, but she knew there wasn't any point in arguing with the woman. The Headmaster made it explicitly clear that Hermione was not to ever miss a meal because of studying. Sighing heavily, she quickly packed up her books before exiting the library. Dragging her feet against the stone floor, Hermione slowly walked away from the library. *Well, that's that then. Madam Pince will be on the lookout for me; she might've even cast a detection charm against me trying to hibernate in there... I guess it's back to the rooms then,* she thought to herself and then hitched up her bag higher on her shoulder before making her way back to Gryffindor Tower.

Entering her rooms, she lazily dropped her bag near the door. Slipping off her school robes, Hermione then toed off each of her shoes before tossing herself onto the bed. Crooks cracked an eye open and mewed irritably at being disturbed so rudely. The half-breed stretched lazily before hopping off the bed, only to curl up again in one of the warm sunspots on the floor. Hermione merely shook her head at her familiar's antics. Stretching leisurely, she whispered softly, and a small leather bound book flew to her fingertips. Settling back against the headboard, the young witch decided that lunch could wait... at least for the time being.

The rest of the afternoon and into the early evening was spent reading and nibbling on the sweets she had picked up from Honeydukes the day before. It was about ten minutes to four when she heard a sharp knock at her door. Hermione glanced over at Crooks, who gave her a look as if to say, *"Well, aren't you going to answer it?"* Rolling her eyes in response, Hermione set her book to the side and went to answer the door. Light cinnamon-colored eyes darkened immediately when they saw who was on the other side.

"Hello, Hermione."

"Harry," Hermione answered simply.

"I... I was hoping that we could talk," Harry stammered nervously.

"How did you get up here?" she asked, ignoring his question for the moment.

"Ah, well." Harry's eyes dropped to the floor, a bright flush staining his cheeks.

It was then Hermione noticed that Harry was hovering just a few inches off the ground. It seemed as though he had found a way to get around Hogwarts' way of keeping boys out of the girls' dormitories. Normally, the second a boy's foot hit one of the steps leading up to the girls' rooms, they flattened and became something akin to a spiral slide. Huffing primly, Hermione crossed her arms over her chest.

"What you're doing is against school rules; I should deduct points for this," she said.

"Oh, like you hexing Ron and me in Hogsmeade yesterday wasn't against the rules," Harry said without thinking. As soon as the words tumbled past his lips, emerald-colored eyes darkened considerably before drifting shut and opening again. Hermione's already stiff stature tightened up all the more as she made a move to close the door.

"No, please wait... I'm sorry, that was out of line. Please... I just want to talk."

Hermione eyed Harry warily for a few tense moments. Sighing heavily, she wordlessly stepped back from the door, allowing Harry to come inside. Gliding forward, Harry hovered a moment before his feet gently touched back down onto the ground. The door shut with a soft click, leaving a tense silence in its wake.

"I just want..."

"Well what..."

Both young witch and wizard couldn't help but chuckle nervously as they both tried to speak at the same time. Hermione gestured silently to the two small, overstuffed chairs near the fireplace. A tense silence settled over the room as they both continued to eye the other wearily.

"Ah...well, what is it you wanted, Harry?" Hermione asked softly.

"I just want to talk to you; I mean... I know that Ron and I messed up..." he stammered.

"If you came here to..."

"I didn't come here to defend anyone or to talk about your relationship with Ron. I'm here because you are practically my only family besides the Weasleys... I don't want..."

"Your only family! How dare you call me that? How can you even fit your mouth around such words when you did what you did? I don't care for your reasons, Harry Potter; you knowingly helped him to bed that *bitch* while he was with me," she screeched.

"Hermione, please."

"No... Get out. Get out now. Just the sight of you makes me sick," she croaked.

Emerald-colored eyes began to shimmer brightly with tears. Stretching a hand out toward her, Harry looked at the girl who was once like a sister to him, beginning to truly see what he and Ron had done to her.

"Please," he rasped out, stepping toward her once more.

A loud thump, followed by an angry hiss, filled the room. Crookshanks had positioned himself in front of his mistress. He knew this boy from before; she was always spending time with him and another. He didn't really care for either boy, but if they made his mistress happy, then so be it. However, things now had changed; this boy was making her upset.

That would never do.

Hissing angrily, Crooks extended his claw and sliced right through Harry's trousers as he made to move even closer toward Hermione. Harry looked down into the half-breed's eyes, licking his lips nervously; he made another plea to Hermione.

"I asked you to leave," she said, her voice trembling.

"Hermione, just please..."

"I told you to leave... now!"

A strange glow had entered Hermione's unseeing eyes; her body tightened and became ramrod straight. Concerned for her safety, Harry moved to grab Hermione. That was when the room began to tremble, and the door flew violently open. Suddenly, Harry was propelled backwards and out the open door, which immediately slammed shut after he had passed through.

Panting heavily, Harry didn't have long to contemplate what had just happened because he was soon careening down the spiral slide that was once the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Lying at the foot of what were once again stairs, Harry struggled to his feet and dusted himself off as he righted his robes once more. Casting a longing glance back up the stairs, he knew that it was going to take a lot more than a few kind words to gain Hermione's forgiveness, let alone get her friendship back. As he stumbled out of the common room and up to the boys' dormitories, there was something he couldn't seem to shake off. He knew that Hermione was a very powerful witch, even without schooling, but she had propelled him backwards and sent him flying out the door. However, that wasn't what was bothering him; it was the fact that he couldn't remember whether she had a wand in her hand or not. Shaking it off as nerves, he headed up to his own rooms to share the not-so-great news with Ron.

Back upstairs, the strange light that had entered the young witch's eyes died out, and she then slipped to the floor, unconscious, with a soft thud. The sound of Crooks' distressed mewling was all that could be heard throughout the silent room.

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Severus rolled his eyes heavenward, pushing the remains of his lunch around on his plate. On the weekends, he never took his meals in the Great Hall, though the Headmaster could be very persuasive when he wanted to be. He was unable to hold back the sneer that curled on his lips as both the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall were engrossed in conversation. Those two were absolutely hopeless at times. Shrugging it off, his eyes moved about the Great Hall. He allowed a small smile of pride to cross his lips as they settled on his House table before it melted away just as quickly.

What caught his attention was the absence of Miss Granger at the Gryffindor table. Normally, something as such wouldn't have been so noticeable, but for Miss Granger's behavior from the evening before and the fact that both Mister Weasley and Mister Potter were seated far away from everyone else. Add to the fact that if their body language was any indication, they wanted to keep it that way.

Even Mister Longbottom wasn't privy to their conversation.

Something was definitely going on with those three. Ever since their first year, they had been as thick as thieves, those three; even during the height of the war they seemed to stay close, not allowing the stresses or even the occasional deaths bring them down. It was then he caught the Headmaster's eye. They silently agreed that it was time to have another talk. Deciding that he'd had enough, he pushed his plate back and made to leave the table. In a swirl of inky robes, he exited the Great Hall, the Headmaster's eyes following him with each step.

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Sounds of stone pushing, moving and grinding against one another filled the otherwise silent corridor. It wasn't long before the stone settled, and the spiral staircase appeared. Sure footsteps made soft scuffling sounds against the stone as they made their way toward the Headmaster's office.

"Ah, Severus," the Headmaster greeted softly.

"Albus, what is it you wanted to talk about?" Snape asked, getting right to the point.

"I was wondering how that... project of yours was going."

Severus immediately stiffened and sat up just a bit more in his chair.

"Things are... progressing. I was able to acquire a book, which I believe will be most helpful; it may not be the key piece to the puzzle, but I think it's another step closer," Severus answered, intentionally omitting his visit with Abhijat. The Headmaster eyed Severus carefully before a bright smile curled on his lips.

"Well that's wonderful, then. However, it's still early in the year, and there are numerous lessons to conduct and projects to complete..."

"What are you trying to say, *Albus*?" Severus stressed the older man's name in suspicion.

"I think you might benefit from some... assistance..."

"Absolutely not, Headmaster!"

"Now, don't go getting all riled up, Severus. Just listen to me first. This project of yours is necessary, but it is also a large undertaking. I can understand not wanting to hand it over to anyone else, but I think in order to keep things running smoothly you should have some help. Whether it is with the research itself, or marking and grading the younger years' papers, I know you like to do everything yourself, but... I think it's for the best."

"And just who did you have in mind?" Severus asked, sighing heavily.

"Hermione Granger," the Headmaster said softly.

Dark eyes widened before they began to glitter dangerously.

"You're joking, aren't you?"

"No, Severus, I'm not. You are in need of some assistance, and Hermione is more than capable of helping you with what you require. I also believe that this little side project will be good for her right now."

"Really, Albus. Even with me needing assistance, as you call it, she is a nosy, spoiled, glory-seeking Gryffindor. Let alone the fact that she runs around constantly with Weasley and Potter, causing nothing but trouble," Severus griped.

"Come now, Severus. You and I both know that Hermione has never broken a school rule unless it was with good reason. She's also one the brightest witches to ever grace Hogwarts' halls. There's even rumor that her mind rivals that of Rowena Ravenclaw."

"You're not going to let up on this, are you?" Severus asked tiredly.

"No, I'm not," Albus answered, a sickeningly pleased smile gracing his lips.

Severus merely rolled his eyes heavenward.

End of Chapter Six

Author's Notes: Up next there will be a conversation and a game of wizard chess... Thanks to CocoaChristy for the beta read!

Christy's Notes: Wow, Hermione scared me there for a second! Looks like Snape will be getting an assistant...whether he wants one or not.

Black

Chapter 7 of 10

Conversations and Wizard Chess

Broken Enigma

Tygerlily

Angelusblood@yahoo.com

Chapter Seven Black

Leisurely, she made her way down the long and otherwise empty corridor. A soft mewling behind her caused her to pause in her steps, turning; she faced her familiar and raised a brow in response.

"Well, c'mon then. You know you're not really allowed to be out and about, especially while classes are in session," Hermione said.

Crooks mewled in response; he then trotted right up alongside her. Stopping in front of the familiar, large, ornate gargoyle, the password tumbled from her lips, causing the statue to spring to life. The half-breed hissed in agitation before moving to sit behind his mistress' legs. Hermione just rolled her eyes in response. "*C'mon, Crooks,*" she cooed softly before making her way up the large, spiral staircase. The sounds of paws scuffling softly against the stone reassured her that Crooks was indeed following her up and into the Headmaster's office.

A smile curled on her lips at the sight of the Headmaster's nose pressed into a book as he absently nibbled on one of his sweets. Fawkes' gentle song caused Dumbledore to look up. Spotting her and her familiar at the door, he couldn't help but smile at the sight of them; silently, he waved both of them further into the large office. Crooks mewled in response and trotted deeper into the office and up the stairs that lead right to the desk that was raised on the dais. Finding the large plush cushion opposite the bottom of Fawkes' perch, Crooks curled up right on top of it and settled in for a nap.

"Ah, I see your Crookshanks has taken a liking to his spot here," Albus said, smiling.

"So it would appear; and to think he used to hiss and snarl near the door at the mere sight of Fawkes. Now you'd think they're the best of friends, with the way the two of them act around one another," Hermione said, laughter coloring her voice.

"Well, come sit. What is it I can do for you today, my dear?"

Hermione's lips quirked in response. She then dropped a sack onto the Headmaster's desk. Albus' eyes widened in delight when he caught sight of the Honeydukes' insignia scrawled along the side.

"When I was in town yesterday, I caught sight of them, and I know all too well about your penchant for Muggle candies. I also just wanted to do something nice for you. You've been really good to me, so... just... thank you," she said softly.

Albus merely smiled in response and popped one of the sugary sweet, tangy candies into his mouth. Hermione couldn't help but giggle at the almost euphoric expression that had now settled on the Headmaster's face.

"Hermione, tell me, how was your trip to Gringotts yesterday?" Albus asked curiously.

"Oh, it went just fine; like I said yesterday, I deposited half of what my parents sent me and decided to keep the other half of this package for myself. There's the Hogsmeade weekend next month, and then, of course, there's Christmas. I may need to take out a bit more by then, but I doubt it... especially with all that has happened." She trailed off.

"I won't claim to know what exactly occurred between you, Ron and Harry, nor am I asking. Just know that you will always have a place with me, no matter what happens," Albus said softly.

"Thank you, sir. I suppose it's just that everything that seemed so certain before isn't any longer. It's a bit disconcerting, I guess."

"Things will sort themselves out, dear. They always do, you know? Now, how about a game of wizard's chess; it's been awhile since you and I have spent some time together," Albus said brightly, hoping to lift his young charge's mood.

"Oh goodness, you know I'm absolutely terrible at that game, Headmaster."

"Come on, indulge an old man," he said, his eyes twinkling brightly with laughter.

"First off, you're not old, but because I can never say no to you, I'll play."

"Wonderful," Albus exclaimed happily. With a wave of his hand, his normally cluttered desk cleared, and in its place was a beautifully stone-carved chess board with equally exquisite pieces.

"Wait. Why don't we make this game a bit more interesting?" Albus asked slyly.

"What did you have in mind?" Hermione asked curiously.

"If you win, you get half my lemon drops..."

"And just what do you want, if you win?" Hermione asked, knowingly.

"Just half of your chocolate, which you bought in Hogsmeade yesterday," Albus answered, a bright smile curling on his lips.

"Not on your life, Headmaster," she said giggling.

"It was worth a try," Albus said, a slight pout curling on his lips.

Hermione rolled her eyes heavenward at the Headmaster's antics; it was rare that he teased with her like this while classes were in session. Pulling her chair up closer to the desk, she waited for Albus to make the first move.

"Pawn to E3."

Hopefully, she'd win at least one game.

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"Five points from Ravenclaw; now get moving," he hissed out angrily.

Professor Snape was in top form. It was only late afternoon, and he had already taken a total of thirty points from all four Houses. Normally, his Slytherins got off with a curt warning and a swift jerk of the head. However, today he was in no mood to deal with any of the children. Snarling softly, he continued to stalk through the outer corridors in search of students on their way back from Hogsmeade. Many loitered just outside the school, wanting to put off coming back onto the grounds down to the very second. It was then he caught sight of Potter and Weasley on their way back from their own trip into town.

Probably drunk and sugared up on sweets from Honeydukes and those damned Butterbeers the Three Broomsticks is infamous for serving he thought to himself. It was then he noticed their rather sullen demeanor and soft, yet urgent tones in which they spoke to one another. About to come out from behind one of the large stone pillars, he halted in his steps when he saw a young Hufflepuff saunter up to the Weasley boy. Severus was taken aback when he saw how the young girl tried to plaster herself to Weasley's side. The last he'd heard, Miss Granger was with the youngest Weasley boy... not this young thing. Moving closer, he realized just who the young girl was. Her name was Samantha Reese. *A pureblood if I recall correctly, more middle class than anything else... I believe her father works for the Ministry. That's right, now I remember where I know her from. Her father works for the Department of 'Muggle Interaction'... Fourth year Hufflepuff. Gods, she's an abysmal potions student. What on earth is he doing with her?* he thought to himself. Quietly, he decided to try and get closer.

"Hello, Ron," Samantha purred, as she moved to place her hands on his shoulders. Ron's hands immediately came up to stop her movements, and he placed her hands back at her sides. Taking a step back, he moved closer to Harry before responding.

"What is it you want, Samantha?" Ron asked.

"Oh c'mon, don't be like that. She knows that we've been together... We don't have to hide it anymore. I mean besides all that, now you don't have to keep playing the part of the dutiful boyfriend to that Mudbl..."

"I wouldn't finish that statement, if I were you. Finish it and you'll wish that facing Hermione be the least of your problems," Ron bit out harshly.

Samantha's eyes widened in surprise, but she recovered quickly and smiled beautifully in response to Ron's statement. Clumsily, she swished her hips and sauntered up even closer to him.

"Forgive me, love. I didn't realize that you still harbored such *feelings* for the girl. No worries though, I'll be sure to *work* all of that rubbish right out of your system," she said with a saccharine sweetness.

It was then that Ron exploded at the audacity of the girl in front of him.

"Look, I've already told you that what we were doing was wrong! I never had any real interest in you. You were... convenient, at best. I'm sorry if you thought it was more, but it wasn't. I've never wanted to be with you, Samantha. You were a... you were a quick piece and nothing more. I want to be with Hermione. I love Hermione... Now you need to leave me alone. I'm going to fix things, and when everything's settled, I will be with Hermione." Ron then stalked off into the castle without a backward glance.

Samantha's eyes began to glitter with unshed tears; Harry merely sent her a sympathetic glance before turning to jog after Ron. Severus watched as a torrent of tears began to slip down the young girl's cheeks before she, too, ran back into the castle. Shaking his head slightly, he couldn't help but wonder if he'd stepped into one of those Muggle teen soap operas.

For Merlin's sake, that was ridiculously dramatic. Although it does explain Miss Granger's actions as of late, it still doesn't explain that rather impressive display of wandless magic. He then quietly and swiftly made his way back down toward the dungeons. Dunderheads, the both of them. She may be a Gryffindor, but she is still a very intelligent witch. What the hell were those two thinking when they thought they could keep something like that a secret from her? Well, they weren't thinking, now were they? Although that's not much of a surprise either, he thought to himself, chuckling softly.

Pleased that he didn't have to attend dinner that evening, he settled down in his private library to catch up on some reading. It was then that he began to remember his own childhood and experiences at Hogwarts. The teasing and name calling he'd received for spending time in the library then, rather out in the Quidditch pitch. It wasn't until he truly befriended Lucius that the taunts stopped, and even then, he knew there were a few that continued to talk about him. Of course, none of it was ever to his face; no one dared to cross Lucius back then. However, he had done a fair job of creating a persona for himself. He no longer needed Lucius' protection like he once did. Sighing heavily, he realized he probably wouldn't get any reading done at this rate. Even though she was a Gryffindor and a Muggle-born, Hermione Granger was probably one of the most able witches he had ever had the pleasure of teaching... Not that he'd ever tell her that.

The Potions master cursed himself, for once again his mind had wandered back to a witch that he'd thought more about in the past two days than almost the past five years since she started her schooling here. Growling in frustration, he left his rooms and headed out of the dungeons. Unsure of what to do with himself, he decided to do what he did best, patrol the halls in search of miscreants... although Albus would more than likely just call them students. Twenty minutes and fifty points later, Severus quickly came to realize that this particular activity wasn't the most productive. He had classes all day tomorrow, so it wouldn't do to leave the castle on an impromptu excursion.

Severus suddenly felt in the mood for a game of wizard's chess.

He quickly made his way to the second floor and greeted the large gargoyle curtly. The password tumbled from his lips, and he was soon riding the spiral stairs upward. However, the sight that greeted him caused him to pause in his footsteps.

There sat the Headmaster and Miss Granger, locked in a heated game of wizard's chess, as the paintings sat quietly cheering for both Gryffindors, former and current. Hermione was seated comfortably with her back to her Potions professor, gleefully sucking on a lemon drop, while Albus was laughing joyfully and picking at a small hunk of chocolate.

It was then the Headmaster noticed a rather reluctant Severus hovering near the entrance. A bright smile lit up his face as he waved the young man to enter. Knowing that there wasn't any way around it, Severus slowly entered the room. He sunk down into one of the large chairs near the fire. Albus continued to give him a toothy grin, while Hermione smiled tentatively at the Potions master now seated across from her.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your company, Severus?" Albus asked happily.

"I came here to speak with you, but I can see that you are busy..."

"Nonsense, my boy. Come join us. We're just finishing up a game. You shall play next."

"I don't think..."

"I'll hear none of it." And with a wave of the Headmaster's hand, the board was wiped clean.

"Headmaster..."

"In fact, you and Hermione shall play. I've much to do and have spent far too much time procrastinating as is." The Headmaster then turned to face Hermione. "Forgive me, my dear, but I've spent the afternoon playing games and eating sweets when I have a school to run. However, I'm sure that you and Severus will fare nicely without me." And with that, the Headmaster sailed out the door. Smiling to himself, Albus leisurely made his way down the corridor to Minerva's office. Whether Severus liked it or not, he and Hermione would be working together, and now was as good a time as any to become acquainted with one another.

Back in the office, Severus was silently cursing the Headmaster a thousand times over.

"Professor, you don't have to stay if you don't want to. I mean, I know the Headmaster was just trying to be nice about things. I understand if you have better things to do," she said softly.

Severus merely eyed her for a moment before taking the seat the Headmaster recently vacated. With a wave of his hand, the chess board was set up once more; he gave the young Gryffindor a rather expectant look.

"Ah, well... what'll it be? White or black... sir?" she said softly.

"Black... of course."

End of Chapter Seven

Next: Harry and Ron do their homework...

Late Night Expeditions

Chapter 8 of 10

Late night expeditions should be avoided.

Broken Enigma

Tygerlily

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Chapter Eight Late Night Expeditions

I'm going to kill him if he doesn't stop moaning and groaning about how all of this could have happened. What in Merlin's name did he think was going to happen? That Hermione would find out that he was practically shagging that harlot, Samantha, and she'd be fine with it? "Oh, yeah, go on Ronald, have at her! Give it to her good, then!" I don't bloody well think so. Gods, and I'm just as much of a moron for going along with it all. The second I saw Ron with her in the shed that day, I should've gone and told Hermione. Although that would've been betraying Ron, so either way I was screwed. I was damned if I did and damned if I didn't.

It was then Ron's whining penetrated his thoughts.

"Gulping gargoyles, Harry! Hermione was a real fright yesterday. I've never seen her so heated about anything. She's a lot angrier than I originally thought," he murmured softly to himself.

"Well, what on earth did you expect, Ron? You cheated on her, and I helped you... sort of, anyway. She's not going to welcome either of us back with open arms, and that's if she ever does," he finished sadly.

It was then Ron noticed just how Hermione's self-inflicted estrangement was affecting Harry. Crossing the room, he moved to sit down next to the boy and laid a gentle hand on the young wizard's shoulder.

"Hey, we'll get our girl back. It's just going to take a bit of time, that's all. Although, did something happen to bring all this on? I mean you weren't this upset about everything earlier today, or were you and I was just being too thick-headed to notice?" Ron asked jokingly.

"Yeah, something happened," Harry replied sullenly.

"Well, are you going to share? What happened then?" Ron asked, concerned.

"You know how I sort of disappeared after lunch? Well, I didn't exactly come back here to lie down for a bit. I came here to see if I could get Hermione to talk to me. Do you remember that charm she taught us back in our third year to get around Hogwarts' rule about no boys in the girls' dormitories? Well, I decided to put it to good use. It took some doing, but finally she invited me inside. We talked a bit but then..."

"But then what?" Ron asked anxiously.

"I don't rightly know. Suddenly everything just backfired. I said how she was some of my only *real* family and how I didn't want to lose her. She didn't take too kindly to that statement, asking me how I could have lied to her the way I did if she was supposedly so important to me. Then, the next thing I know, Crookshanks is hissing and snarling at me, and before I knew it, I went flying out the door," he finished sadly.

"You mean that mangy cat of hers attacked you? And what do you mean, *you went flying out the door*? Please explain that one to me... or do I not want to know?" Ron asked.

"I think Crooks was just protecting her. We were having quite a bit of a row. I think he was just making sure that I didn't raise a hand to her or something. As for flying out

the door, I mean just that. Something really... odd happened, and the next thing I know, I was careening out the door and sitting on the stairs. Then, the door just slammed shut."

"Whoa," Ron said in awe.

"Whoa is right."

"Bloody hell. What are we going to do? I've never seen Hermione this angry... and we've really upset her in the past, but this is decidedly different. I really have no idea what to do to make it right again. I've even thought about owling Mum about all this."

"Please tell me you didn't," Harry whimpered.

"Course not, I've only thought about it. I have every intention of getting Hermione back; the way I see it, Mum never has to know that this ever happened," Ron reasoned.

Harry merely nodded in agreement, and they lapsed into a comfortable but contemplative silence. Sighing tiredly, Harry noticed a book on a nearby side table, the title causing his eyes to widen and full blown panic to set in.

"Oh, no! How could we have been so stupid?"

"Oh, c'mon Harry, we've been through this. I know that..."

"What? No! Our potions assignment. Remember that essay Snape gave to us in advance so that we wouldn't have anything to worry about during the Halloween Feast? Although the release of it early probably had to do with Dumbledore, he did give it to us almost two days early. If we don't have it for him tomorrow morning, you know he'll have an absolute fit," Harry explained frantically.

"Oh, damn! I remember now... well, can't we just do it now?" Ron asked reasonably.

"C'mon, let's have a look at the actual assignment."

The boys then dashed up the stairs to their rooms and began rummaging through their books as quietly as possible, not wanting to wake the other occupants of the room. Harry let out a small yelp of joy when finding the assignment stuffed idly between two of his Potions texts.

"C'mere, Ron, I've found it."

"Alright then, what's it say?" Ron asked anxiously.

"It's a six inch essay on...Jobberknoll Feathers and their basic uses in potions."

"Well, six inches isn't all that much to write. I'm sure the books we've got here will be enough to get what we need. Besides, it's only one assignment. Even if we don't get the best mark this go round, we can always pull it up on the next one."

"I guess. Pass me that text over there," Harry asked quietly.

Flipping directly back to the index, he quickly skimmed the pages listed to have information on Jobberknoll Feathers. After a few minutes of blatantly copying down the information directly from the text, they realized they came up two and half inches short.

"Argh, you've got to be kidding me...isn't there anyway we can, I don't know, stretch it out some more?" Ron whined.

"No, not unless you know anything other than what the book has told us. The only person I know that would have more information other than the book itself would be..."

"Hermione, I know... Well, it's not like we can just walk up to her door and ask her for help with this assignment. Normally, we might get a stern talking to and then her help with the answers, but not this time. So what are we supposed to do now?" Ron asked.

"We need to finish this... so I guess it's off to the library," Harry said reasonably.

"Uh, Harry, it's nearly ten o'clock, and the library closed up at eight. It's two hours after closing and it's curfew. We might be Prefects, but we aren't the only ones, and it's not our night to be patrolling the halls. I really don't like to be the voice of reason, and I may not want to hear that greasy git's mouth tomorrow, but I sure as hell don't want to end up in detention tonight."

"Look, we need to get this assignment finished and don't worry so much. We won't get caught... I just think it's time to break out my father's cloak; I think this qualifies as an emergency... don't you?" Harry asked, a sly smile curling on his lips.

"Alright, mate... let's do this. But if we get caught, I'm never going to let you hear the end of it."

Harry quickly collected the two rolls of parchment and charmed quills. He then motioned Ron to join him underneath the cloak, and the two silently made their way out of the dormitories and Gryffindor Tower. Although on the seventh floor, both boys made it through the gauntlet of staircases and to the fourth floor without incident. Once inside, they removed the cloak and slowly moved about the large space.

"So what are we looking for, exactly?" Ron asked.

"A book..."

"I figured that much."

"If you'd let me *finish*, we're looking for a book that is about birds and how they're related to potions. Don't forget, the essay is on Jobberknoll *Feathers*," Harry said, slightly irritated.

"Well, Mister I-Know-It-All, lead the way," Ron bit out sarcastically.

"What bug crawled up your arse? I don't want to be doing this just as much as you, but without Hermione, this is our only option. It's not like it's going to be a regular thing. We won't forget our assignments again, and hopefully, we'll both be able to patch things up with Hermione soon enough."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. C'mon, let's get this finished."

Splitting up, the boys quickly went to work scouring the isles. After coming up empty, Ron came across a small and rather old looking leather-bound book. Extracting the small book from the case, his eyes lit up happily when he caught sight of the title, *Fowls: Possible Magical Properties*.

"Hey, Harry, come have a look at this!"

"What is it?"

"*Fowls: Possible Magical Properties*. This book has to have something."

"Well, let's have a look then," Harry said, taking the book from Ron's hands. He then flipped to the index and quickly scanned the pages with information on Jobberknolls and their feathers. His eyes practically lit up at the plethora of information he found. Both boys quickly copied down the information they needed and returned the book back to its rightful place.

They cast a quick drying charm on the inky parchments and folded them back up to place in their pockets. Another small charm could be cast before class in the morning to smooth out the creases. Both knew from past experiences that Snape was about both presentation and information. Making sure that they left nothing behind, Harry reached for his father's cloak. Once they were both safely underneath, they then headed back out of the library and into the empty halls. The boys easily navigated their way back toward the labyrinth of staircases before encountering a very serious problem.

The gentle scuffling of paws hitting against stone sounded throughout the corridor just before Mrs. Norris rounded the corner. She let out a low mew and trotted toward the boys hidden underneath the cloak. Ron's eyes widened at the sight of the cat, knowing that Filch wouldn't be too far behind. With a pitiful whimper, he turned to tug on the hem of Harry's shirt only to find that the boy was already a few steps ahead of him. He let out a horrified gasp as he realized that the invisibility cloak was slowly slipping up over his back and his head, leaving him partially visible. Letting out a muffled curse, Ron tried to scurry forward and back up underneath under the cloak, only to stumble over his own feet and fall gracelessly to the floor.

Harry whipped his head around at the sound of scuffling behind him, only to find Ron laying flat, face down on the floor. He quickly turned around in an attempt to get Ron back up underneath the cloak when Filch's oily accusation caused him to pause in his steps.

"Well, what do we have here? A student out of bed after hours, and a Gryffindor Prefect no less. C'mon then, I'm sure Professor Snape will have a fitting punishment for you."

Sighing heavily, Ron climbed to his feet, and with his head hung low, he listlessly began to follow Hogwarts' caretaker down into the dungeons. All Harry could do was watch helplessly until the two were well out of sight. Cursing himself for not paying closer attention, he slowly began to make his way back up to Gryffindor Tower. Slipping out from underneath his father's invisibility cloak, he carefully folded up the priceless object and placed it back into his trunk. Harry then looked around the room, noticing that only Neville's bed was occupied. It seemed as though Seamus had once again abandoned his own bed for that of another. Shaking his head, Harry let out a frustrated curse. Normally, he and Ron never got so careless while out after hours. Although, now, with the end of the war, everyone had slowly but surely began to relax, let alone his own distraction with his falling-out with Hermione. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his Potions assignment and muttered a quick charm to smooth out the creases. He then slid the parchment into one of his Potions texts. Kicking the foot of the bed half-heartedly, he knew that Filch had probably taken Ron to Professor Snape and knew that there was nothing else he could do.

All Harry could do was climb up into his bed and wait until Ron returned.

... :: ...

Down in the dungeons, Filch was practically giddy at the prospect of the punishment the Gryffindor boy would probably receive. It was already weeks into the semester, and the detentions he so looked forward to were few and far between. He turned to look back at the Weasley boy dragging his feet behind him. Catching the young boy's eye, he sneered in response and continued to trudge through the dimly lit corridor. Argus Filch never did care for any of the students, with the minor exception of Slytherin house, and this redheaded Gryffindor was no different than the rest.

Stopping in front of a large wooden door, he lifted up his lantern before knocking heavily. It wasn't long before a muted *Enter* could be heard. The hinges of the heavy door squealed and creaked in protest as Filch entered the darkened classroom.

"Professor Snape, I'm sorry to be botherin' ya at such a late hour, but I've got a student here for ya; found him wandering about near the seventh floor," Filch rasped.

The furious scratching of a quill against parchment, the three occupants' steady breathing, and Mrs. Norris' soft mews were all that could be heard throughout the classroom before Professor Snape looked up from the assignments he had been grading.

"Thank you, Mister Filch; I have plenty of work around here that needs to be done." With that, Filch was dismissed. Severus' eyes couldn't help but widen fractionally at the sight of Ronald Weasley hovering nervously near the door. He felt the corner of his lips twitch as he quelled the urge to smirk at the frightened young man. The Potions master hadn't realized that he'd be able to play with the young Weasley boy so soon. Normally, he would've been less than pleased at the interruption of his quiet evening. However, in this case, he was more than willing to make an exception.

"Ah, Mister Ronald Weasley... I can only imagine what asinine purpose had you out and about after hours. However, you may save your excuses for your own Head of House. It is still rather early yet; only a quarter to the hour. As you can see, there are numerous cauldrons that could use some cleaning... Although, all can be scrubbed up with a quick *Scourgify*; no, I think an impromptu trip into the Forbidden Forest for some potions ingredients will be quite the fitting punishment," Severus said enigmatically.

He then swept down from the raised dais and headed toward the closet, which held many of the instruments needed for his classes. When he emerged, clutched in his hands were a pair of thick dragonhide gloves, an old worn-out school robe and a basket. Severus dropped these items into Ron's hands as he swiftly made his way past him and toward the door.

"Are you perhaps waiting for an engraved invitation?" Severus asked silkily.

This prompted Ron to scurry past the Potions master and into the hall. Severus merely rolled his eyes before pulling the door shut and warding it behind him. Then, without a word, Severus soundlessly made his way up and out of the dungeons with Ron scrambling to keep in step with him. Once outside, the chilly night winds nipped at their cheeks.

"I suggest you put on that robe and pull on those gloves, Mister Weasley. I did not give them to you just so you could hold them in your arms all evening," Severus advised as he made his way toward the Forbidden Forest.

Ron nodded to himself and quickly pulled on the threadbare robe before pulling on the dragonhide gloves while running to keep up with the swift-paced professor. They silently made their way past Hagrid's hut and through the trees. Soon enough, they arrived in a rather large clearing filled with greenish looking plants.

"Here you will *carefully* collect as many of these plants as I deem fit. I have given you those gloves with good reason; we are now surrounded by *Atropa Belladonna*, or Deadly Nightshade as it were. As you can see, it is not exactly all that esthetically pleasing, but it is also quite poisonous. However, it's a key component in a number of poisonous potions, one being known as *Belladonna*; obviously named for the plant from which it's made." With that the Potions master fell silent.

Looking around the large clearing, Ron sighed heavily before sinking to his knees. He then began to gently pluck the plant and place each branch into the basket with care. If too many of the leaves were damaged, he knew that the greasy bat would probably have a fit and have him out here until sunrise.

Severus just continued to observe the youngest Weasley boy silently. Although he had given the boy the gloves to protect against the poisons within the plant, it wasn't a one-hundred percent guarantee that he'd walk away unscathed. Even if the barest minimum of contact is made between the plant's natural oils and a person's skin, the end result is quite grotesque. Hopefully, the boy wouldn't heed his warnings and would end up spending at least a week within the infirmary. Though Nightshade was a poisonous plant, it wasn't in anyway deadly... not in its pure plant form, anyway.

When Severus looked up from his musings, he couldn't help but smile as Ron brushed a few fallen locks out of his eyes.

Oh yes, if only all detentions could be so amusing.

End Chapter Eight

Author Note: As for the mentions of Belladonna it is an actual plant but I don't know too much about it. So if any of the minimal information I provided is inaccurate in anyway, I apologize to all of you botany experts out there.

Next: We catch up with Hermione...

Withdrawal Symptoms

Chapter 9 of 10

Hermione has trouble adjusting. While, Albus and Minerva have a chat.

Broken Enigma

Tygerlily

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Chapter Nine Withdrawal Symptoms

No one's here and I fall into myself This truth drives me Into madness

Five days, three hours, twenty-three minutes and fifteen seconds... sixteen seconds...

The gentle tick of the clock and Hermione's rhythmic breathing were the only sounds that filled the small room. It was about twelve o'clock noon on a Wednesday; ordinarily she would be dining in the Great Hall. However, today wasn't an ordinary day; to be honest, the past three days had been nothing but one disaster after the other. Sighing heavily, she carelessly tossed her quill down, causing ink to splatter across the thin pieces of parchment and the desk's glossy finished top. Crossing her arms over her chest, she began to pace the room restlessly before tossing her body onto her bed. The past few days had really been nothing but painful questions, mournful glances, gossip and snickering behind her back...

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Monday morning was really a sign from the gods of the many small catastrophes to come. The Trio's first class, oddly enough was a double Potions with none other than Slytherin. Hermione couldn't help but groan as she woke up to Crookshanks' incessant mewing. With a heavy sigh, she dragged herself from the warmth of her bed to Floo the kitchens for breakfast. It was the usual for her familiar and some plain toast with scalding hot black tea for herself. Even though she had spent the entire weekend in seclusion away from most everyone, she still didn't feel as though she was ready to jump back into the swing of things.

Harry's visit the day before had really left her shaken. Her reaction to him and his words had been rather violent and completely uncontrolled. Whether Hermione liked it or not, she was going to have to go to Dumbledore about her recent influx of magic. More than likely, it could be attributed to the emotional rollercoaster that she was now aboard, but it was better to find out for sure. Taking only a few small nibbles of her toast, she gulped down her tea and headed into the bath for a quick shower. Still emotionally exhausted from this weekend's happenings, Hermione merely cast a drying charm on her hair and pulled it back into a sleek ponytail. She then slipped into her uniform and pulled her school robes over them. Gathering her books, she made sure that the needed books were tucked safely away in her bag. With that, she gave the room one last lingering glance, for once wishing that Monday hadn't arrived.

Hermione made sure that her door was locked and warded behind her before she slowly made her way down the spiral staircase, which led into the Gryffindor common room. Letting out a sigh of relief at the sight of only a couple of first years huddled in a corner looking over their schedules, she knew that she'd have to deal with both Harry and Ron sooner or later. She'd rather it be later than sooner. Squaring her shoulders, she hitched up her bag a touch higher on her shoulder and stepped out into the corridor. Once she reached the ground floor, Hermione couldn't help but hold her breath as she passed the Great Hall. Thankfully, the large double doors never opened, and she was able to scurry past without incident. She swiftly made her way down into the dungeons before coming to a halt in front of the Potions' classroom door.

It was early yet, but class was due to start within fifteen to twenty minutes, so the door was thankfully unlocked and open. Silently, she headed inside and settled into her seat. More than likely, they would be brewing a base potion today; the Jobberknoll Feather assignment was due today, and that particular ingredient would probably have a starring role in today's base. Hermione carefully removed the six-inch essay from the confines of her bag and placed it atop her desk. Her eyes critically scanned the parchment to make sure that there weren't any creases, up turned corners and/or ink smudges. Satisfied that her essay was up to par, she settled in and waited for class to begin.

The sounds of chatter and the muffled scuffling of feet soon filled her ears as the students began to trickle into the room. Hermione offered Neville a small smile, causing the boy to smile in return and slip into the seat next to her. Harry and Ron soon trailed in silently after a quiet, solitary Slytherin. Both boys were forced to take seats directly behind Hermione instead of beside her, as they were occupied by Neville Longbottom and Lavender Brown, which Hermione was blessedly grateful for. It wasn't long before everyone had arrived and was seated, including Malfoy and his two bodyguards, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Hermione," Ron whispered, giving her shoulder a gentle poke.

Sighing silently, Hermione grit her teeth in response, hoping that silence would detour Ron from trying to communicate with her any further. However, this is was Ronald Weasley we're talking about.

"Hermione," he whispered again.

Her nostrils flared as her eyes fluttered shut; she was still bound and determined to ignore him. All the while, Harry was wisely keeping to himself. The run-in he had with her yesterday was enough to let him know that now was not the time to be attempting to open the lines of communication. Although, no matter how much he tried to tell Ron that this morning, it didn't seem to penetrate his thick skull. Rolling his eyes heavenward, Harry sent up a silent prayer to whatever deity would listen, that Hermione wouldn't kill Ron.

"Hermione."

Placing her palms flat on the desk, Hermione was about to whip around to face the youngest Weasley boy when Snape swooped into the room with a bang in a swirl of inky robes. He swiftly made his way up to the raised dais and surveyed the room with a cool detachment. 'Well, it's quite clear that the illustrious "Golden Trio" have yet to resolve their differences. Considering Miss Granger's murderous look and Potter's and Weasley's uncomfortable expressions, perhaps today's lesson might be just this side of amusing,' Severus thought to himself.

"We will be continuing our lecture from this past Friday. The probability and possibility of using birds within the art that is potions was our topic. You were given an assignment on the Jobberknoll and its feathers," Severus said, as he began to slowly make his way around the room collecting the pieces of parchment.

He collected Hermione's without comment. However, the oddity went unnoticed as he collected Harry's assignment from him, but, in turn, made a scathing comment about Ron and his detention the evening before.

"Ah, Mister Weasley, I believe I received your assignment last night. A prefect wandering the halls after hours and breaking into the library to complete an assignment that should have been completed days earlier; truly a dreadful piece of work it was at that," Severus said silkily.

"I never meant to hand in that assignment last night, and you know it! It was because I was picking those blasted plants for you that it fell out of my pocket, and you took it then and there. It wasn't fair, and you know it!" Ron exclaimed, his face beet red and his eyes blazing with a vicious fury.

Severus' already dark eyes darkened considerably and began to glitter dangerously. He pulled himself up to his full height and looked down at the boy as if he were nothing more than the mud on his shoes.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for showing disrespect for a teacher," he said crisply.

The Gryffindors couldn't help but let out a small groan of disapproval and disappointment as Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins had a good chuckle at the loss of points and the anger that was still very evident on Weasley's face.

Once all the papers were collected, Severus strode back up to the front of the room and up to the raised dais. Tossing the papers onto the top of his desk, he swiftly turned back around to face the room.

"Today, we will be working on a truth serum, and the main component, of course, is the Jobberknoll feather. Now, if you did your assignment, and you did it correctly, brewing this base potion shouldn't be a problem for you. Now, although we are creating a truth serum, it is not nearly as strong as Veritaserum, which of course you all know is used by the Ministry." With a flick of his wrist, a short list of ingredients and instructions appeared on the boards in front of them.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get moving!" Severus bit out harshly when none of the students made a move to get their areas prepped.

The class jumped in response, but was soon moving about collecting any and all the items they needed. A gentle silence settled over the room as each of the students was absorbed in preparing the different ingredients for the base. Severus began to wander slowly through the classroom, silently observing each of the student's attempts at the potion.

"During the first stages of brewing, a very light, almost opaque, azure color should be emanating from your cauldrons. This mist should contain very minute flecks of silver, if your base has been done correctly," Severus said as he moved to inspect each of the base potions.

Draco smirked with pride as Severus praised his base potion and awarded Slytherin House fifteen points for a job well done. However, he merely nodded at the results of many of the other Slytherins' attempts at the base. Coming upon the Gryffindors' in the classroom, he merely murmured under his breath before moving onto the next person. When he came upon Neville, Severus surprisingly gave the rather nervous Gryffindor a "It's close, but it could be better," before moving onto Harry and Ron. With Hermione ignoring him, and Harry not being much help in trying to help him with Hermione, Ron had forgotten to dip the feather into a water and herb mixture before dropping it into the potion. This in turn caused the base to become basically useless; the thick mist floating above his cauldron was a dull robin's egg blue with large black flecks.

"Mister Weasley, are you illiterate in some way that you cannot follow simple directions? The instructions clearly state that you are to prepare the feather before dropping it into the potion. Now, judging from the horrific color of the mist above your base, it is clear that you did nothing of the sort. This is absolutely appalling, and I will not have it my class." With a flick of his wrist, the cauldron was empty and the mist gone.

"What with your behavior last night and your performance in class today, you might want to think about taking more time out to study. Merlin knows you can use all the help you can get. In fact, I think after dinner this evening, you ought to spend the evening with me... in detention," Severus drawled before making his way back up to the front of the classroom.

"Greasy bat," Ron murmured under his breath.

Severus paused on his footsteps and swiftly turned to face the class, his robes whipping around his body before settling once more.

"I suggest you bite your tongue in the future, Mister Weasley. Twenty more points from Gryffindor and detention with me for the rest of the week. Now, Mister Weasley, you've already lost your House forty points within one lesson and detention for the rest of the week for yourself. Would you care to continue?" Severus asked, his eyes ablaze.

Ron looked as though he was about to push the Potions master even further. However, at the sight of his fellow Housemates' glares and the Slytherins' snickering, he bit back his reply and sunk down rather low into his seat. Severus eyed the Weasley boy a moment longer before turning and heading back up to the raised dais.

"Class dismissed; bottle and label your bases. I want them on my desk before you leave."

With that, the class went about the task of cleaning up their work areas and bottling and labeling their potions. Hermione quickly went about the task of cleaning up her area, putting her books away and bottling her base. She then scurried up to Severus' desk to drop off her base before she bolted out the door. There was a good chance that if she lingered, both Harry and Ron would try to talk to her once more. That was something she just wasn't ready to deal with.

Severus took all of this in with watchful eyes.

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A soft, insistent mew jarred Hermione from her thoughts. She couldn't help but smile as Crooks crawled up onto her stomach and settled himself underneath her chin. He then began to purr and nuzzle her neck comfortably. Hermione giggled softly and ran a gentle hand through the half-breed's thick fur. Sighing heavily, she then removed Crooks from her belly and rolled over onto her stomach. Crookshanks mewled in an offended response before sauntering off to the opposite side of the room.

Spotting one of her Transfiguration texts lying on the floor next to the bed, Hermione couldn't help but remember what a disaster that class had been as well. Unlike in Potions, seats in Transfigurations weren't really assigned, so it was basically first come, first serve, seating-wise. However, her attempt to sit as far away from both Harry

and Ron had completely backfired.

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It was early afternoon, just after lunch on Tuesday, when Hermione was leisurely making her way to Transfigurations. Today they were to begin their lessons on Vanishing Spells with the use of vertebrates. Arriving at the classroom, it was clear that most still hadn't made their way up from lunch yet, which suited the young Gryffindor just fine. Heading to the front of the classroom, she settled herself next to another quiet Gryffindor girl named Rachel Barksdale. They both shared a smile before each went back to their own musings. From what Hermione could remember, Rachel's father was a wizard and her mother, a Muggle, making her a half-blood. The two had studied together on occasion, and both shared a love of books, although Rachel's interest didn't even come close to rivaling Hermione's.

Soon enough, the rest of the class began to trickle in, and before anyone could make a move to take their seats, both Harry and Ron commandeered the seats right behind Hermione and Rachel. Rachel smiled cheerily at both boys while Hermione continued to keep her eyes forward. Before either Ron or Harry could attempt to say anything to Hermione, Professor McGonagall swept into the room with a confident and regal air. The students' chatter slowly began to diminish as McGonagall waited for the class' attention.

"Good Afternoon, today we will be spending our time practicing the skill of making an animal invisible and visible once more. Now this shouldn't be too difficult for those of you who did the reading. For those of you that had trouble with it, at least attempt the spell before seeking help," McGonagall stated before a small frog appeared in front of each of the students.

With that, the class then began to make the frog disappear from sight. McGonagall observed the class with a watchful eye. It was clear, after a few minutes, that most of the class was still having trouble with this particular spell...all except Hermione Granger. The older woman allowed a small smile to touch her lips; as she watched, the young Muggle-born witch was able to have the frog shimmer from sight.

"Wonderful, Hermione, that was executed perfectly," McGonagall murmured as she began to move about the room.

Normally, Hermione would have beamed in response to the offered praise. However, she merely offered her Head of House a small smile before turning back to the project in front of her. McGonagall noticed the stiff smile right away, but after a moment, wrote it off as a bit of stress. 'Hermione always did have such high expectations for herself. She's probably just stressed about schoolwork, although she and Mister Weasley and Mister Potter seem to have had a falling-out. Perhaps that is it? Well, I'm sure they'll get themselves sorted soon enough,' she thought to herself with a small smile.

The Transfiguration professor continued to make her way slowly about the room, offering a bit of advice and helpful hints along the way. It was when she is closer to the front of the room once more that concern for a few of her students began to set in. Both Harry and Ron were having a lot more difficulty with the assignment than usual. True, both boys were intelligent in their own right. However, like most adolescent boys, they had a tendency to focus more on sports and girls than their schoolwork, which was why Hermione was a beautiful balance to the trio. In fact, it didn't even look as though she was making an attempt to help either boy. Although things like that in class were really against the rule, most professors let things like that slip by. It was Hermione's endearing nagging that really kept the boys on track academically instead of always focusing on the next Quidditch match.

Hermione's stoic face and Harry's and Ron's desperate expressions were great cause for concern. It was then that Minerva made a mental note to mention the trio's odd actions to Albus. She then turned her back to them in order to help Neville. The poor boy was having quite a time getting the entire frog to disappear; all but the poor animal's hind legs were invisible.

Now, with McGonagall's back turned, Ron took this as his opportunity to get Hermione to talk to him. Harry gave Ron a look and slowly shook his head from side to side before mouthing the word "No." Hermione had made it more than clear that she just wasn't ready to try and work things out with either of them. However, Ron was desperate to talk with Hermione again, even if it was only a flimsy attempt at getting the answers from her.

"Hermione," Ron whispered desperately.

Again, just as she did in Potions, Hermione did her best to ignore the incessant whispers and annoying pokes to her shoulder. She knew that if she turned around now, she'd probably end up exploding at him, which would only cause a scene and disrupt the class. Then there was also Rachel; though she remained silent, the poor girl had sunk down so low in her seat that it was a task just to see above the desk. Ron took notice to none of it; yes, he had hurt Hermione, but she had found out about that last week on Friday, and it was now Tuesday of the next week. Surely that should have been enough time for her to calm down enough to be willing to talk... right?

Hermione grit her teeth at the feel of the constant poking at her back. Curling her fingers into fists, she felt the beginning strains of anger flow through her fingers as a few gentle sparks began to spit and sparkle near her fingertips. Her eyes painfully fluttered shut as Ron's annoying pokes turned into a more insistent shaking of her shoulder. Hermione's eyes snapped open as she whipped around to face the annoyance.

"Ronald Weasley, why can't you just leave me alone? I've made myself unequivocally clear that I have no desire to speak to you at this moment in time. No matter how much you attempt to coerce me into working things out with you, it will not happen! It's not my fault you decided to go and sleep with that slut, now is it?" Hermione shrieked loudly, her body trembling.

A deafening silence settled over the classroom, but was soon marred by the sounds of glass shattering. Many of the glass items littering the room suddenly burst, causing numerous shards to shimmer brilliantly as they rained down onto the floor. When Ron finally got the nerve to make eye contact with Hermione, just like the rest of the class, his eyes widened in shock. Hermione's normally soft cinnamon-colored eyes now had a more luminescent quality to them and bright red and silver sparks fluttered about her fingertips.

The normally loud and boisterous magical classroom had gone deathly silent. Professor McGonagall quickly called an end to the class and ushered all but the trio out of the room. She quickly made her way over to the infamous three before settling her attention on the two boys first.

"Mister Potter, Mister Weasley, I'd like both of you to return to Gryffindor Tower now. I want you both to go straight there and do not, I repeat, do not make any detours, nor should you leave until I have come to speak with you both. Understood?" When she received dual nods in agreement, Minerva sighed and inclined her head, indicating that they both may take their leave.

The boys sullenly gathered their belongings and left, but not before giving Hermione one last lingering glance.

"Miss Granger, gather your things; I think it best you come with me," she said softly.

With that, Hermione silently collected her books and followed Professor McGonagall to the headmaster's office.

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Suddenly frustrated, Hermione heaved her body off of the bed and stalked over to her desk. Her eyes wide and wild, she glared at the contents strewn on top furiously before she sent all of it flying off the desk, causing it all to tumble gracelessly to the floor. She then let out an enraged scream before slipping to the floor tiredly. Hermione

sniffed softly as she tried to keep the tears at bay. Because of her sudden outburst the day before, Dumbledore had excused her from classes the rest of the week. However, her private lessons with him were to intensify, and she was only allowed a limited amount of access to the library. Otherwise, she was only allowed in Gryffindor Tower or the Great Hall. He had even gone so far as to temporarily take her off of prefect duty rotation, which hurt her most of all.

It had been a long time since she had truly lost control like that. Dumbledore suggested that with the fallout among her friends, her magic was now a bit unstable, as they were tied to her emotions. In the end, Hermione had to agree. She knew that it was going to be difficult trying to work around Harry and Ron, but she truly hadn't realized how much of a time she'd have trying to rein in her emotions.

Sighing heavily, she tossed herself back onto her bed before silently reaching out towards the small bookcase tucked in the corner of the room. She reverently ran her hands over the front and back covers of the book before opening up to the marked page. Hermione settled back against the headboard and smiled slightly when she felt Crooks crawl up beside her and rest his head in her lap.

'Thing will sort themselves out eventually... right?'

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A comfortable fire crackled and burned within the well-used hearth as Fawkes murmured a sweet song to the setting sun. Albus was settled into the large and plush chair behind his desk while Minerva had settled into one of the seats across from him.

"What is it you wanted to speak to me about, Minerva?" Albus asked quietly.

"I'm concerned; as you know, Hermione had that... incident earlier this week and, well, I think somehow both Mister Potter and Mister Weasley are involved. Mister Weasley seemed quite desperate to just get her to talk to him, which I know that has never been a real problem in the past. I'm worried," she said softly.

"Ah, I was hoping things wouldn't turn out this way. It seems that while in actuality Mister Weasley was supposed to be faithful to Hermione and their relationship, he went and sought out company elsewhere. For what reasons exactly, I do not know. What I do know is that Hermione discovered Mister Weasley's indiscretions this past Friday. The night of the Halloween feast, to be precise, and ever since then... well, tensions have been high," Albus explained.

"Well, that certainly explains quite a bit. It even makes Hermione's... magical outburst, as it were, much more understandable. Oh, but Albus, her powers are tied to her emotions. What are we going to do? No matter how much they're not her fault, we can't have things like that happening in the classroom. Hermione's prowess with wandless magic is nearly unheard of," Minerva said.

"I know, I know, I've already spoken to Hermione about all of this. As you know, I have already given her the rest of the week off, and we have once again stepped up our private lessons. What with these few extra days, the weekend, and the extra practice we've been getting in, it is my hope that Hermione will be able to participate normally in her classes by early next week. I think this time away from the boys will be good for her."

"Time away might be good for her, but what of the boys? Although both are intelligent in their own right, they seem to be struggling greatly without Hermione there; I mean, all three have been practically inseparable from the beginning. She has almost always been there, hovering in the background, giving them the support they need," Minerva said wisely.

"That is very true, but as I said, this time away will be good for Hermione, and I think it will be good for the boys as well. It is their fifth year, and in reality, in a little over two years' time they will be of age and will have to make their way in this world. Now with Voldemort gone and nothing more than a distant memory, they can do so freely no matter what their bloodlines are. As much as I'd have loved to see them remain as they were, I think it is time they began to strike out on their own. Minerva, all three are brilliant in their own way. It's time they became individuals," Albus said wisely.

"I suppose you're right, but you do know that those three didn't take on that madman and live to tell the tale for nothing. Those boys will more than likely be absolutely relentless in their pursuit of Hermione. Although it was Mister Weasley that was dating her, it is clear that both think of the girl as theirs, believe me. They are quite possessive of her."

"I will speak to them if the problem persists, but I do hope that "

Conversation was suddenly interrupted when the hearth flared to life with brilliant green flames and the face of Madam Pomfrey.

"Excuse me, Albus, Minerva, but I think you had better come down to the infirmary."

"What is it, Poppy?" Albus asked.

"It's the youngest Weasley boy... I think it best you both come have a look at this."

"We're on our way," Albus replied.

End of Chapter Nine

Next: Hermione spends some time with Hagrid.

Xavier

Chapter 10 of 10

Hermione goes for a walk.

Angelusblood@yahoo.com

I apologize in advance for the long delay

Chapter Ten Xavier

Dried leaves and twigs cracked and splintered underneath her booted foot as she silently made her way through the dark forest. It was already well past sunset, and the comforting blanket of night had already settled over Hogwarts. Dressed in Muggle jeans that sat low on her hips along with boots, forearm guards and gloves similar to

those parts of the Quidditch uniform, she felt no need to worry about some of the more dangerous species of flora and fauna residing within the forest.

Even though the beginning of the week had been nothing but stressful, a sense of peace was slowly returning to Hermione's way of life. In retrospect, the exemption from classes and prefect duties really helped her to focus on getting her emotions and magic back in order. For the past two days, a good amount of Hermione's time was spent either in the headmaster's office, the library, or her rooms.

It was now late Friday evening, exactly one week since she discovered the boys' betrayal. However, this time she wasn't crying her eyes out in the Astronomy Tower. This evening, she was out with Hagrid, traipsing about in the dark forest, running various errands for the headmaster. Hunkering down, Hermione methodically went about the tedious task of gathering the varying wild mushrooms that grew in the woods at the base of many of the larger trees. Sighing tiredly, she moved to wipe the moisture from her brow when she heard an amused chuckle coming from behind her. Hermione quickly turned and jumped to her feet, wand at the ready. Her wand immediately dropped back down to her side and a bright smile lit up her face at the sight of her long-time friend. The little witch then brushed herself off before throwing herself into the centaur's arms.

"Xavier, how are you? It's been so long since I've seen you," Hermione said excitedly.

"It's good to see you, too; we missed you this past summer. You said you'd be spending it with Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley, right? Did you enjoy yourself?" Xavier asked.

"Oh, yes, I did spend it with them and it was... nice. I don't think I'll be doing it again anytime soon though. It's just that I missed being here and seeing everyone," she said, trailing off into an awkward silence.

Xavier merely nodded silently in response; it was obvious there was something wrong with his young human friend, but he knew when to keep silent, and now appeared to be one of those times.

"Well then, tell me how your classes have been coming along. The O.W.L.s are this year, are they not? Although, I'm sure if they were to place that test in front of you now, you'd pass with flying colors," Xavier said, chuckling good-naturedly, and it only seemed to intensify at the horrified look that now graced Hermione's face.

"Don't even joke about something as serious as that. I still have all of this year's work to complete, along with reviewing the previous year's as well. Then, of course, it's not just the written tests themselves. There are the practical portions and "

"Goodness, Hermione, calm down. I was only teasing you, girl. Besides you worry far too much. I'm sure you'll do just fine. You're usually *at least* two to three chapters ahead of everyone else as is, and don't even try to tell me that you've forgotten your lessons from previous years."

It looked as though Hermione was about to argue when suddenly she stopped short; the teasingly stern look on Xavier's face was enough to force a small giggle from her lips, and the mood lightened considerably.

"So, besides your classes progressing splendidly as usual I might add what else has been going on? I heard from Hagrid that that friend of yours, Ronald Weasley, got himself into a spot of trouble. A bit of an accident with some... deadly nightshade, I believe.

"Oh, I'm not exactly sure as to what happened. I just know that he had to serve a detention with Professor Snape," Hermione stuttered quietly.

"Alright, what's going on?" Xavier asked point blank.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"I mean you stuttering and stumbling over what happened to one of your best friends. For years, you could tell me just about every minute detail as to the actions between you three, and now, you've given me such a brief synopsis that not even a house-elf would accept it at face value."

"It's... complicated," Hermione said, sighing heavily.

"Well, why don't you try anyway? I've never seen *you* at such a loss for words," he said teasingly, hoping to lighten the mood a bit, and was pleased when he was rewarded with a small smile for his efforts.

"Ah, well, it started last week. Wow, I can't believe it was only a week ago... Anyway, as I was saying, it started last week, just a few hours before the Halloween feast, actually. I had finished my studies for the day and decided to start getting ready. Normally, it wouldn't have been such a big deal, but this year they were making a dance out of it and then of course, this year I had Ron to go with... well, I was excited," she said.

"Well, I'm still not seeing what's wrong. What happened?" Xavier asked.

Hermione sighed heavily before stepping back to lean against the trunk of a nearby tree as she slipped down to the ground. Tucking her feet underneath her, she gestured for Xavier to get comfortable as well.

"Like I said, it was only a few hours before the Halloween feast..."

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It was just a few short hours before the Halloween feast and the fifth year Gryffindor girls' dormitories were in absolute organized chaos. Lavender and Parvati were running about the room, chatting happily as they continued to go through their expansive collection of formal robes and jewelry. Hermione couldn't help the small smile that curled on her lips at the sight that greeted her as she looked in the mirror. She had grown into a lovely young woman over the summer between her third and fourth year and now it showed, as the formal maroon robes hugged and accentuated her young curves. The Gryffindor's hair had also finally come into its own, falling around her shoulders in soft, silky curls.

"Gods, Hermione, you're going to knock that Ronald Weasley's socks off when he finally gets a look at you," Lavender said.

"You do look gorgeous tonight, Hermione, but I bet you anything that's not all you're looking to knock off," Parvati chimed in, a sly grin curling on her lips.

"Parvati!" Hermione exclaimed loudly.

"Oh, c'mon, don't tell me that sometimes you don't want to just walk right up to him and rip his clothes off just before having your wicked way with him. The years have been good to that boy. I mean if he wasn't your "

A rather large pillow had somehow made its way right into Parvati's face, effectively cutting her off from saying anymore. Lavender couldn't help but have a giggle at her friend's expense.

"You two are absolutely horrible, I swear I don't know why I tell either of you anything," Hermione said with a smile.

"Hey, where is your boy anyway? The last I saw him was at breakfast," Lavender said, her eyes already back to pursing a collection of bracelets.

"Oh, yeah, he's usually come looking for you by now," Parvati intoned.

"Hmm, he's probably just off with Harry. Maybe even down by the Quidditch pitch. Probably procrastinating getting dressed. He did always hate having to wear dress robes," Hermione murmured to herself, a small smile curling on her lips.

Looking around the room, it was clear that both Lavender and Parvati would be held up in there until the very last few moments before the feast. Taking one last look in the mirror and giving herself the once over, she was pleased with what she saw and decided to head out early in search of her wayward boyfriend. Lavender instantly noticed the other girl's intent on escaping and promptly placed herself in front of the door.

"Where on earth do you think you're going?"

"Like I said, Ron is probably down at the Quidditch pitch procrastinating as usual. I intend to go get him and make sure that he bathes before he gets in those robes of his. You know how difficult he can be sometimes," Hermione explained.

"I think not. It's been raining and you know how the pitch gets all muddy. If you go down there now, you'll ruin your robes, not to mention those shoes," Lavender said.

"I'll be fine; I can go through the locker rooms and out through the stands."

"Alright, but get your boy and head straight back here. Oh, and be careful of the younger years, they've been running around the dormitories like mad, making a mess of everything," Lavender griped.

Hermione merely laughed as she slipped out the door and down the stairs. She quickly made her way through Gryffindor Tower and out of the castle. Mindful of her outfit, she easily made her way across the grounds and toward the pitch. It wasn't long before she reached the base of the stadium and began to make her way toward the locker rooms. It was then she heard lusty sounds emanating from the utility shed. Sighing tiredly, she decided to quickly break up the heavily petting couple and send them on their way with nothing more than a warning before continuing on with her search for her wayward boyfriend. Hermione unlocked the shed with a quick 'Alohomora.' The door easily swung open to reveal a couple wrapped up in a rather intimate embrace in a shadowy corner. Hermione couldn't help but flush brightly, clearing her throat awkwardly. The couple paused in their movements and looked toward the now open door.

It was then Hermione caught sight of a very familiar head of red hair.

"Ron," Hermione whispered brokenly, her eyes already glossy with unshed tears.

The next few moments were filled with a heavy silence as Ron Weasley stared shocked and open mouthed at his girlfriend. He quickly got his bearings and pulled himself off of the young girl in front of him and tried to make his way toward Hermione. Before he could even move to defend his actions, Hermione turned and took off running. Hesitating for only a moment, Ron barreled out of the shed and took off as well, all the while calling her name frantically. Suddenly his footsteps came to a halt as he watched Hermione head straight for the dark forest and disappear into the trees.

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"Wow," Xavier said.

"Yeah," Hermione replied in kind.

The two just continued to sit in a companionable silence, just listening to the sounds of the forest.

"I could break his legs for you," Xavier suggested in a conversational tone.

Hermione turned and looked at her friend, an incredulous look adorning her face before she noticed the slight smirk curled on his lips, causing her to burst into a fit of giggles.

"Although the sentiment is greatly appreciated, I'd rather just leave Ron alone. He's not worth the trouble it would bring you. You've got enough of your own problems. Which reminds me, how are things on your end?" Hermione asked.

"Things have gotten better, what with the end of the war; all the opposing factions are slowly beginning to dwindle, and the centaurs are slowly but surely beginning to come together again. There's a lot that needs to be done... but we're getting there. So, tell me, are you going to be spending your holiday at the castle this year?" he asked with a smile.

"Oh, yes, it looks that way."

"That's good. I'm sure Hagrid will be quite pleased. He'll have someone to take with him when he goes off in search of 'the perfect tree,'" Xavier teased.

"Oh, Merlin! I swear, I went that one year and I thought my finger tips were going to fall off. I think we spent hours tromping about looking for a bloody tree. Of course, most every single one we passed was more than perfect, but they were never quite good enough. I don't think I could do that again even with all the warming charms in the Wizarding world," she said with a laugh.

The two continued to laugh and trade stories for some time until Xavier finally began to make his goodbyes.

"It was so good to see you again, Hermione," Xavier said sincerely before heading back into the darkness of the wood.

Sighing softly, Hermione turned and gathered up her earlier findings and began to head off in the opposite direction, back toward the edge of the forest. It wasn't long before she could hear loud, lumbering footsteps not too far off in the distance. She then heard Hagrid's voice call out for her. Concerned, she broke into a run, heading in the direction his voice seemed to be coming from. Breathing heavily, Hermione suddenly came to a stop when she saw Hagrid tending to an injured unicorn. She immediately looked to the gamekeeper for instructions.

"Good, you're here, Hermione. Poor little thing has hurt its leg. We've got to get her up and walkin'. If we can get her to the stables, I'll be able to fix her up soon enough, and she'll be on her way again in no time."

The two soon made short work of wrapping the gentle beast's leg and got her up and walking again. With a few soft words and gentle strokes along its flanks, Hagrid was able to slip a length of rope around the unicorn's neck to lead her out of the forest. They were soon walking along the forest's edge and were headed toward Hagrid's hut. Hagrid had some meat for his supper in one hand and the length of rope connected to the unicorn in the other. He sent Hermione and Fang off with a quick jerk of the head. He then made his way for the stables only a short distance away. Hermione opened the door to the hut, letting the large dog inside first before following.

Once inside, she quickly deposited herself in a chair and propped her feet up. Hagrid soon entered the house and offered the young witch some tea, which she happily accepted. Hermione then went about stripping off the gloves and forearm guards before settling back in her seat once more.

"So what did you find for yourself on this outin'?" Hagrid asked curiously as he bustled about.

"Hmmm, nothing terribly exotic this time around; mostly just a variety of mushrooms, a few wild grasses, and a bit of a variety of non-poisonous plants. I mean, I know I'll put all of it to good use, but I was hoping to find some new things to experiment with... Oh! But you'll never guess who I ran into earlier," she said excitedly.

"Oh, yeah, who?" Hagrid asked curiously, as he set down two cups of tea.

"Xavier!"

"Are you kidding me? I haven't seen him in Merlin knows how long. Well, you know things got a bit chaotic just before the ending of... well, you know. It's a shame though, centaur against centaur... but I've heard whisperin' of things finally quietin' down a bit," he said.

"That's what Xavier said, too. He said that basically most of the opposing factions have been dismantled and that things are slowly returning to normal. It's weird to sometimes remember that it all ended just a year ago," Hermione murmured softly, bringing the steamy liquid to her lips.

"Too right, seems like so much longer."

The two then lapsed into a comfortable silence; the crackle of the fire and Fang's breathing were the only sounds that filled the small room. Hermione soon finished her tea and began to take her leave. Hagrid handed her a note, just in case she ran in to Filch during his rounds. Stepping out of the hut and into the night air, Hermione began to leisurely make her way across the grounds and back toward the castle.

Weaving her way through the outer corridors, she was suddenly bombarded by a rather large fluttering object. Hermione cried out in surprise and tumbled to the floor, as did the bird. Muttering a soft curse, Hermione looked up and eyed the bird warily before recognizing that it was the same bird she had met the other day in the garden.

"Well, hello there... What on earth are you doing inside the castle?" she murmured to herself quietly.

The bird merely squawked softly in response before trying to hop away, when suddenly a loud and raspy *meow* could be heard from just down the hall around one of the corners.

"Mrs. Norris! Damn, that means Filch isn't too far behind." Hermione swore softly as she caught sight of the large cat's shadow out of the corner of her eye.

Turning back toward the bird, she was surprised to find it gone. Her eyes quickly scanned the hallway in search of the bird. However, another *meow* resonated throughout the space, this time much closer. Hermione quickly gathered herself up and took off in the opposite direction. Even with the note she procured from Hagrid, there was still a very good chance Filch would try to drag her to the dungeons for detention with Hogwarts' resident Potions master. Hermione continued to run down the halls and up the stairs, all the way up to Gryffindor Tower; only when she reached the Gryffindor painting did she come to a screeching halt.

Hermione cleared her throat as politely as possible. The fat lady snorted softly before cracking an eye open. Sleepily, the painting asked for the password, and Hermione quickly replied, not even waiting for the painting to fully open before slipping inside. The common room was unsurprisingly empty, save for the occasional wandering ghost. Trudging tiredly up to her room, Hermione kicked off her shoes at the door and slowly made her way toward the bed, leaving a trail of clothing in her wake.

Standing at the foot of the bed, Hermione gave a large stretch before quickly slipping off her current top and bra. She then grabbed the larger shirt lying carelessly at the end of the bed and slipped it on. Unbuttoning the top two buttons of her jeans, Hermione then tossed herself into bed and quickly fell into a dreamless sleep.

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"He's a disgusting, slimy, conniving bastard! That jerk *knew* exactly what he was doing when he had me picking those bloody weeds as punishment. I swear he's not fit to be a teacher. He shouldn't even be allowed interaction with anyone in civilized Wizarding society!"

"Uh, don't you think you're over-reacting just a little bit? I know this is Snape we're talking about, but he did give you those gloves for a reason "

"Are you seriously taking that snake's side over mine!?" the boy screeched loudly.

"No, of course not, but it really isn't about taking sides, is it? Snape is a bastard and we both know it, but he'd never intentionally physically hurt either of us. This thing with Hermione has both of us distracted," Harry said reasonably.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Still doesn't stop this bloody itching, and Merlin's balls, I'm disgusting, Harry. I mean just look at me. I'm covered in this... junk. You can't mean to tell me that that jerk had no idea that this would happen if I touched those stupid weeds," Ron whined.

Harry's lips quirked in response as he took in his friend's appearance. He had waited up for Ron to return after being caught by Filch the other night. It had been almost four hours before Ron finally made it back to the boys' dormitory. Of course, before he even made it fully past the door, he was bitching about how Snape had him traipsing about in the dark forest. When Harry finally got the youngest Weasley boy to settle down, it was clear that there was something slightly off with his appearance, which Harry immediately brought to his friend's attention. A bright red flush seemed to have covered Ron's face. However, due to Ron's ranting and raving, both just wrote it off as a reaction to his emotions.

It soon became apparent that they were both wrong. Within a matter of hours, Ron's skin had taken on a grotesque pigment, a mixture of his natural skin color and any number of shades of red. His skin began to itch uncontrollably, which was soon followed by painful, oozing boils sprouting up all over his already uncomfortable skin. Even with being immediately rushed to Madam Pomfrey, Ron's skin was still a mess.

"I really want her back," Ron whispered sadly.

"We'll get her back... It's just going to take some time, that's all," Harry replied.

"Yeah, I know, but it just hit me. That this will be the first Christmas for us where not everyone is worried about when and if You-Know-Who is going to show up, and Hermione might not be there to share it with us."

"Don't think like that. We're barely into November, and even if Hermione is cross with us, she wouldn't not come and at least see your mother."

"Uh, yeah about that... I think I might've done something I shouldn't have," Ron admitted worriedly.

"Do I *even* want to ask?" Harry asked, and his eyes fluttered shut as if he were in pain.

"Well, I was just frustrated with everything! I didn't know what to do. Hermione doesn't even want to look at me, let alone talk to me. You wouldn't and still aren't doing any better than I am when it comes to that. Fred and George are absolutely worthless when it comes to stuff like this, and Ginny may be my sister but she's also a girl... I just didn't know what to do "

"Ron! Just what did you do?"

"I wrote a letter to Mum."

"You did what?"

"I wrote my mum a letter; I didn't know what to do!"

Harry couldn't help but groan quietly as he leaned forward to drop his head into his hands.

"What did you say, exactly, in this letter?" Harry asked, his question muffled by his hands.

"Visiting hours are long over, Mister Potter," Madam Pomfrey advised as she came in to check in on her one and only patient.

Harry smiled slightly before nodding to Ron; they exchanged a few more pleasantries before Madam Pomfrey ushered Harry out and left Ron to his thoughts.

As Harry made his way back toward Gryffindor tower, he could only hope that Ron had told his mother the truth. He loved the youngest Weasley boy like a brother, but sometimes he'd tell little white lies to save his own arse, especially when it came to avoiding Molly Weasley's wrath.

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"How's that...project of yours coming along, Albus?" Minerva asked quietly, as she sipped at her tea, her eyes staring into the roaring fire that snapped and crackled within the hearth.

"It seems to be progressing nicely; it's quite a bit of work for one wizard alone to complete, but I believe I've found the perfect solution regarding that aspect of it. However, we both know that is not what you came here to talk about," the headmaster replied, a slight smile curled on his lips.

"Yes, well, I will admit I am concerned...very concerned actually, about Hermione. I thought she was...handling herself much better. It's been so long since an outburst of that magnitude," Minerva said and smiled slightly before setting her cup and saucer down on a nearby table.

"I wouldn't worry too much. There's been a slight upheaval within her little world, which is the cause for the incident. Mister Weasley's and even Mister Potter's actions have caused a rift that just cannot be easily repaired with a few kind words and gestures here and there. It's a shame, but the three of them are drifting apart; it's all part of growing up, I'm afraid. They've been through so much together, it's about time they began to come into their own," Albus said wisely.

"I suppose you're right, it's just so disappointing to see a friendship such as theirs deteriorate that way."

"They may find their way back to one another just yet," he said with a smile.

End of Chapter Ten

Author Note: To answer HeroVillian's question over at Fanfiction[dot]net - yes there is quite a bit of mystery going on but there will be romance. Patience is a virtue.

Next: Hermione and Severus begin to work together... finally!