

Razor's Edge

by Keppiehed

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

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A/N: I would like to thank my beta, Melisse, for all of the hard work she has done on my behalf.

Hermione Granger was at her limit. The stress of always having to be perfect was building up in her chest like fizz trying to escape a pop bottle. She had a free period that was for studying, and she slipped into the girls' bathroom. If she didn't do something...anything...soon, the feeling would become unbearable. It was making her shiver and clench her teeth. Her scalp prickled, and she fought the cold fingers of tension and panic. She wondered if she was having a breakdown. She couldn't allow that to happen; she had to regain control of herself.

When she was absolutely sure that she was alone, she locked herself into a stall and took out a razor blade.

Hermione had been carrying it around for weeks, and now the time was right. She took the cold metal in her right hand, and it glinted at her with a soulless wink as she gently applied it to her left wrist. Her hand shook, but she wasn't afraid, just a little nervous. She moved her hand in a ghost stroke first, planning it out. She was going to cut across the wrist, and not down the arm. Her intent was not to hit a vein and kill herself, but to relieve some pressure. She took a deep, steady breath and gently cut.

Hermione's breath hissed between her clenched teeth. She had barely made any cut at all, but she could feel it. The blade was sharper than she had realized. It stung and went cold. Bright pearls of blood collected along the edges of the line, if you could call them that...pearls are pure and precious, and this was already deepening into something darker. Hermione watched, detached, as the skin became pinker along the edges. She licked her lips, which had become dry, daring herself. *Might as well do it again.* She raised the blade and made another cut, just below the first, a little voice urging her to exert more pressure.

This cut hurt as she made it. The cold bite of it made her wince, but that was the point, after all. The blood that was already there from the first cut welled quicker in to the second and began to flow a little. Hermione had not anticipated that blood might actually run. She grabbed some toilet paper to staunch the wound. It kept seeping; it was deeper than she thought. All of a sudden, she realized that she might get into some trouble if anyone found out about this. She took out her wand and performed a healing charm.

The blood continued to drip down her arm. Hermione increased pressure, but wasn't panicked about the damage from the cuts. She racked her brains. Why were the cuts still there? Had she gotten the words wrong? She concentrated. Making absolutely sure that she had the incantation correct, she performed it again and lifted the toilet paper.

Two parallel lines remained, one deeper than the other, unmistakable in what they were. It seemed a beacon to the world of her failure. All anyone had to do was glance at her arm and see her deepest secrets, a badge that she was carrying for all and sundry to gawk at, to talk about and become afternoon gossip. Hermione felt beads of sweat

break out on her forehead. Why wasn't the spell working? She'd gotten it right, she knew she had. Her legs felt a little weak, and she didn't know how all this had come to such a point. Hermione Granger was supposed to be a girl who was in control of everything, who was confident and knew it all. And now look at her. Shame briefly flooded her, but she clamped down on it. There wasn't any other way. She had to fix this now. What were her options?

Madam Pomfrey might be able to help, but Hermione was reluctant to chance it. It was likely that Pomfrey was not familiar with Muggle psychological problems, and Hermione could lie about how she'd acquired the cuts, but if it ever happened again, Pomfrey wouldn't buy it. Hermione needed to know why her charms were not effective. She needed to go to someone whom she could trust. Someone who dabbled in the darker side of things.

The problem with that was that her friends were definitely not into the dark side of anything. She loved Harry and Ron, but they couldn't help her with this. They wouldn't understand her compulsion. She barely understood it herself, and it would hurt them. They didn't know that the things that drove her were also the things that isolated her. So that left her with people she didn't trust, but who knew things she wanted to know. Her mind automatically turned to residents of the House of Slytherin.

Hermione's mind struggled with itself. She didn't want to have any dealings with people from that house! They were untrustworthy, and she didn't want them to have anything to hold over her head. Who could she possibly ask, Draco Malfoy? She recoiled at the idea of going to him with anything.

A thought whispered, as if from far away, "You could ask Snape."

"No!" The thought shocked her, as if someone else had thought it, and not her own brain.

"Yes. He is skilled in many areas. The Dark Arts, Potions... he would know what to do."

"I hate him!"

"Fondness is not required for this. He has knowledge you require. Seek him out."

Hermione could not refute this logic. "He has no impetus to help me. Why would he? He could turn me in."

"Turn you in to whom? As you said, he doesn't care enough to turn you in. The worst to happen is he'll say no. You have no other option. Swallow your pride and go, or you will be discovered."

Hermione realized that Snape was her only choice, however repugnant. Besides, the thrill of her illicit action was starting to wear off. The high of it had initially numbed her to the pain, but now her arm was starting to burn. She sighed, gathered up her stuff, and left the bathroom.

Unfortunately, she realized with a start, her free period was almost over. She had spent more time in the bathroom than she had intended to. Cutting had been cathartic, but Hermione didn't know if it was worth the benefits. She had to go to her next class, and it became obvious that she would have to hide her arm from her classmates for the rest of the day. It wasn't an obvious injury in an obvious place, but Hermione was conscious of it, and she was grateful when the day was finally finished and she could go to the empty Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and speak to Snape.

Her heart was thudding as she approached, and she felt more nervous than she should have. "Stop being so silly," she told herself sternly. Then she was there.

Snape was seated at his desk, scribbling on parchment and scowling as usual. He didn't look up at her slight shadow in the doorway. Hermione cleared her throat.

"Miss Granger, what brings you here?" Snape said silkily, without looking up.

Hermione was unnerved. "May I come in, Professor? I have a matter I need to discuss with you."

At this, Snape's quill stilled, but he didn't move. "Am I correct in deducing that this is a... private matter?"

Hermione cleared her throat and nodded.

Snape began writing again. "Then I suggest you address the head of your own house for such a thing. Good day, Miss Granger," he said dismissively.

Hermione took a tentative step inside his classroom. "Please, Sir, I need your help. I am appealing to you as the most appropriate source in this matter. Professor McGonagall would not be able to guide me in this."

Snape's head snapped up. "Come, come, Miss Granger, enough of the theatrics! Are you telling me you have some sort of girlish secret you require the knowledge of the Dark Arts to deal with?" He spat this out irritably, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

Hermione gulped. "I... I don't know. That is to say, I'm not sure what my problem requires, but I think that I'm in over my head, and I know that you can help me. Please."

Snape looked her over for a minute. "Well, well, that is a first. The lofty Gryffindor admitting ignorance on anything is a sight I thought I would never see," he mocked. "What is the exact nature of your problem, Granger?"

Hermione looked around nervously. "First, I need your word that this is just between the two of us." Suddenly, that sounded more intimate than she'd ever intended, and she hastily changed her wording. "I mean, I am telling you this in confidence."

Snape sounded impatient. "I won't bandy your secrets in the common room; is that what you want to hear? Idle gossip is of no interest to me." His bored tone seemed designed to embarrass.

Hermione colored again. She sensed she was losing his interest. She closed the door behind her. "I thank you for your discretion in this, Professor. I have a wound that I am unable to heal. I was hoping that you could take a look." As she spoke, she rolled up the edge of her robe.

Snape gazed down at the neat red lines. "I understand your quandary, Miss Granger, but do you?"

Hermione looked up at him. "That is why I am here, Sir. I felt... unable to see Madam Pomfrey about this. I thought perhaps..."

Snape interrupted her "But do you fully understand the import of your actions? I assume you have tried your own methods of cure, and they have thus summarily failed you?" Snape circled around Hermione and his voice dropped a notch, now deceptively soft. "Only the greatest need would bring you to me. You view me as an enemy, and indeed, perhaps I am to you. There is no love lost between us. Why should you share this great piece of your personal life with me? Did you think I would not divine the cause? If you feel that I am the only person you could turn to, then you are in a desperate situation, and you will do something for me in return for the favor I am about to do you."

Hermione felt as if all her muscles had frozen in place and time had stopped around her. This was unreal! She couldn't even think of what he could want from her. Her voice barely eked out from behind her clenched jaw, "What do you require of me?"

Snape's eyes glittered as he considered her. A gleam entered his eyes as he took her measure, standing there with her hand cradling her hurt arm, slightly disheveled robes, and bushy mane of hair. He gave her a once-over and seemed to look right through her, as if he saw to her very soul. For a minute, Hermione was spellbound, drawn right into the black depths of his eyes, unable to look away. Then he broke the contact, and with a slight wrinkle of his oversized nose, seemed to indicate that he didn't find her suitable in what he was looking for.

Hermione felt unexpectedly angry. How dare he find her not up to scratch! The flare of ire caught her off guard, and before she could stop it the words were out: "I'm more than up to the task of anything you set for me. You can't scare me off, Snape..." Suddenly what she'd said hit her and her face flamed bright red. She wanted to sink into

the floor.

A flash of surprise flitted over Snape's face at her words, before he slammed down the defense of his customary scowl. "Very well, Granger, consider a deal made. I will help you with your predicament, and you will be my..." Here he paused a moment, and seemed to lose his train of thought. "Assistant. I have need of someone with skill to aid me, as I still get requests for potions, and that takes up some of my time. You will come here every day after class and I will have things for you to do. Agreed?"

Hermione's face was still crimson, and she only generally nodded in his direction so as not to meet his gaze directly. "Agreed."

Snape was all business now. He took out his wand and grabbed her arm. "When I asked you earlier if you understood the full import of your actions, it was partially in reference to the self-harm imperviousness loophole."

Hermione shook her head, watching Snape as he inspected her arm more closely.

"I can only assume that these wounds are self-inflicted? Yes? Well, being that you are a Muggle-born, it is less likely that you would know of the clause that disallows the one who inflicts the harm to heal the damage, in reference to the self. It doesn't much happen here in the magical world; this tends to be a largely Muggle problem. The clause requires the person to seek out help, or to deal with their problem the way a Muggle would, which wizards and witches are most likely not going to. It is an effective clause, limiting self-harm. Occasionally, Muggle-borns such as yourself stumble into it, and then they are found out. These wounds, unfortunately, are highly resistant to magical means of repair, and their healing requires knowledge which few people possess. In this, you were right to come to me." Snape smiled a tight smile but did not look at her. "Madam Pomfrey would have caught on to the fact that something was wrong rather quickly when none of her usual cures worked."

Hermione had relaxed while Snape was talking. His voice was pleasant when he wasn't deriding someone. She felt the brush of his fingers on the skin of her wrist, and she felt very calm. She chanced a look at him and saw his head bent intently over her arm. His black hair was falling forward, concealing his face from her view, but it looked soft, rather than greasy. On a whim, she almost touched it, then startled slightly. Had he put her under hypnosis? She realized he had been talking and struggled to pay attention. What was wrong with her?

Snape had finished examining the wound. It was as he had expected. He had read about the next step, but never performed it himself, as it required something of the enchanter, and he had never felt compelled to give of himself in this personal way before. However, to have a Gryffindor student at his mercy was too much to resist. He readied his wand and bared his wrist.

Hermione watched in growing horror as Snape said the words that peeled a very thin slice of skin off of his own wrist. It was tiny, to be sure, but it drew a line of blood that looked even more painful than her own. She watched in mute fascination as the minuscule sliver wavered in the air and came gently to rest on top of the first cut she had made on her own arm. Snape uttered an intense phrase, and it fused with her own skin, the thinnest silver line barely visible. He repeated the process with the second cut, and then it was over.

They both sat back, silent. Hermione felt transformed somehow. She didn't have words, or even know what to think about what she had witnessed. She was vaguely ashamed. Snape just looked tired, for once, which strangely endeared him to her. She shook it off and grasped for anything else to think of. When she saw the lines of blood on his own arm, she was able focus on something else.

"Sir, isn't this a Catch-22? You have harmed yourself now."

Snape aimed his wand at his own arm and repeated the spell to heal himself. It worked. "While I don't understand your reference, I do intuit your meaning. The difference is intent. My intent was not to inflict harm or damage upon myself; it was of a... nobler purpose." His mouth twisted, and a wry expression came upon his face. "Now go back to all of your 'friends,' and I shall expect my payment in blood of my own devising, starting tomorrow."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Disclaimer:: This all belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Melisse

With the password, phoenix feathers, still on her lips, the door to the common room slammed shut behind her and Hermione stepped in amongst her housemates. She was still in a daze from her meeting with Professor Snape, and her head felt stuffed with cotton. She surveyed the scene before her, but nothing she saw registered in her brain.

She was jostled from behind by some first-years who were coming into the room, and she realized that she'd better move or risk looking like a fool, just standing there and clutching her books to her chest. She didn't see Ron or Harry and vaguely remembered that they must still be at Quidditch practice. She eschewed her customary place in front of the fire in favor of a more private overstuffed chair that was turned towards the window. She made her way to the little alcove and settled in with her thoughts.

Hermione traced the skin of her wrist and marveled at the delicate silver seams, which were nearly invisible. Only she knew they were there. She was filled with conflicting emotions. This was a new experience for her; she was usually sure of the right course in everything. With enough evidence, enough research, one could find the answers to just about anything. When she felt so lost and alone, though, nothing seemed to make sense. Always in the past she had been able to turn to Ron and Harry with all of her problems, but this was a new and scary thing, to have to step out of her comfort zone, and now she was beholden to Snape, of all people. He had unexpectedly helped her...but why?

Hermione thought back to their encounter. At the time, she had been in shock, almost unable to participate. It had felt as if it was happening to someone else. Now she went over every moment in her mind again and analyzed it. She had felt a brief connection with Snape, she was sure, but it had gone almost as quickly. Then the spell that healed her had been unexpectedly personal. Had she known that aspect of it, as he surely had, she would have just let the wound heal on its own, no matter the extra time and subterfuge involved. Now she was uneasy. She would be in obeisance to him for the next long while, and she didn't like it. She would just have to make the best of it and keep her wits about her.

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"Hasn't anyone told you it's rude to lurk in doorways?" Snape's low voice curled over Hermione all the way over from where he sat at his desk. He knew she was there without looking. She had dreaded this moment all day and had been unforgivably distracted in her classes due to this small matter. She reluctantly stepped into his

classroom and mentally chided herself for being such a ninny. As if he could hear her internal chastisement, the corner of one thin lip twitched, but he remained seated and proceeded to ignore her.

Hermione grew uncomfortable and stood before him, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. He kept at the grading of his papers, so she stole a quick glance at him. He wore his customary black robes, but with the extreme pallor of his skin, they seemed more severe on him than on others. His hair was of course long about his face as always, but as she examined it more closely, she saw that, as yesterday, it appeared less greasy and more soft-looking. The style did nothing, however, to distract from the large, blunt nose on his face, but she couldn't help but notice his hands as he wrote. Snape's fingers were almost skeletally long, but he moved them with such grace that she had the notion that he would be good at the piano. And other things. Her face grew red as the direction of her thoughts turned. That stray thought held a world of interest, but felt like a betrayal. She wanted to fling the unwelcome reverie forcibly from her mind.

"Be still, for pity's sake!" Snape's voice, though not loud, rang out in the quiet room and startled Hermione's already jangled nerves. She jumped guiltily, hoping he wasn't using Legilimency on her. Snape quirked an eyebrow at her, and she blushed darker, knowing that she was acting foolish, but thankful that she had practiced Occlumency and resolving to now remember to do so. If she hadn't been acting like an idiot before, she surely was now!

Snape stood quickly. "I have thought about our ... arrangement, and it occurs to me that it would be a waste of time for you to be stirring up minor potions. Your talents would be well used in other areas, Miss Granger, as you remind me on every occasion what a smart and resourceful witch you are. I have need of an ingredient that you can procure for me, at no little expense to yourself, and we shall call our bargain satisfied. I need not tell you that discretion applies on your part as much as you require it on mine. Are we in accord?" He cracked a wicked little smile.

Hermione looked up at him. "So I am to understand that you will not require my assistance at all, if I just get something for you and I keep it quiet? Then we go our separate ways?"

A slight nod. "Eloquent assessment, as always. Your keen grasp of the situation does you credit as the star pupil of Gryffindor," Snape sneered.

Hermione ignored the jibe and breathed in. "What do you need me to get?" She had a feeling it wouldn't be something easy.

"I need from you the heart of a thestral." Snape's eyes glittered as hard as obsidian.

Time spun out, and Hermione's mouth gaped open as she tried to grasp what he'd said. "You ... need ... what? The heart? You want me to get you ..." Eyes wide, she trailed off, not believing that the request had even been made.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "Come, surely Hogwarts' brightest can do better than that! I need it in a fortnight's time. You have your task before you, Miss Granger. I expect nothing but the best from you, as always." His slow words belied the bitter message.

"No." Her brain finally kicked on, thankfully. "I will not do this. It is a repugnant thing, Professor, and you should be ashamed. I will take another task that you set for me, but I will not do this."

Snape had begun to turn away, but at this he whirled toward her with tightly controlled menace. "You *will* do this, Miss Granger! You have no choice in the matter. I give you none! You will do as I say, in this and all things, until I am satisfied. It seems you don't understand how this works; I thought you a better pupil. You disappoint me. Let me clarify for you." Snape's voice was smooth, and the words were deceptively soothing, almost seductive-sounding, concealing their poisonous rancor. "I have something you want...namely, your reputation...in my grasp, as well as the key to helping you out of any further ... difficulties that should arise in this area. And do not forget the service I performed for you yesterday, at no little cost to myself. You will act at my behest and continue acting until I deem your debt repaid. Otherwise, you are vulnerable to me. You do not have a bargaining chip to decide how to repay this debt. I have all the power here. Do you understand now, or shall I continue?"

Hermione was outraged. "But that's blackmail!"

"Very good, Miss Granger. Lesson learned."

"You can't do that!" Hermione wanted to scratch that smug look off his face.

"I thought we had just established that I can do whatever I want, and what I want is the heart of a thestral. You will procure that for me, however you choose to go about it. Your methods are your own. You have the terms of our deal; now, I will expect to see you two weeks hence with the ingredient. Good day, Miss Granger." Snape brushed a stray lock of hair off of his forehead, settled back into his chair, and proceeded to continue in his work as if she was not there.

Hermione stood stock still for a moment, then turned slowly and left. There was nothing left to do. She needed some time to think this over, alone. There were always students in the Gryffindor common room, so she headed to the place where she was most sure to be left to her own thoughts: the library. Her solace and refuge.

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After the initial shock of Snape's request wore off, Hermione was able to think. Snape had used the word ingredient when he referred to the thestral heart, so she wondered if she could figure out what he needed it for. Most probably a potion of some sort.

Certainly a thestral heart was a very rare ingredient, so it should be possible to deduce what it was in and what he was up to. Perhaps she could find a substitute, or maybe she could make a visit to Knockturn Alley to get one. He hadn't specified that it had to be *fresh*, after all, or that she had to be the one to kill the thestral herself.

It seemed important to figure out what he would need such an object for. From Hermione's limited knowledge of the Dark Arts, it seemed like organs from live animals might fall into that category. Maybe she could catch Snape in some nefarious deed.

Hermione reached for the book on the stack closest to her and cracked the spine. A cloud of dust rose from disuse. She sneezed as the air cleared slowly. It was going to be a long night. She had no time to waste.

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"Mione!" Hermione startled out of a dream, her face flat on the table beside a little book she had been bending over only moments ago. Or had it been longer? She must have dozed off ...

"She's here, Ron!" A voice called above her and she looked up, wincing, a pain shooting through her neck, to see Harry Potter. He grinned a lopsided smile at her. "I knew we'd find you here, Hermione. That must be some important project."

"Mione!" Hermione winced again as Ron bounded up, his voice too loud for the library. Luckily, they were totally alone in this section, but still, she respected the space. "You were here all along with these moldy books? You could have studied anytime! You missed the Quidditch match!"

Regret flooded through her as she suddenly remembered what day it was. "I'm awfully sorry, Ron. I totally forgot. I've been completely wrapped up in this, and, well... it just slipped my mind."

"Slipped your mind! Bollocks!" Ron burst out. "How can some term paper be more important than the game? Can you believe it, Harry?"

Hermione felt her temper rising at his tone. "Listen, here, Ronald Weasley..."

Harry chuckled nervously and rubbed the back of his neck. "It's okay, Ron. We didn't win, so she didn't miss anything. Hermione's working hard on something. Maybe we should go and get changed. We'll meet you for supper?" There was a question in his voice.

Her memory came back, and she got excited when she thought of what she had to tell them. "Actually, Harry, I'm glad you found me. There's something I need your help with. And yours, too, Ron," she added, noticing that Ron still had a bit of a scowl on.

"Well, if it involves this kind of work, I don't want any part of it, I can tell you that!" Ron said.

"It has to do with Snape."

Harry sat down in the chair opposite Hermione. "Is this why you've been so secretive lately? You haven't been around much." His thick brows drew together. "What does all this have to do with Snape?"

Hermione rubbed her nose as Ron took the chair right next to her. "Listen. I need your words of honor, both of you, that you won't breathe a word of this to anyone. No matter what."

"Blimey, Hermione, come on, if you can't trust us, who can you trust?" Ron asked plaintively.

"I know, I know, it's just..." Hermione sighed. "You know this stuff. It can't get past the three of us, okay?"

Both boys nodded.

She began. "I had to go to Snape for a ... favor. No, it's..."she interrupted herself by holding up a hand, seeing that they were about to say something, "...not important to the story what for. I just had to. Let's just say I owe him now. In exchange, he asked me to find something for him. A rare item. I've been looking at the uses for this item, and it turns out that there aren't many that I could discover. In fact, there're only two. I thought before I turned the item over to him I could find out what he was up to and stop him. The problem is, there's a time limit on my search. I have two weeks, and I've already used up several days researching the uses for this item." Hermione paused. Their eyes were bugged out.

Harry spoke first. "Why didn't you tell us? You know we can't trust Snape. He's probably up to something bad. What's the item?"

Hermione hesitated, suddenly reluctant. "Thestral heart."

Ron exploded. "That proves it, doesn't it? He's a villain of the worst sort to want something like that! No good comes of a thing like that!" He shuddered.

Hermione found herself in the strange place of having to defend someone she didn't want to. "We can't be absolutely sure, Ron. Remember, I said I found two uses for the ingredient. We don't know which use he intends it for."

Ron snorted. "Who cares?"

Harry sighed. "What are the uses, Hermione?"

Hermione rubbed the bridge of her nose. "You know what a thestral is, right? The giant horse-like creature that only becomes visible after..."

"Yes, we *know*, Hermione," whined Ron. "Haven't we all just been in class all day? You don't need to give us another lecture, do you?" Harry kicked him under the table.

Hermione glared at him. "I am telling you this, Ron, to remind you of the link that thestrals seem to have with death."

"So get on with it, will you? What does all this have to do with the two uses?" Ron sat forward.

"If you would listen, you git, I'm getting to it!"

"Well, excuse me for living. Would you get to it already?"

Hermione was ready to scream. "Ron! You are exasperating! Will you please just let me talk? The two things you can do with a thestral's heart..." Hermione realized she was talking too loudly and lowered her voice, "...are these: you can brew a potion to give someone their heart's desire, but in a way that can only be fulfilled if their desire is to see another die."

Harry's eyes snapped with fire. "I knew it! That is exactly the sort of weapon Voldemort could use against us! Doesn't that seem just a little too convenient? Snape is not to be trusted...we have to stop him!"

Hermione held up a hand. "Wait, Harry, there's another use. It allows the person who drinks the potion one hour to resurrect a dead loved one and right a grievous wrong. It allows a conscience to be eased."

"Oh, come on, Hermione. Don't tell me you think Snape is pining away for someone he did something wrong to. It's much more likely that he wants this absolutely convenient weapon that would bring about ... oh, I don't know ... my total destruction!" Harry was nearly shouting.

Hermione held out her hands in frustrated supplication. "Just calm down a minute, Harry, and listen, would you? This other spell, the first one I mentioned? It was really hard to find. I only found it in the..." here she paused, "...restricted section. No, don't ask me how. And even at that, it was only mentioned one time in all the books. It seems to have been completely forgotten, and furthermore, there's a catch. It's more a spell in theory than in practice. It was made, but the bugs were never worked out of it. After one successful brew of the potion, no one was ever able to replicate it, in all the centuries. Eventually a fire destroyed the original scroll, and now all we have is a legend. So I know that it's extremely dangerous, but it's also the most unlikely scenario."

Harry's nostrils flared. "Snape is a known Death Eater. He is a great Potions master. Why shouldn't he have worked it out? And now he has you eating right out of his hand, just going and getting the last ingredient for him? I say it's a bloody brilliant plan on his part, and bold. We have to stop it. I seriously doubt he's got somebody he wants to dig out of the grave to bring a last goodbye from. Come on, Hermione, you know I'm right!"

Hermione felt torn. "Harry, you are blinded by your hatred of Snape! Maybe he isn't all bad!"

"Well, he sure isn't good!" Harry shot back.

Hermione tapped her foot under the table in consternation. "Ron? What do you think?"

Ron looked at her face and then at Harry's. "Sorry, Mione, I have to side with Harry on this one."

"You two aren't making any sense! You aren't looking at reason!" she snapped. "If I'd known you'd just be battering your heads like a bunch of ... bighorned rams at each other, then I wouldn't have bothered asking for your opinion!" Hermione jumped up and gathered her books, shoving them into her satchel.

The boys stared at each other. "Whoa, whoa, Hermione, sorry," mumbled Harry. "I didn't know Snape meant so much to you."

Hermione was horrified to feel the beginnings of tears. "No, it's not that. Of course I hate him. I just want to do the right thing. I think I'm under a lot of pressure. Listen, give me some time to collect my evidence. I still have a week and a half before I have to give him the heart. I just want to find out what's going on. Then I'll let you know, okay?"

"You won't give him anything without first talking to us?" Harry asked.

Hermione felt herself bristle, but reminded herself that Harry was just worried about Snape. She sighed. "No. I just want to poke around and see what I can find out. Maybe

he has evidence laying around that can tell me more about which direction he's leaning."

Ron looked skeptical. "C'mon, let's go eat. I'm starving. This place always makes me hungry!"

Harry looked at Hermione. "Are you coming with us?" he asked quietly.

She smiled to let him know everything was okay. "Go on without me; I was just finishing some things up." She tried to make her tone sound light, but as she watched them go, she couldn't explain why it was suddenly so important to her to prove that Professor Snape was not the evil man everyone thought he was. She remembered that he was blackmailing her into getting the heart of a live animal, and cold fingers of dread wrapped around her. She wasn't sure of anything, but she would try her best to find out.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Disclaimer: I own nothing. It all is property of J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Melisse.

Hermione now had her task before her. She got a good night's sleep and in the morning felt much refreshed. Before she got out of bed, she mentally reviewed how she would tackle her problem. She rejected the idea of trying to read Snape's thoughts almost immediately; he was just too accomplished in the art of Legilimency himself. He would know almost immediately that his mind was being invaded, no matter how subtle she tried to be. Not only would he use Occlumency, but he would then apply Legilimency on her, and while she had been practicing her blocking techniques, he was still far more skilled, and he would be able to break her barriers if he really tried. The game would then be up. So she would have to do some legwork.

If Snape were concocting a potion, then it stood to reason that he probably had all the ingredients standing ready, save for the last, most precious one, which was to be supplied by her. She could check the potion stores first to see if he'd left a trail there, but assuming that he had not, she would have to find the stash. The collection of ingredients he had standing ready would tell her which potion he intended to use, for though she didn't know the list for Voldemort's potion, she did know what was required for the resurrection potion. Now, at last, she had a course of action, but it seemed easier said than done. There were innumerable places to keep a small stash of ingredients.

Hermione swung her legs out of the warm bed and winced as the cold from the stones seeped into the soles of her feet. She went through her morning ablutions as quickly as she could and made her way to the Great Hall.

Just as she reached the hall doors, she had an idea and pulled back to avoid being seen. She stood in the shadows and scanned as much of the room as her position would allow. It was a Sunday morning, and most of the students were partaking of a leisurely breakfast, chatting over their choice of favorite foods. Hermione's own stomach let out a loud rumble as the smell of hash browns wafted out towards her, and she had to suppress a groan at the thought of missing another meal. The croissants looked awfully good! Maybe she could take the time to eat something. In fact, she saw Harry and Ron at the long Gryffindor table, arguing over the last rasher of bacon. Just then, her eye was drawn to a dark shape at the far edge of the room, and she saw Snape getting himself something hot to drink and settling in, with a blank look over his features, to survey the room.

Success! That was what she was looking for! Hermione hadn't really expected to see Snape dining with the others; he usually took his meals alone, except for occasions when he had to make an appearance as the head of his house, or as part of the staff. She didn't question what he was doing there now, though. Just seeing him was sufficient. She would have enough time, if she hurried, to check out the potions stores, and possibly some probable hiding places.

She would check the storeroom first because she didn't relish the thought of searching Snape's personal things, and she had no notion where to even begin in that quarter. Besides, it was much more likely she would be caught in the act of going through Snape's personal effects. Hermione shuddered at the very thought. There was still a high degree of danger in checking the storeroom, as Snape kept a close eye on it even though he was in charge of Defense Against the Dark Arts now.

Hermione reached the Potions classroom and peered at corridor around her. It was empty of students. She was alone. She checked the door first. Locked. She withdrew her wand. "*Alohomora!*" The mechanism clicked and the door swung ajar a few inches.

Hermione stepped into the empty classroom. It was dim in there, and dusty, and the motes swirled around her as if perturbed by her presence. "*Lumos,*" she murmured, and her wand tip gently glowed. A prickle of guilt flared up her spine, and she suppressed it with effort. She stepped towards the storeroom. A feeling of unease was enveloping her. Perhaps it was the silence. She had never been good at this kind of thing.

Her wand was already shaking when she reached the storeroom door. It, too, was locked, but the simple Alohomora charm opened it to her. She couldn't help but think that in Snape's reign, this would never have been allowed to happen. He surely would've had tighter security on his wares. Well, all the better for her in this case.

A scroll on the first shelf kept a record of the comings and goings of ingredients. Hermione quickly scanned the first several pages, and Snape's name appeared, but only for the most general herbs and ointments that could be applied to almost anything. It did not raise her suspicion, but she knew he was too clever to leave such an obvious mark. She had another trick up her sleeve, though.

She raised her wand. "*Tracesempta Severus Snape!*" Hermione held her breath and waited a moment, and then it happened. In the gloom of the airless storeroom, a gentle green glow began to coalesce on certain bottles and vials scattered throughout the shelves. It became brighter and began to pulse, almost in time with Hermione's own. She couldn't believe it had worked! She took a ragged breath and stepped to the first item. Belladonna. Her heart plummeted. This did not bode well.

She reached up to the second item she could reach and read the label. Heartshorn. That was also not on the good list. She went along to each and every vial that had a glow on it, refusing to believe the evidence until she had examined it for herself. None of the ingredients were on the list for the potion to right a wrong.

There was one last vial, pushed so far back on the shelf that she couldn't reach. Hermione didn't know why it mattered at this point, but she was determined to get it, to see it through. She had become single-minded in her purpose to be right, to believe in reason over insanity, as if this cause were meaningful to her in a way that it was not to others. She had attributed something to Snape that wasn't there, some sense of goodness and justice that he didn't have, and it all hung on this counterpoint; she could see it, although it didn't make any sense. If he was a villain, then she felt like giving up. She took aim with her wand at the last vial, as if all hope for her hinged on it, and

shouted "*Accio vial!*"

At this, a confluence of events transpired, appearing to Hermione as if happening in slow motion. She realized, too late, that she was no longer alone in the storeroom. In fact, the very person who was in the small space with her was no other than Professor Snape himself. His somber, slim figure seemed to cast a pall over the already shrouded closet, and Hermione could feel the waves of cold fairly rolling off of him. She was in the middle of a spell, however, and her hand reached out to catch the tiny vial, as if by reflex, to fully incriminate her.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from his to read the last crucial ingredient, and she felt seared by what she saw in his dark depths. His eyes burned into hers, seeing everything that had transpired as if she had told him aloud herself. He didn't have to read her mind. He could see it there before him.

Still, his voice was controlled, as if he were speaking of a mild topic instead of something so vital. "Miss Granger, I see that your friends have been a ... questionable influence on you at best. Turning thief, are we? Perhaps you might have been a credit to the house of Slytherin after all."

Hermione's lips curled back at the suggestion, and she tried to sound as normal as possible. "I was trying to find the thestral heart here, sir. I thought that perhaps there might be one here I could use, instead of having to do the job myself. After all, you never said that I had to..."

Snape cut her off, stopping her ramble. "Spare me the lies, Granger." His voice was velvet, but it held a lethal edge. "You're no good at it." He looked around. "We seem to have a problem here, but first I must admit my surprise at your rather ... resourceful spell. You did catch me off guard in your use of that particular invocation. Explain yourself."

Hermione felt the cold sweat of fear break out over her scalp and wanted to shiver. The reality of her situation crashed down on her. She was alone in this place with someone she now knew to be almost certainly on the side of evil. No one knew she was here. She had to convince Snape that she knew nothing.

"I don't know what you mean, Professor. I'm sorry I broke in here, but I'm desperate. I don't want to have to ... murder an animal." She tried her best to look innocent, and probably succeeded in looking a good bit scared. "But I was just looking for anything to do with thestrals, that's it. I don't know anything else."

Snape narrowed his eyes in menace. "I heard you cast that spell. What was it?"

Hermione lifted her chin. "There was no spell."

Snape let the silence spin out. "Miss Granger, I will not play these children's games with you. You will tell me what I wish to know, either your way..." here he indicated, with a slight nod towards her, that this was the preferred way, "...or *my* way. It is of no account to me which way we use, but I can guarantee, it will matter to you. I am going to find out what I want to know, so make your choice now. My patience runs thin. What ... spell ... did ... you ... cast?"

Hermione peeked up through her bangs and saw that she was utterly outmatched. She could not conceal anything from this man. His force, his sheer power, was overwhelming. She didn't know if he was using an unknown spell on her, or if it was just his presence, but she felt drunk on the energy he was exuding. Her shoulders slumped, and the words spilled from her lips almost of their own accord. "I created this spell on my own. It's taken me years, actually." She couldn't help the boastful tone, and her cheeks pinked as she realized how ridiculous it was here, now, to want credit and acknowledgement for her achievements. "I got the idea from where I live, in the Muggle world. They use fingerprints in crime scenes to identify people. I thought that I could do something similar here. Not necessarily for criminals, but just to identify a witch or wizard's unique trace. On something they touched. I thought it might be useful someday. I guess it was," she trailed off, staring down.

"Well, well," mused Snape. "You really may be Hogwarts' brightest after all." He looked her over. "Do you know what you have done, Miss Granger? Give me the vial in your hand."

Hermione's eyes snapped open. She had almost forgotten that she had it in all of the tension. A stubborn, childish impulse drove her to spite him. "No."

Snape's eyes glittered dangerously. "Hand it to me, Miss Granger. You don't know what you're dealing with."

He might as well have said, "You don't know whom you are dealing with;" Hermione felt the urge to gall him. It was dangerous, and it didn't make a lick of sense. She knew that he already possessed the ingredient because his trace was on the bottle, but she wanted nothing more than to disobey him, to thwart him in any way she could, no matter how small. It might be her only way to have power over him, if only for the briefest of moments. Her fingers tightened around the glass. "I said *no!*"

Snape very carefully drew his wand, and she had hers in her hand already. His eyes never left hers. Just as he said, "*Accio vial!*" Hermione shouted, "*Expelliamus!*" and the accident occurred.

Only too late did Hermione realize the vial she was holding contained Dragon's Bane, a highly unstable element. As it flew through the air towards Snape, his wand flew to her, and they met in the middle of the room. The bit of magic at the end of Snape's wand was all it took to ignite the highly flammable Dragon's Bane into a spectacular ball of light. Hermione barely had time to jerk her own wand up and murmur the words for the shield charm before it engulfed the whole room.

The dragonfire burned everything in an enormous swath of destruction, hotter and brighter than anything Hermione had ever felt. It was like the surface of the sun pouring over her in a liquid curtain, and she felt the integrity of her shield melting, but then it was over, as quickly as it had flared.

The roar left her ears ringing in the quiet, and her eyes burning in the sudden shadow. Darker than the rest of the charred and smoldering ruins around her, though, she could make out a figure lying half in and half out of the doorway. It was Professor Snape. She could just see a breath. He was barely alive.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Disclaimer: I own nothing. This all belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Mel.

Hermione's breath froze in her chest. The professor was alive, but barely. His robes had been burned right off him, hanging from his gaunt frame in still-smoking strips. She could hardly bear to take in the sight of him and realized that she was just standing there, immobilized by panic. *Think!* she told herself. What was the best thing to do? Ideas were slipping away just as soon as they appeared in her mind. It was as if they were coated in oil; she couldn't grab hold of any of them. And the sight of Professor Snape's pathetically burned form was making the necessity of action...any action...on her part all the more urgent. She forced herself to calm down and use her brain, her best asset. What could she do?

It was too late for a Freeze-Flame Charm; that only worked while the flames were still on. Hermione wracked her brains. *Aguamenti!* A strong jet of water shot from the tip of her wand because of the forcefulness of her words and emotions. She aimed it at Snape's prone form and as the water hit him, a sizzle arose. At least that was something. She needed to think for a minute.

Another idea came to her. *"Finite Incantatem!"* she tried. The water stopped, but nothing else seemed to happen...probably because Finite Incantatem worked on spells, and Dragon's Bane was some sort of element. Hermione was running out of ideas. She knew a minor healing charm, but Snape's injuries were far too severe to be aided by that. She tried it anyway. It couldn't hurt. *"Episkey ..."* Her voice wavered, but the spell was cast.

Hermione took a trembling step closer. Snape looked too terrible to contemplate. The healing charm seemed to have eased his breathing slightly, but that was the only noticeable effect.

Hermione was out of ideas. She had to get him to Madam Pomfrey's more knowledgeable care. Was he too injured to move? Should she conjure bandages? In the end, she thought the fastest way to get him to the hospital wing without questions would be to use Mobilicorpus and a Disillusionment Charm. She performed both quickly and guided his limp form up to the hospital wing with her heart in her throat.

*

Hermione rubbed her throbbing temples. It had to have been the longest day of her life. Thankfully, the events that had transpired didn't yet have her name attached to them...at least for the student body as a whole...but she didn't doubt it would become common knowledge soon enough. Right now, that was about the only bright spot in an utterly dismal day that had started with a literal bang and had quickly gotten worse from there.

After Hermione had taken Snape to the hospital wing, she had had a lot of questions to answer, both from Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall. No one was too pleased to hear that the entire stock of ingredients in the potions storeroom had been completely obliterated, and the lion's share of the blame seemed to fall...rather unfairly, she thought...on her own shoulders. Rather than risk tipping her hand, she suffered in silence and took the blame. Indeed, guilt weighed a little heavy in her own heart for the atrocious injuries Snape had suffered.

"Hermione Granger, I just don't know what has gotten into you," Minerva McGonagall said for at least the third time. It might have sounded sour to a less intuitive ear, but Hermione could hear the faintly veiled distress in her tone. Not much genuinely upset the older housemistress. "You will have to be punished. Albus has left it to me, as you have a previously unblemished record. I must say I am disappointed. Very disappointed."

Hermione stared at her feet. She should reveal everything now. There was no reason not to, especially when she had caught Snape with not a single ingredient on the list that might have saved him. And yet, something stilled her voice in her throat. It occurred to her that he had no way to get his ingredient now, so she had a little time. He was in no position to betray anyone at present. Perhaps she just needed some time to think. "Yes, I understand, Professor. What can I do to make it up?"

Professor McGonagall had been wringing her hands, but at that she stopped and stared at Hermione, seeming to regain some of the tart-tongued ways for which she was known. "Make it up? Why, I daresay you can do nothing to make this up, my girl. A fortune in precious materials was lost because of you. One of our most valued educators is lying near death because of your actions. Do you imagine that anything you could do could make up for that?"

Hermione stared at her, understanding that in part, she was right. Even if Snape was to blame, so was she. The misery must have shown on her face, because McGonagall softened a little. "I have decided that the best way for you to mend this matter is to help Professor Snape in his recovery. I understand that he will survive, mostly due to your quick thinking in saving him in the storeroom. Your actions contributed greatly to his survival. It may not seem that you did much, but you kept a clear head and got him help as quickly as you could. That very likely saved his life. Madame Pomfrey has worked wonders, but it will be a while before he recovers fully from his injuries. He will need an assistant, and I know that he will not trust any student with his work as he trusts you. Not to mention that the enforced interaction between you should be punishment enough." McGonagall hid a smile.

Hermione looked at her in astonishment. "But Professor, Snape hates me! He wouldn't trust me to help him with his papers and accounts. Why would you get that idea?"

"Because he told me that very thing himself. Now off you go."

*

Hermione was doing her best to stay away from Harry and Ron, but as they were her best mates, after all, it was inevitable that they would eventually find her. When they did corner her, coming out of the second floor girls' bathroom, she tried to act as though she hadn't, in fact, been trying to lose them for the last week.

"Um, hi, guys. Where have you been?" She clutched her books to her chest, kept her head down, and set off down the hall at a fast clip, determined to keep up a cheerful demeanor.

"Where have we been?" Ron burst out. "Mione, we've been trying to find you all week! You've been acting more slippery than a slugwort!"

"Thanks, Ron," Hermione snorted. "Ever the charmer."

Ron had the grace to blush.

Harry laid a hand on her arm, and the trio came to a halt in the hallway. "Hermione, what's going on? You're acting strange. There are rumors. We're your friends. You can tell us." His eyes, gentle as always, bored into hers, and she felt herself melt. She could trust Harry, and Ron. She'd been acting so unreasonable lately; she didn't know what had gotten into her this year.

She took a breath and told them the whole story, of how she had sneaked into the storeroom and used her invented spell, and then the accident.

"Whoa, Hermione, that is some major damage for you!" Ron looked impressed. "I didn't think you had anything to do with the explosion! I wish I could've been there ... that must've been something to see." His mouth hung slightly open as he imagined Hermione at the scene of unmitigated chaos.

"You prat! It was terrible! Professor Snape realized before I did what I had in my hand, and he was just trying to diffuse it! I should have seen how unstable it was! Instead, I was trying to ... duel with him or something, and in a potions storeroom of all places! I don't know what got into me ... " But in that brief moment of reliving it, she remembered his eyes, and she thought that maybe she did. An inkling of something that she didn't want to admit, even to herself, trickled into her consciousness and she tried to shake it off. She had felt some kind of connection with Snape. She didn't want that. She was fighting against it, but it was there. Now that she had realized it, the tiny seed of knowledge seemed to burrow into her brain and plant itself firmly. She shook her head, as if to dislodge the idea.

Harry mistook her motion. "Hermione, it was a freak accident. Snape is senior to you, in every way." At this, Hermione felt a tiny frisson of heat *Stop it!* She furiously blushed, and focused on Harry again. "He bears the burden of responsibility for this, if anyone does. It's high time we did something about this. Did anyone think about why he was down there?"

Hermione looked into Harry's eyes and saw a dangerous gleam there. "We need to go to Dumbledore. When Snape recovers, he'll go after the thestral heart, perhaps by

other means. Then he can do what he wants."

Hermione felt a lump in her throat. She just had a feeling; she couldn't explain it. It was crazy. There was no evidence to support Snape...in fact, there was plenty of evidence to the contrary... but she just couldn't shake the feeling that Snape was not as evil as they all supposed. "Harry, I just think that you're ... well, wrong on this. Can you give me more time to..."

Harry fairly exploded. "Wrong? More time? Hermione, you think I'm blinded by hatred of Snape, but you're not seeing reason either, here. I am going to Dumbledore, with or without you. Ron? You coming?" Harry turned and walked down the opposite corridor.

Ron gave Hermione a regretful wince and followed Harry. Hermione watched them for a moment, then hurried to catch up. She might as well be a part of this thing, too. They made their way quickly to Dumbledore's staircase. No one said anything, save for the password, "Marshmallow Peeps." Actually, Hermione was proud of that one. She had brought several packs of the cute yellow Easter chicks back as a surprise for Dumbledore on her last trip home, and he couldn't get enough of the sugary treat. They ascended to his office.

Harry stuck his head in the door. "Sir? May we have a word with you?"

Dumbledore was feeding Fawkes, and he smiled and motioned them in. "Of course," he said easily. "What brings the three of you here on this fine day?"

Harry had calmed his temper a bit, and he looked at each of them in turn, then elected to be the spokesman of the group. He started the story of why they thought Snape was a traitor, and outlined it with as much heart and expression as he could pour into the telling. Dumbledore listened intently to everything. Hermione schooled her features into blankness, but couldn't help but think that things did, indeed, sound awfully incriminating for Snape. She decided not to speak up. There really was no counterargument to give. The facts spoke for themselves, and they were grim.

"... and that is why he has to be stopped. He is a known Death Eater, Professor. He only needs the heart of a thestral as his final ingredient, and he could make a potion to give to Voldemort to kill anyone. And I can imagine who it will be!" Harry finished up passionately.

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. "That is quite a story, Harry. Do you also share his concerns, Ron? Hermione?" Dumbledore looked at each in turn.

"Uh, yeah," Ron uttered.

Dumbledore's piercing gaze fell upon Hermione. She thought that he saw more than she wanted him to as he looked at her mildly over his half-moon glasses. He seemed to be able to see the truth before him, as easily as wheat pulled from the chaff. She dropped her gaze, wishing she had that ability for herself. She had been silent too long, and nodded slightly without looking up, unable to give voice to her assent.

"Very well. Harry, I commend you for your ... vigor in keeping the school safe. And indeed, I know that you are thinking of the side of good in all things. In this matter, I can assure you, I trust Professor Snape. Not all things are known, nor have all things come to pass, that must still in the fullness of time. I am asking you to set aside your personal feelings on the matter and trust that I can see things you cannot."

Harry began to protest, but Professor Dumbledore held up a gnarled hand and smiled slightly. "Harry, I am not dismissing you. You were right in coming to me with this. In most cases you would be right to be alarmed. I am only telling you that I know Professor Snape is on the side of good. Whatever his actions might appear to you, I trust him implicitly. You must trust someone, somewhere, and I put my faith in Severus. I am asking you to do the same for me. If you cannot trust my judgment, then you need to search your heart, my boy. You will always be alone in this world if you cannot find someone to put your belief in."

Though the words were directed at Harry, Hermione felt that Dumbledore was speaking more for her benefit. She didn't know why his words touched her so deeply, but she had plenty to think about.

Harry nodded. "I just needed some direction, sir. I do not disrespect you or your decisions." He seemed disappointed.

Dumbledore smiled. "I know, Harry. Thank you for coming to me. It is never a bad idea to talk over your concerns, no matter what they might be."

Ron mumbled his good-bye and stumbled out behind Harry, and Hermione turned to go, strangely reluctant to be left alone. She had always enjoyed the old wizard's company before, but this time she just wanted to be gone.

"Miss Granger, a word?" Dumbledore called to her just as she reached the threshold. She motioned for the boys to go on without her. She turned, feeling unaccountably nervous.

"Please, have a seat. Lemon drop?" He offered her one, and she shook her head with a smile. He nodded and took his time selecting one from a cut crystal candy dish sitting on his desk. "Oh, I do love a good lemon drop," he said, after he'd finally chosen the one he wanted. "Miss Granger, I have a feeling that you may wish to present me with an account of the events that transpired in recent days different from the version Harry just gave me. Am I correct in that assumption?" He leveled a surprisingly acute gaze at her.

Hermione felt the flush start creeping up her neck and willed it not to burst into a bright pink shade that she knew would mottle her complexion a violent red and make her look suspicious. "Uh, not really, Professor." She squirmed uncomfortably.

Professor Dumbledore looked at Hermione for a long moment until she stopped her fidgeting and looked back. She saw kindness and understanding in his old blue eyes. When he finally spoke, his voice was gentle, but there was an underlying urgency to the softness. "You know, I have something to say to you that I did not see fit to share with the others. It is true, everything that I told Harry about trust, but Miss Granger, there is also something for you, specifically. You need to trust in yourself. Your heart knows the answers that your head does not, and it will not lead you astray. Why were you afraid to speak up just now in defense of Professor Snape?"

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but caught his knowing look and found it difficult to speak. They sat in silence a moment while she gathered her thoughts. "I don't have a reason to believe in him. All of my life, I have trusted my head, my logic. Everything points to the fact that he is guilty of something. All of my research supports this. And yet, I don't want to accept that, for some reason, and that frustrates me!"

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. "Ah, Hermione. These times are difficult. It feels as though we're surrounded by the forces of good and evil at every moment, and perhaps we are. You students are coming of age at a time when the fate of our world stands upon the ... well, the razor's edge, as it were. But some things don't ever change, no matter the age. You must be able to look inside yourself, and to trust your own heart. Believe in yourself. Nothing else matters in this whole wide world. You won't know who or what you are fighting for if you are blind to the very truth of your own self."

Hermione was startled by Dumbledore's choice of words. He had kept his eyes on her face the whole time he was speaking, but all of a sudden, she knew that he knew about the service Snape had performed for her. Her wrist fairly burned with the two invisible lines, and her eyes filled with tears. "Thank you, sir. I will consider your words," she said as steadily as she could.

Dumbledore nodded. "I hope that you do, Miss Granger. You will find what you need in time. And, on a lighter note, may I ask you to explain again about the Peeps? A rabbit leaves these candies in a basket for you? Most extraordinary! Muggle ways never cease to amaze me!"

Hermione smiled. She proceeded to explain again about the Muggle traditions of Easter, which she thought Professor Dumbledore would greatly have enjoyed.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Disclaimer: All of this belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Melisse. Also, this story is not complete, sorry for the wrong label on it!

Hermione waited outside of Professor Snape's personal rooms. He had been released from the hospital wing the day before and had refused to meet with her in any setting where he appeared to be weak. She had shown up for her service, as prescribed by Professor McGonagall, and when she saw him in his white hospital gown, looking so frail, her heart unexpectedly fell. The worry must have shown up as pity on her face, because he snapped that he would call for her when he was ready for her and to be gone until then. She was unsteady on her feet on the way out and didn't bother to examine why the sight of Professor Snape laid low affected her so much.

So here she was, after class, knocking on his door. Hermione had never been to Snape's personal rooms before, of course. They were located a short distance from the Slytherin common room, just down a corridor, but accessible from the outer hallway, in a mirror arrangement of Gryffindor's situation. Snape had both privacy from his students and an ability to keep an eye on their antics. She chose to knock on the door that did not require her to pass through the Slytherin common room, but was considered his private entrance. She waited until she heard him bid her enter and nervously stepped into his abode.

Hermione didn't know what she had expected, but it was surprisingly warm and inviting. She couldn't help the grin that spread over her features when she realized she thought it may have been decorated in all green and silver snakes, but neither were obvious or in plain sight. Instead, a wealth of antiques and thoughtfully collected pieces vied for her attention, and she couldn't help but be impressed by the subtle ambiance of wealth and sophistication that his rooms exuded. She recognized some Muggle paintings, and leaned in for a closer look at one when she heard Snape clear his throat. Her face turned pink. What had gotten into her? She was gawking at his things like she was in a museum! She turned towards the sound and saw him sitting in a chair with a look of amusement on his features.

"Miss Granger." He bowed his head slightly, acknowledging the fact that he was not going to get up. "I see you've found where I reside. You seem ... enchanted."

Hermione blushed harder. "Sorry, I didn't mean to stare at your things. I just haven't seen a non-magical painting in a long time. It reminds me of home."

"Yes, I have a taste in art that is considered by other wizards as being...how shall I put it? Eclectic. Muggle art is not highly valued in our world, but I find I have acquired a certain ... taste for it." Snape's gaze never left hers.

Hermione didn't know if it was the change in setting, but Snape seemed like an entirely different person. His hard edges were gone, replaced with an intensity that was almost magnetic. He may not have been as harsh as she was used to, but she sensed a danger about him, just the same. She straightened her spine, which felt as if it was slowly melting towards Snape as he talked.

"Come over here, Miss Granger, and sit; you are still lurking about in doorways," Snape said smoothly. There was a chair set a discreet distance from his. It was a nice upholstered one, the kind that you found in good libraries that Hermione liked so much. She walked gingerly across the room and took her seat, aware of Snape's hooded gaze upon her.

"Can I get you anything, sir? I'm supposed to be here to aid you," Hermione began, speaking to her lap, unwilling to look him in the eye.

"Yes, I think you can, Miss Granger. I know just the thing you can get for me. But before I tell you, I need your oath that you will not reveal what you are about to discover to anyone." Snape's eyes were as black as she had ever seen them.

"Why would I want to?" Hermione swallowed nervously.

"You seem to have a nasty habit of running to your ... friends with things that are best left unsaid. I told you before that I have need of discretion from you, and I require it still. Are you willing to give me your trust?" Snape looked her over quietly, waiting for her to decide.

Hermione remembered Dumbledore's words and suddenly she yearned to put her trust in someone. She was tired of standing alone, and if she wanted to listen to her feelings about Snape, she wasn't going to get support from Harry or Ron. She was going to have to do this on her own, to whatever ends that took her.

She looked at Snape, his eyes gleaming, and saw nothing to indicate that he was anything other than her enemy. Her gut pulled her towards him, though, and she was in now, or she was out. She had to make her choice and live with it from this point forward. She decided. "What do you need from me?"

Snape smiled. "You will give me your word not to reveal what you are about to learn?"

Hermione nodded.

"You are willing to swear it." It was not a question.

Hermione looked at Snape. "I am."

He was suddenly intent on her and all business. "You will repeat after me. I, Hermione Jean Granger, swear an oath to Severus Snape to be silent about what I am going to be told. The secret now binds me to him in service upon pain of my..." here he hesitated a moment, but continued after the brief pause, "...honor, never to be revealed until circumstance renders it null or Binder deems it allowable. Let it be sworn."

Hermione said the words steadily, with nary a tremble in her voice, her eyes never leaving his. As the last syllable died away from her lips, she felt a tightening of magic around her hands and wrists, almost as if she were wearing shackles, and an almost imperceptible tightening around her throat. It was an unpleasant feeling. It wasn't an Unbreakable Vow, but there had been strong enough magic invoked to cause her considerable discomfort should she renege on the deal. Hermione got the point.

"Good." Snape nodded briskly. "I'm glad that that is finished, because I have need of you. Before the ... accident ... you were retrieving a certain ingredient for me. I assume you still remember what you were supposed to be getting?"

Hermione's brow crinkled. "Yes, but what could that possibly have to do with anything?"

Snape sat there in silence and let her piece it together for herself.

"You couldn't still want me to get you the thestral heart?" she gasped. "You have some nerve! Why would you think that I would do that?"

Snape smiled a little unpleasantly. "You have made me a vow, is your memory so short? There is no one you can tell. I also assume that the reason you are here at all is that, being who you are, you have weighed all of your options very carefully and decided in favor of me and against your great friends Mist^{er}s Potters and Weasley. Because of this, I also deduce that there must have been a confrontation, perhaps with Dumbledore? That means that he has been apprised of the situation, has stood in favor of me, and you have no leg to stand on, Miss Granger. That leaves you in the unenviable position of being totally ..." here Snape looked Hermione over thoughtfully, "alone, and at my mercy. You might have worked this out for yourself and avoided further binding yourself voluntarily to me by such means as say, an oath. This leads me to think that you ... prefer it this way. You want to be under my control, or you would not be here."

Hermione was growing more mesmerized as Snape spoke. Everything he was saying did follow a certain logic, but she didn't realize how it sounded until...well, he said it out loud. Then it just sounded pathetic. She jumped up, humiliated. He made her sound like a child. "I do not! And I certainly will not do your bidding just because I made a vow to you to keep your secrets!"

"Sit down, Miss Granger!" Snape barked out, and Hermione, startled, sat. "I had you make the vow because I intend on telling you exactly what I need the heart for. If you think you can keep your temper for more than a few minutes, perhaps I can elucidate for you, but time is of the essence in this matter. Shall I explain?"

Hermione nodded, her eyes wide. She did want answers.

Snape let his head fall a short distance back against the headrest of his chair, and Hermione was distressed to note that this show of force on his part was probably taking a lot out of him, more than he cared to admit. He had suffered a grievous injury and was surely a long way from full recovery. He let his eyes close for just a second, but then he seemed to regain some strength, and while he kept his head resting on the chair, his eyes never left her face. He began to talk in a low, clipped tone. "As you have probably figured out, Miss Granger, I need the thestral heart for a potion I am working on. It is the last key ingredient, but time is running out. It needs to be delivered to its destination soon, and the potion is nearing completion in the next twenty-four hours. I don't know how long it will take me to collect the next batch of ingredients, or when our circumstances will align to allow the perfect chance such as we have been afforded just now. It is absolutely crucial that we get this, and now. If all of our plans fall apart, then it means a war. I don't know if I can protect him, if I am strong enough." This last part was said to himself. Snape's eyes had closed again.

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She had to speak up. Dumbledore had said to know herself, and it may have been foolhardy now, of all times, but she finally did. "Sir? I just can't do it." Her voice was thin, but the conviction was there underneath. "I can't help you get an ingredient that will aid the ... that will help Voldemort. You might as well just do what you have to do to me now. I can't do it for you. I am on Dumbledore's side, on Harry's side." Her voice broke.

Snape's eyes snapped open. "So am I!" he snapped irritably. "What do you think I have been talking about?"

Hermione was bewildered. "I thought you meant ..."

A dark, bitter expression crossed his features. "It is no more than I have ever been accused of. I am trying to tell you that I am working on a potion to protect our side, if you would but use the sense you are renowned for. You are wasting our time. Perhaps I should have enlisted the aid of another, less prejudiced ..."

"No, no," Hermione broke in hastily. "Forgive me. I misunderstood. I am here because I want to be of service in any way. What do you need of me, after I get the heart for you?" Inwardly she quaked at the thought of such a thing, but she tried to concentrate on the conversation at hand.

Snape focused on the girl in front of him. So many hopes rested on her. It was a slim hope for the future to rest on such slender shoulders, but they had no other choice. They needed her. "I need you to get me a house elf. We have to sneak into Azkaban."

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Razor's Edge Chapter 6

Disclaimer: This all belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Thanks to my beta, Mel! She worked for this one.

Hermione had been dumbstruck by Professor Snape's plan, and realized that he must have been more affected by his brush with the Dragon's Bane than he cared to admit. He needed a house elf for some sort of harebrained scheme to break into Azkaban? That didn't make any sense at all, and she could barely absorb the words he was speaking. She made a show of listening politely, nodding every once in a while, and excused herself as soon as she was able. Snape was still weaker than he liked to admit and needed rest, so it wasn't too hard to get away.

His hand snaked out and grabbed her wrist, though, just before she was out of his reach. His fingers were like steel, and his black eyes delved into hers. With a deadly calm he asked her, "You are going to get the thestral heart now? We can waste no more time. I already explained why time runs short. Everything now hangs on your part in this."

Hermione couldn't breathe, couldn't think of anything other than him. The whole room seemed filled with his very essence. Maybe in making the vow to him she had unknowingly given more than just her word? She nodded mutely, unable to muster the strength to do anything else. She had the oddest impulse to reach out and touch him. Her hand actually started to rise, almost on its own, already cupping as if to rest lightly along his jawline. She gasped and snatched it back, mortified, and hoped he hadn't guessed her intention. One perfect brow arched back at her, curious, and she whirled around blindly, stumbling out of his rooms.

"Hermione?" His deep, rich voice reached into her from where he sat in his chair. She stilled, waiting. "You will bring me what I seek." It was not a request. It was a demand for obedience..

She was powerless to deny him anything, it seemed. "Yes." At least her voice did not betray her by sounding as weak as she felt. She didn't turn around, but left quickly, shutting the door firmly behind her.

Once clear of Snape's overwhelming presence, Hermione was able to think for herself. Well, she had gotten herself into quite a bind. No matter; her part in this was only to bring Snape a simple ingredient, as expeditiously as possible. He still hadn't specified that she had to go and kill a thestral herself, thank Merlin, so her only constraint seemed to be that she couldn't share any of the information that she currently knew with anyone. That ought to be easy enough to accomplish.

Now, where to get a thestral heart without killing one herself? She could always make a quick trip to Knockturn Alley, as they were almost assured of having something like that somewhere, but she only relished that as a last ditch option, particularly since she couldn't take Harry or Ron with her for help.

She knew that Hagrid kept a small herd of thestrals in the Forbidden Forest. Perhaps it was time to pay him a visit. If she played her cards right, she might be able to get some information from him without revealing much in turn. At least she had a clear place to start in the mess she had made of things.

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"Mione! What brings you here to my doorstep?" Hagrid's florid face fairly glowed with pleasure when he opened up his massive door and saw the slip of a girl who stood on his front stoop.

Hermione tried to appear nonchalant. "Nothing! Do I need a reason to come and visit you? It's been a while, and I wanted to come and have a chat, Hagrid! Besides, I brought some of those Squawk 'n' Chip Cookies I know you like. I got some the last time I was in Hogsmeade." Hermione held up the bag she was carrying and shook it gently.

"Well, come in, come in! Where's Harry an' Ron? Aren't they with you?" Hagrid frowned when he saw that she was by herself. "You three are thick as thieves, you are. You had a fight?"

Hermione smiled. "Can't I go anywhere by myself? I am getting older now, you know. I'm not joined at the hip with those two. We can do our own things without being in a fight."

Hagrid shook his head as he put the kettle on to boil. "Now, Hermione, don't you be fussin' at me! I know when somethin' is up with you, and I can see that somethin' is up with you! If you want to keep yer secrets, then that's fine by me, but yer not pullin' the wool over my eyes fer a minute!" He looked at her through bushy brows. "Not that it's any of my business, but don't let it stew too long. They're good lads, and I hate ter see you fight, that's all. Now, let's see about them cookies!"

Hagrid talked and gestured expansively, explaining that the cookies were spelled to let out a realistic sounding animal roar whenever someone bit into a piece of chocolate, thus making them some of his favorites. Hermione enjoyed seeing him having such a good afternoon. As they talked, she realized that it really had been quite a while since she had stopped by for no other reason than just to enjoy the pleasure of Hagrid's company, and she began to feel a little guilty about her ulterior motives. There was nothing to be done about it, however, and as she swallowed the last bit of tea in her mug, she tried to get the conversation going in a direction that suited her purposes.

"So, Hagrid, I was just talking to Mumsie Hogendorf ... oh, maybe a week or so ago. She's one of the second years over in Hufflepuff? She thought that the carriage she rode in from the station was just powered by magic. Can you believe it? So I told her ..."

"Magic? Naw! It's thestrals! They're so majestic; people are scared of them, but they wouldn't hurt a fly, not even a fly, they're just the gentlest things ..." Hagrid carried on for a moment about the joyous properties of thestrals. Hermione hid a smile. Hagrid was really getting warmed up. He was in his element when he was talking about his beasts.

"I know, Hagrid. That's what I said," Hermione interrupted. Hagrid stopped in the middle of talking about what thestrals ate, a little befuddled about why she was still there. "Mumsie didn't believe me about the thestrals."

"Didn't *believe* you?" Hagrid burst out. "Well, I'll..."

"Probably because they're invisible, that's why. Not everyone understands them like you do," Hermione soothed him, feeling her conscience prick her a little bit. "I was a little curious myself. Can I ask you some questions about them?"

"Sure, sure. I love it when the students take an interest. Especially you, Hermione." Hagrid fairly beamed, and Hermione felt her good opinion of herself slide right into her feet. Hagrid was about the sweetest, kindest person anyone could ever hope to be friends with, and she was shamelessly taking advantage of him. Her only hope was that he would never find out about it and just think that this was a friendly social call.

"Okay, well ..." she had no idea how to frame her question so as not to arouse any kind of suspicion. "I was wondering how long they live?"

"Oh, lemme think. They're a long-lived creature, the thestral. I can't think that they don't live close to 300 years. Or mebbe longer."

"Three hundred years?" Hermione nearly shouted. "So you've never seen ..." she felt a curious tightening around her throat, as if there was the presence of a noose. Her wrists were also getting uncomfortably tight, as if the magic knew she was close to slipping up. She hastily amended her words. "... one being born?" she finished up lamely.

"No, thestrals are o' course very private creatures. They like to live alone, but they do allow you to make friends, once you get accustomed to their ways. It just takes time." Hagrid happily detailed some of the various things he had seen thestrals do, and Hermione was at a loss as to what else to say. The vow wasn't giving her a lot of wiggle room. She had one more angle, and then she was out of ideas.

"...so they're just like any animal, you see, once you get to know them." Hagrid was explaining reverently.

"I see, but how do you care for them, Hagrid? It must be difficult if you can't see them. Do they ever get sick? Can they ever become visible to you? Have you seen one?" Hermione tried to sound nonchalant, and picked at a loose seam on the hem of her robe.

"Oh, I've had no trouble caring for them. Didn't I just say they were as gentle a creature as you'd ever want to meet? They eat dead things, great slabs o' meat. Carrion! As easy to get..."

"So they never are visible to most people?" Hermione tried desperately to steer the conversation away from rotted meat, which was, frankly, turning her stomach.

"Aw, Hermione, you know when most people can see them. But other than that? It's funny, but people can see them when they're born, when they die, and when they're most vulnerable, about once every ten years or so. That doesn't seem fair, but there it is. The rest of the time, they're invisible." Hagrid stood up, his chair scraping back. "You'd best be getting back to the school, it's gettin' late. I did enjoy the visit with you, though."

Hermione ignored him. Her mind was caught on the little piece of new information. "Wait, Hagrid, did you say when they are most vulnerable? When is that?"

He eyed her. "Every ten years or so. Or mebbe it's twenty, I don't rightly reckon."

"No, no," Hermione tried to sound casual. "I mean, what happens when they are most vulnerable?"

"Well, they lose their hearts, don't they?"

Hermione had to suppress a gasp. "Their... hearts? But then don't they ... die?" There was something here she didn't understand, and her own heart was starting to quicken in anticipation of the puzzle being finally solved.

"Course not! In fact, I have one right here! At least, it was right here ..." Hagrid's voice trailed off as he turned from her and started casting items off of a high shelf and generally making a bigger mess of his hut. Hermione couldn't believe her ears. A thestral heart! Right here! She had to persuade Hagrid to give it to her, by any means necessary. "They are quite a prize, you know, being that they only lose them every couple of decades. Ah! Here it is!" Hagrid turned and held in his hand what looked like a gnarled, gray root. He brandished it with pride.

Hermione was perplexed. "But, Hagrid, I thought you said a heart. That looks rather like an old branch, no offense. Are you quite sure it hasn't come off an ash tree that burned down?" She tried not to wrinkle her nose.

Hagrid did look offended. "It surely is, Hermione! Although I guess you wouldn't know what one looks like, yer not t' be blamed fer it. I didn't mean the beatin' heart a one, I meant the horn part of one, like a unicorn. They shed it, like I said, and it has magical properties. They call it a heart, or mebbe a hart, like the deer, I dunno. It is a horn, after all, and a deer loses its horn, too. You know, these legends get all twisted up. Anyway, mostly young witches like yerself would be lookin' fer this kind of thing out in the woods. It's said to bring the greatest of hope and love to anyone wishin' fer it, mostly witches on their sweethearts, I think. That's the old tradition, anyway. And if you ran across one, you wouldn't even know what one was! Ah, well, that's the crime of it, with things being what they are these days."

Hermione could scarcely believe it. Could it be that she had overlooked the easiest answer of all? That she needn't slay a beast and cut out its heart, only pick up a piece of horn that it shed? Her eyes were wide as she pondered the possibility.

Hagrid looked down at the girl in front of him. The light of the world was shining in her eyes, and he was awash with tenderness for her. In her frailty, which was evident to him just now, she seemed to carry a tremendous burden on her narrow shoulders. Normally, Hermione seemed so smart and self-assured; her intellect was like a shield that protected her better than any armor ever could. As he gazed at her unguarded, though, he could see the workings of her inner mind laid more bare than perhaps she would have liked, and he saw that she may not have been as brash as she'd led him to believe all these years. His heart gave a little tug on her behalf. He wasn't very good with emotion, so his voice was rougher than he meant it to be. He cleared his throat. "Here, Hermione, mebbe you would like to have this."

Hermione had been calculating how best to ask Hagrid to give her this prize, and here he offered it up freely. She felt a clench somewhere in her chest, and a suspicious wetness flooded her eyes. She was not worthy to be called his friend. "No. I, uh, I couldn't possibly."

"Take it, girl." He thrust his hand out to her. "You're young, and you need your dreams more than I do. An old man like me."

"Oh, Hagrid, that's not true," Hermione said, but she took the offering just the same, feeling like a terrible person. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Now, go on. Get you back to the school before they send a party out t' find you." Hagrid gave her a gentle hug and pushed her towards the door.

"I will, Hagrid, but you need your dreams, too, you know. You're not that old," Hermione stepped off the stoop and into the gathering gloom, her treasure clutched to her chest.

"Old enough. And say hello t' Harry and Ron fer me!" Hagrid called after her into the night.

A/N: Thanks goes out to Mumsie Hogendorf for the gracious use of her name in this chapter.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Disclaimer: All this belongs to J.K. Rowling, as always, with an exception this time: I borrowed one line from Tolkien. So sorry, people. It's kind of a groaner.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Mel.

The day was dragging. This was a new experience for Hermione, who usually reveled in her classes and loved her work. Each minute felt like an hour, and she could almost hear the seconds thrumming in her veins in time to the beat of her heart. She was distracted. This could not be allowed. She steeled herself to focus and pay attention to her work. The day finally passed, but it felt like an eternity.

The previous night she had returned to the Gryffindor common room, deciding it was too late to put up with Professor Snape and the strange hold he seemed to have over her. She was tired, and she went to bed after securing the thestral heart. She needn't have bothered trying to get any rest. Hermione usually slept as purposefully as she did everything else in life, but last night was an exception. Her dreams kept her from any real rest; she was just on the cusp of sleep all night. The dreams teased her with images she couldn't quite make out. She wanted something, but she didn't know what. When she woke in the morning, she was cranky and unrefreshed, with a sort of longing that felt as if she had just lost something and couldn't quite remember where it was. It was extremely vexing!

Since Hermione was awake before everyone in the school anyway, she decided to drop the heart off at Snape's; then she could go about her classes in peace. She made her way to the same entry door she'd used previously and knocked, her bad mood evident in the strident tone her knuckles made upon the wood. That there was no immediate answer rankled her unreasonably, and she knocked again...louder and with faster rhythm...until she was practically beating upon his door in a rage. When it finally swung open, she was so involved she was almost surprised, and had to quickly snatch her fist back so as not to punch Snape as he stood there.

"Yes, what?" Snape bit out, having obviously been disturbed. He was wearing a robe (in Slytherin green, which may have amused her at any other time, a small part of her made note) and was in an unusual state of dishabille. She must have roused him from bed, which was understandable, given that he was recovering, but she had not considered that. Suddenly faced with his utter humanity, her senses were assailed and she could think of nothing else. Her eyes seemed to take on a life of their own and gave Snape a good once-over, drinking in the sight of him standing there in his pajamas. Hermione could see that although he was slender, he obviously was well-muscled, and she wondered why she'd never seen that before. She yearned for nothing more than to have him pull her into his strong arms and embrace her. That thought was so shocking that it managed to break the reverie into which she had fallen. Her cheeks stained the brightest crimson she was sure they had ever been, but at least the tableaux was broken. She cleared her throat. "Uh, sorry to disturb you. I have something for you, Professor."

If he had noticed her overeager perusal of his person, Snape gave no sign. "Come in, Miss Granger. The damage is done; you may as well enter. Although, in the future," here he gazed at her as she brushed past him, "perhaps you may do well to ... draw less attention to yourself?" He said the last part laconically with a bit of a smile. Hermione looked down and just hurried past him. Why did she always make such an idiot of herself around him?

Snape shut the door and led her into the same sitting room as before. They both took the same chairs. Hermione had intended to hand off the item and storm out. She was not really mad about anything, but she was tired from a night with no sleep, and the whole situation was feeling contrived and coerced to her. Well, perhaps not contrived, but she was definitely a pawn in a game she didn't want to play, and she wanted out. Now. She preferred to be on a playing field with opponents she could understand, and she wasn't so sure about what was going on with Snape. This made her uneasy. In fact, why was she still sitting here?

"What did you bring for me, Miss Granger? Was my confidence in you well placed? Don't dare to tell me that in the short span of a few hours you managed to bring me my

... heart's desire, as it were?" Snape sneered a little.

Hermione rummaged in her bag and brandished the thestral heart without preamble. It looked worse in the light of day, out of the crudity of Hagrid's hut and surrounded by the finer things in Snape's quarters. She didn't meet Snape's eyes. "You might have given me a bit of a clue, Professor, if you wanted it that badly. I thought I had to slaughter a wild animal!" She couldn't help sounding a little indignant.

Snape's eyes glowed a little as he reached for it. "Ah, Hermione, you do deserve all the accolades that have been bestowed upon you!"

Hermione reeled from hearing her name from his lips. She had to get ahold of herself! She was acting like a silly schoolgirl with a crush! On Professor Snape, of all people...it was embarrassing. She sneaked a glance at him and saw him gently examining it. His black pajamas under the green robe were not buttoned up as far as his formal robes usually came, allowing her a glimpse of his chest. It was alabaster, even paler than his hands, but the skin was flawless as marble, and she wanted to see more. He was talking. She had better stop this ridiculous mooning and listen.

"I didn't think you would be resourceful enough to find one, actually," Snape was saying in wonder. "This is much better for our purposes, and I am glad that you were able to succeed without bloodshed." His eyes snapped up to her face and he nodded curtly. "Well done, Miss Granger," he stood abruptly. "Now I need to see to the potion. You will stop by after your classes; it should be ready by then. I will have the next part of your instructions in place, and you will find out what I need from you then."

Hermione stood up. "I got you this impossible thing. Can't you ask someone else now?"

Snape was already past her and holding the door open. "There is no one but you."

Hermione ignored the thrill those words gave her and headed to her first class of the day.

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Never had she had such an interminably long day, and she blamed Professor Snape entirely for her lack of enthusiasm for subjects which had previously held adequate fascination. Since both he and his demands had entered her life, she could think of nothing but him. The fact that she had sought him out first was one that she pushed uncomfortably from her mind. Ever since she had gotten entangled in this mess, she had not been feeling depressed, but she was not going to give Snape credit for that. He credited himself with too much already, at least in her opinion.

Hermione dodged students deftly in the hallways and tried not to notice that the feelings of exhaustion fairly dropped away from her with each step she took towards Snape's rooms. The anticipation was growing in her belly, and she was nearly running by the time she turned the last corner to his door. She wondered what she would have to do next, what he would have her do, and she was so absorbed in her own thoughts that she didn't see the huge boy step out from around the corner and block her way. She hit him with all the force that she would a brick wall, and the wind was knocked out of her, her books flying. She sprawled on the ground, not seriously hurt, just surprised. It was Vincent Crabbe.

"Well, well, what do we have here? A Granger, caught off her guard," smirked Draco Malfoy. Hermione quickly stood up, dread overtaking her. She saw that Gregory Goyle was there to complete the loathsome trio. This did not bode well.

Hermione's mind was racing. The best way to deal with Draco and his thugs was to walk a fine line of disinterest. If you knuckled under to him, he enjoyed it too much to let you go, but if you humiliated him, he was dangerous. Hermione picked up her books. "I'm not off my guard, Malfoy, I'm just busy. Don't you have better things to do than to push girls around? Like go steal candy from a baby?" She made eye contact briefly and noticed that she had to look up to him since the last time they had had a run-in like this.

"Where is the rest of your ... threesome?" He leaned over and said the words suggestively in her ear. She couldn't help shuddering in disgust, and he laughed.

"Why don't you sod off, Malfoy, and take your cronies with you?" she gritted out, a little embarrassed that that was the best retort she could come up with.

Malfoy circled around her and looked her up and down. "I don't think so. You're in my hallway, mudblood; you're going to play the game my way. Right, boys?"

Crabbe nodded, but Goyle cracked his neck from side to side.

A sudden light lit Draco's eyes. "Why are you here, anyway, mudblood? Sneaking around?"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, I wasn't sneaking, Malfoy! Even you could see that I wasn't making a big secret of it." Hermione suddenly realized her mistake.

Malfoy looked interested. He took a step closer, which was a step too close for Hermione's comfort. He was behind her, and with Crabbe and Goyle in front of her, she was feeling cornered. "So what were you doing here, near dear old Slytherin? Coming to pay me a visit? I'm touched. Why, exactly, were you running down this hall so quickly?"

Hermione could feel the slightest wisp of warning magic around her neck, like a stray hair, to remind her to watch her words. So the vow was still in effect. Interesting. She filed that away for later, because it didn't help her now. She took a breath, but was drawing a blank. Why would she be in the hallway leading to Slytherin, if she couldn't mention the fact that she was making a visit to the Potions teacher in his private rooms? "I ... had a fight with Harry and Ron." The words were out before she knew it. "I need ..." she cast about for something suitably horrible that they would understand. "Revenge."

It sounded weak and laughable to Hermione, but Draco couldn't seem to believe his good fortune. "You've come to the right place. I can help you with that. For a price, of course," he added, eying her craftily.

"Oh, come off it, Malfoy. You want to stick it to Harry for free!" Hermione couldn't believe his nerve. He was so smug, he bought it hook, line and sinker. It made her sick. She hoped that he got what was coming to him one day.

Malfoy couldn't help the duplicitous gleam in his eyes. "What did you have in mind, Granger?"

"Oh, I figured I'd see what you thought," she demurred to him. "You're better at these sorts of things than I am, being Slytherin, after all." She put a slight slur on the word Slytherin as an insult, but Draco took it as a compliment, the idiot. Draco liked it when girls played dumb. All she had to do was play up to him and bide her time. Hopefully, Snape would come out looking for her, see what was going on, and rescue her! Or, she amended hastily, at least put an end to Draco's torment. No need to get carried away with romantic notions!

"Yes, it's true. As it turns out, I do have a plan to humiliate Potter." His pretty features twisted as he spit out Harry's name as if it were a poison. "We needed someone who is close to him to make it work. This will be the perfect chance!" He smiled wickedly.

Hermione felt a little sick. If Draco already had a plan to hurt Harry, maybe she had better go along and foil it. That would be the best thing to do, so that Draco couldn't just rope someone else into doing his bidding later on. She tried to seem enthusiastic. "Okay, tell me what it is."

Draco looked at her, his eyes narrowing. "I can't do it here. I have to show you. In my room. That's where the things are, to, uh, give to him. And Weasley, of course." Draco seemed to think something was funny. He was smirking. "What's the matter, Granger, losing your nerve?"

Hermione didn't trust him for a moment. The waves of menace were almost palpable in the air around him. She was worried about Harry, though. She hadn't been a very good friend to him lately, and this would be a good way to make up some of it. Hermione shrugged, trying to put on a show, and leered back at Draco, hoping she didn't look as silly as she felt. "You have no idea how much I want to give him exactly what he deserves. I'll do it."

Draco turned on his well-polished heel. "Crabbe! Goyle! Come on!" They were only a few paces from the Slytherin painting, and Hermione felt the other boys right behind

her. Draco spoke the password in a deliberate undertone, and the painting swung open. She stepped into her enemy's common room, feeling, ridiculously enough, like she was being escorted to jail.

Slytherin was not that much different from Gryffindor, though she was loathe to admit it. It had a consistent silver and green snake theme throughout to demonstrate house allegiance to any person in doubt, but then again, Gryffindor was equally overzealous in its support of the red and gold. She could have done without the black leather couches, but they did look comfortable. She hardly had time to take in much more, as she was herded along and up the stairs before any of the Slytherins that were reclining could make note of what Draco was up to. The four of them entered the boys' dormitory area, and Draco pulled out his wand. "*Colloportus!*" The door locked.

Hermione began to get nervous. "Malfoy, why don't I wait downstairs, and you bring what it is down there?" she tried to keep her voice light. "Girls aren't allowed up here, anyway."

"Maybe not in *your* house," Draco countered. "You are staying right here." He waved his wand around. "*Muffliato!*"

Hermione's breath hitched in her throat. The idea of what could possibly occur here had never even presented itself to her before. Malfoy was annoying, yes, and bad in every way, but ... actually evil? The thought that he could physically harm her had never entered her head. She had always been safe at Hogwarts, had never felt a threat like this, and she froze at the idea that danger might come from her very own classmates, no matter how much she had disliked them in the past. She had to talk, to reason with him. He couldn't be as terrible as this.

"So, Draco..." she tried not to grimace at the use of his first name, "you said you have a plan to get even with Harry, and I really can't wait to hear about it. Can you tell me about it? I'm sure you've thought it over for a long time." There, appeal to his overinflated ego.

Draco grinned at her. "Actually, Granger, the idea just came to me in the hallway. The best way to get back at Potter is to hurt one of his friends. You said you wanted to do that, so thanks a load." He winked at her. "The fact that you walked right up here just made it a lot easier for me. I am going to break you, Granger." Draco pulled his tie off. "Crabbe, Goyle, grab her."

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Disclaimer: This all belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Melisse.

Hermione had never felt the sort of blind fear she did at this moment. It was as if the floodgates had opened on cue and her veins were filled with ice water. When she heard Malfoy say the words, "Grab her," she saw everything snap into the crisp, clear focus of reality. This was really happening to her! The fog was gone. She backed away from Malfoy, but his two goons were behind her, which was worse. The panic she was feeling threatened to rise up and choke her. She reached into her sleeve for her wand, but Crabbe was already there, too fast, and Goyle had her other arm. No matter how hard she fought, their meaty hands were vice-like on her, and she wasn't going anywhere.

"Malfoy, listen," she begged, hating the sound of her pathetic voice, but he aimed his wand at her.

"*Silencio!* I've been wanting to do that for a long time, Granger." Draco looked at her. "Put her on the bed. I could use a spell to body-bind, but where's the sport in that? Afterwards you'd just feel vindicated."

Hermione put as much venom as she could muster into the look she gave him. Crabbe and Goyle wrenched her arms around and threw her on one of the beds. She yelped with the excessive force, but of course no sound came out. She continued to struggle, but to no avail. Crabbe and Goyle may have been stupid, but what they lacked in brains, they made up for in muscle, and she wasn't moving an inch. In the meantime, Draco divested himself of his robe, and as he removed his belt, he cracked it, just for her benefit. He leaned over her. "Oh, and Granger, when I said I was going to break you? I didn't just mean that I was going to fuck you. Although that will be part of it." He gestured to Crabbe. "Get her clothes off, will you? Do I have to tell you to do everything?"

Hermione started to buck in earnest when she heard that. This was the most nightmarish thing that had ever happened to her, and they wouldn't be getting an article of clothing off her without a fight! If this had to happen, it was going to be after she had exhausted every ounce of energy she possessed fighting it. She would rather die than let Draco Malfoy be the one to steal her virtue.

Draco whistled. "If I had known you would have that much passion, I would have gotten you in the sack a long time ago, Granger. Save some for me. And Crabbe and Goyle, of course."

Just when Hermione thought she couldn't be more horrified, that stupid twat opened his mouth! Crabbe reached for her shirt, and Hermione twisted and turned so viciously that there was a real scuffle on the bed. As this was happening, there was a knock on the door to the boys' room.

"Sh!" Draco warned his cohorts. Hermione of course, could say nothing. He dispersed the muffling and locking charms and cracked the door. "Yes?"

"Draco!" It was Pansy Parkinson. "You'd better come down."

Draco smoothed his blond hair back in a show of nonchalance. "Actually, Pans, I'm busy. I can accommodate you later, okay?"

"No, Draco, I saw who you have with you!" hissed Pansy venomously. "And I am telling you that Professor Snape is asking for you. Downstairs! Now! If you get caught with her ... just go. I'll cover for you."

From her vantage point on the bed, Hermione could see the rage overtake Draco's features before he dropped a mask over them. He almost looked like his father for a minute, but he couldn't quite keep the fury out of his eyes at being thwarted. He grabbed his robe from where he had dropped it, and as he dressed, he leaned over her, and for her ears only, whispered as if to a lover, "If you tell a soul about this, I will make good on what didn't happen here today, Mudblood. You will regret it, I promise you that," and he kissed her mouth very gently, only at the end turning it to a bite. She felt a drop of blood on the inside of her lip, where no one could see. Malfoy looked deep into her eyes to make sure she understood the message, then turned away. "Let's go, Goyle, Crabbe." They released her.

She sat a minute, shaking. Pansy came into the room and eyed her with distaste. "Probably a silencing charm, too, huh?"

Hermione nodded, and Pansy dispelled it.

"Thank you," Hermione gasped.

"Listen," Pansy sauntered around the bed. "I'm not doing this for you. Draco is mine. So get out and keep quiet, or you'll be sorry. I saw him bring you up here. If you want to return the favor, just shut up and leave him to me!"

Hermione was incredulous. "That's fine by me; you can keep him. I don't want any part of him!" Hermione jumped off the bed and tried to run out the door.

Pansy grabbed her arm. "Hold on there! You can't just run out of here. At this time of day everyone will see you. You and I will go together and pretend to be friends."

Hermione was appalled. "Why would I do that?"

Pansy's eyes glittered dangerously. "We both have something to protect. I'm protecting Draco, and you're protecting yourself. Let's go! Snape's looking for you, too, for some reason."

So Hermione and Pansy descended into the Slytherin common room together, and while Hermione couldn't exactly paste a smile on, she was glad to be in the company of someone, anyone, other than Draco Malfoy. And when she spotted his blond head in sharp relief against a dark one in the middle of the common room, she had never in her whole life felt such happiness flood her as she did right then to see none other than Professor Snape. She fairly skipped up to him right there, and did her best to ignore Malfoy.

"Miss Granger!" Snape seemed startled to see her in this unlikely setting. "I ... didn't expect to find you here amongst my Slytherins. Are you here courtesy of Miss Parkinson?" For Pansy had drifted away, released from her obligation.

"Yes, and Draco here," Hermione caught his eye; he gave her as much of a menacing glare as he could with Snape standing by, "was kind enough to show me how things are done here in Slytherin."

"Hm," Snape looked at him, and Draco just smiled beatifically. "Well, it is ... serendipitous that I encountered you here, Miss Granger, as I have need of you in my rooms. Please accompany me." With no further explanation, he turned and walked down the corridor that led to his rooms.

Draco smirked at her. "Don't act all innocent with me, Granger. Now I know what you were running so fast for in the hallway! If I knew you were that desperate to get some I wouldn't have held you down!"

"Oh, and Mr. Malfoy?" Snape turned around in a whirl of black robes as if he had just remembered something. "I volunteered you, along with Messrs. Crabbe and Goyle, to help restore the Potions storeroom. You will go there now. It may take several weeks to set it to rights again, even with such ... diligent workers as yourselves. Miss Granger?"

Hermione got the slightest stab of satisfaction at seeing Draco's mouth fall open like a gutted fish as she rushed after Snape.

They didn't speak at all until they reached the sanctuary of his rooms, and indeed, she was beginning to think of them as a sanctuary. They had come in through the Slytherin common room door this time, so Hermione got to see the whole suite of rooms that constituted his living quarters. Teachers did not make much to live on, but as Head of Slytherin, Snape had been gifted with ample space to call his own, and had furnished it tastefully throughout the years so that the place really looked like a warm, inviting home. Hermione's eyes skipped past the room she knew to be the bedroom, her cheeks heating, and they went to their now customary places in what she thought of as the living room. When they were settled, Snape cleared his throat.

"Miss Granger, thanks to your efficacy in the objective I set for you, things are going exactly as they should...that is to say, according to my plan. Now, I have brewed the potion to specification...which was no small feat, I might add...and it is complete. All that remains is to deliver it to its final destination. At this juncture, I find I also require certain ... skills ... that you alone seem to possess. You are a very talented witch, Miss Granger."

Hermione may have been lulled by his honeyed tones, but at this her eyes traveled of their own accord to his and were held as if by magic. She could easily see why Severus Snape belonged to the House of Slytherin, as his gaze was as hypnotic as any serpent's, and she felt enthralled and completely enraptured. Had he intended the double meaning of his words? Surely not; it was just the matter with Draco that was bringing such thoughts into her head. Why was it that such an act that appeared abhorrent a few short minutes ago now didn't seem so repellent at all? Hermione gazed into the very depths of Snape's dark eyes and couldn't discern what she saw there. She licked her lips.

"Uh, what?"

Snape blinked, unused to her indelicacy. If he was taken aback by her apparent lack of graciousness in accepting a compliment, he tried not to show it, and he smoothly continued. "Thank you for retrieving the thestral heart so quickly."

Hermione drew a ragged breath. It was hot in here, she was sure of it. "You're very welcome, sir. How else can I help? You said something about house-elves? And Azkaban? I'm not sure I follow."

Snape gave a half-smile. "I would not expect you to. I might remind you that your previous vow holds in this matter, as well. Have you felt its confines yet?" Seeing her nod, he continued. "Then you are aware of its power. I shall explain the second part of the plan to you now."

"Please," Hermione nodded for him to continue, as she was anxious to hear what was expected of her, what with all of her, uh, talents. Whatever he supposed them to be. Studying hard, maybe?

"Well," Snape sounded uncharacteristically uncertain. "I confess myself to be at a loss. I am not sure where to begin. It is a complicated tale, and not all of it bears repeating. Let me just say this. I have created a potion, as you have been made aware, and it needs to be delivered into the very heart of Azkaban to achieve its full potential. I have, in the course of my own investigations in this matter, discovered that the only creatures equipped to carry out such a task are house-elves. It seems unlikely, but I can assure you, it remains true. Through all of their long years in service to wizards and witches, particularly those of the Dark persuasion, it seems that they have built up quite a tolerance for the ... grimness that exudes from Azkaban. They are singularly prepared to be steeped in the atmosphere without being poisoned by it."

Hermione's eyes were getting rounder by the minute. "You propose to sneak into Azkaban with a potion?" Her voice was a squeak.

Snape waved a hand impatiently. "You have not been attending me, Miss Granger. A house-elf is going to accomplish this feat of derring-do. And here is where your part comes in. I was made aware that you formed a union for the creatures a few years back? As representative for them, you are now in a favorable position to select the appropriate one, train it in stealth tactics and wayfinding, and generally ensure that it is able to perform its part satisfactorily. It seems like ... providence ... that you already have a link to the house-elf community."

Hermione was so distressed that she nearly jumped to her feet. "I can do no such thing, Professor! S.P.E.W., while an extremely good cause and still worthwhile venture, was not supported by anyone outside of the house-elf world, and they were not able to speak up for themselves to break the chains of slave labor that still bind them!" Snape looked a little bored by her proselytizing. "I believe that because of this injustice still poisoning their minds, as well as their bodies..."

"The point, Miss Granger," Snape ground out warningly. "If there is one, get to it."

She looked down, deflated. "I may have made some enemies of the house-elves. I certainly have no friends there."

"Then this will be a challenge for you," Snape said in droll tones, "but necessary all the same. You have your task before you."

"But I don't know anything about stealth tactics, or ... wayfinding technologies! How can I teach a simple elf?" Hermione was distressed to hear a wail beginning in her voice.

Snape quirked an eyebrow at her in amusement. "Simple elf, Miss Granger? And just a moment ago fighting for their equality, hm? A lesser man might make note of the hypocrisy."

Hermione scowled at him, her earlier attraction erased in her rising ire. "You know what I meant! They are not fit for that sort of thing. Come to think of it, neither am I!"

Now it was Snape's turn to scowl, and it was in earnest. "What exactly do you deem them fit for, if not for this? They are not suited to the task of serving their country, but they are fit to stay safely in the kitchens so that you may wave a banner and sign some names to a petition in their stead? Choose your next words with care, Miss Granger, that you may look your Gryffindor pride in the mirror next morn!"

Hermione was uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken, having the distinct impression that she was being outwitted, and not liking it one bit. She also thought that perhaps the topic had turned from the original theme, and she struggled to swim to shallower water. "If I can recruit one, I myself still am not knowledgeable in the areas you need me to be. I could never learn in time, certainly not enough to teach someone else. And anyway, you never said what the potion is for. What is it? How could it possibly have anything to do with serving the country?"

Snape skewered her with an unwavering look. "All in good time, Miss Granger. I cannot at this time tell you what the potion does, only that it has the most vital importance. It must be delivered to Azkaban, even if the odds of accomplishing it are not in our favor, and it appears to be a lost cause. We have to try. It may well be impossible, but we will do it...together, if need be. It is the only chance we have, the only choice we have. I will teach you, you will teach the elf. It is the only way."

Hermione assessed Snape. He didn't trust her, not enough to tell her what the potion was for. Maybe she could find out on her own. "How much time do we have?"

Snape relaxed into his chair with her apparent acquiescence. "The potion was the first biggest hurdle. It was on a strict..." Something about the way he clipped that word made her shiver delightfully "...timetable. Now we have until the first full moon of the vernal equinox."

"April ninth," Hermione breathed, beating Snape to the calculation. "That gives us nearly three weeks' time."

"Yes." Snape's eyes gleamed appreciatively at Hermione's quick thinking. "You will need to spend all your time with me, preparing." It didn't sound like so much of a command this time, but more like a comment that might be met with criticism.

"I'll need every minute," Hermione said, not daring to look back. Her eyes were sure to give her away.

"I daresay we both will," Snape said drily.

Hermione was not heartened by the fact that his thoughts seemed to be running in a more appropriate direction than hers. It might be a long three weeks, after all.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Disclaimer: All of this belongs to J.K. Rowling.

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Melisse.

In the end, although Hermione didn't want to get saddled with the rejection of the house-elf community, that's exactly what she ended up with.

Her next task in a seemingly endless series of assignments was to recruit a house-elf, and she had royally peeved the bunch of them a few years ago, albeit with the best of intentions. Still, it was apparent that bad feelings remained. Hermione realized the extent of her earlier offenses when she started asking around and was met with overt hostility from every house-elf she chanced upon. They had to be decent, it appeared, when performing a prescribed servile role, but if she asked a query or favor of one that fell outside that perceived range, then they turned their rancor upon her in full force. She had to use all of her ingenuity to even gain access to them anywhere *en masse*, and it turned out that she only managed to find out about an opportunity through dumb luck, nothing more.

After having been rebuffed countless times, and frankly growing both weary and not a little scared of what Snape would do if she failed right out of the starting gate with her task, Hermione was tossing and turning with worry in her bed. She couldn't face the idea of what Snape would think of her if she failed. She couldn't get to sleep for the thinking about it all, and the bed was not a comfortable place to be any more. Hermione crept down to the Gryffindor common room and sat there for awhile, but it felt like she had stared at the same walls for years. She needed to take a walk. It was the middle of the night, which was against the rules, but there wasn't a soul in the school who didn't slip out of their common rooms at some point. In fact, Hermione thought with a smile, you had to be careful that you didn't bump into someone you knew out after hours, there was so much traffic. It seemed everyone had a secret these days. She wasn't even the slightest bit naughty to just want to take a walk.

With that bit of rationalization to keep her superior, Hermione slipped out of the painting...which was, thankfully, snoring and not awake to give lecture...and walked briskly until she was out of sight of her corridor. Then she ambled around for awhile until she found herself in the mood for a snack. That made the kitchens a logical destination.

The Hogwarts kitchens were rarely seen by students. They were a marvel of sophisticated equipment; the most state-of-the-art cooking equipment was installed for use, and it gave a very Muggle feel to the place that was at odds with the rest of the castle. As Hermione approached, she could hear voices, and though she didn't mean to eavesdrop, she couldn't help but be interested in the conversation she overheard as the house-elves toiled away by hand for the next day's meals.

"... he does, Punchkie, he does! I see it with me own eyes, him just sitting there in the back o' the class, as if he belong there! I was so ashamed! He really think he is human!" The voice broke down into tiny sobs.

"There, there, don't cry, Dumptie. He can't really think he is a human. Perhaps he just was waiting to give one of them something in class, and he is an especially good servant!" Punchkie sounded pleased with himself for coming up with a reasonable explanation for abhorrent elf behavior.

Fresh sobs broke out. "Me own nephew! What will everyone think? No, no, he think he can learn, can do magic or something! He think he has some kind of special purpose, he is cracked in the head. I don't want it to get out, we will have to leave this place, this wonderful place, with everyone here ..." Dumptie was overcome by the very idea of having to leave because of his nephew.

Hermione was thrilled at this piece of good news. Of course, not thrilled at the sorrow of the miserable Dumptie, but she was sure that this could work out for them all, if only she could handle the situation correctly. She swiftly stepped around the corner and assumed the most cold and commanding look she had in her. This startled the elves, who were not used to students being around the kitchens at all, especially at night.

"You there!" Hermione pointed authoritatively. "Bring me your nephew, now!"

The elves cowered, but they had been given a direct order and couldn't disobey. Hermione hated having to do it this way, but the past few days had shown her that if she asked them or explained herself, they would just leave. They showed up with the elf in question. He appeared out of the ordinary.

"You, there, will you come with me? I have a ... uh, quest, for which I need an elf to do a great..." the magic in the vow restricted what Hermione could say, "thing. You have been selected. Will you accept?" She tried not to roll her own eyes, but the other elves were dumbstruck, and this elf was having a paroxysm of joy.

"Yes, my lady!" the elf cried. "I most joyously plight my troth to thee!"

"Okay, then," Hermione was a little nervous, not sure what to do now that she had the elf. A wicked idea came to her. "You may present yourself to Professor Snape at five o'clock tomorrow morning, and tell him you are reporting for your duties." She decided to play it up, since he appeared to have a medieval bent, what the heck. "He hath a terrible temper, so pay it no mind, good sir. This is part of your test of worthiness, so do not be scared off! Be brave my little elf!"

The elf drew himself up to his full height. "There is none braver than me, my lady! I shall vanquish this foe, slay this dragon, mine enemy ..."

Whoa! "Um, no, Sir ... Elf."

"Sneephig, but for you, you may call me Figgie," he supplied helpfully.

Okay, maybe he was cracked in the head. Hermione was getting into the swing of the game, however. "Sir ... Figgie, Professor Snape is not a foe; he is your mentor and greatest ally, but he will be testing you tomorrow, so just don't run away when you wake him up and he gets a little upset. I will be there presently and we shall continue to train for the quest together." That should do it. The look on Snape's face when he got his wake-up call made her eyes glow with suppressed laughter. He deserved a little payback for the difficulties she had gone through in the last few days!

Figgie's eyes shone. "Fair maiden, how shall I thank thee? Let me press my suit upon thee, let me give you mine..." he grabbed her hand and began to kiss it.

Hermione was mildly alarmed. She may have created a monster. "I'm for bed, good knight. Just ... let me go in peace and I will see you later."

"I bid you good night, then," he said dreamily.

Hermione stepped away quickly, and had to hide her giggles so that his feelings would be spared. A furious fight began in her wake, but she had no doubt it was an entirely different one than the one she had interrupted. As for her, she was suddenly tired enough to sleep the whole night through!

*

Hermione made her way to Snape's rooms after classes, a little mortified that she had had the gall to pull a practical joke on him. What had seemed like a good idea in the middle of the night was feeling regrettable in the cold light of day. As anxious as she was to find out what the implications were, she wasn't about to make the same mistake twice, and she was careful in the hallways this time. Draco was surely on the warpath for her now in retribution for his punishment, so she had to keep an eye out.

She reached Snape's rooms with no mishaps, however, and Snape answered his door as if expecting her. Hermione nervously searched his face for signs of anger, but he gave nothing away as he ushered her into his living room. The silence stretched out, and Hermione fiddled with the cuff of her robe, waiting for him to say something. He merely waited. She couldn't take it!

"So, did anyone come by, Professor?" she tried to ask him as innocently as she could.

Snape steepled his fingers. "Why yes, Miss Granger, I had a visitor today." He gave nothing away.

"I hope he didn't disturb you?" she looked at him sweetly.

"If I didn't know better, Miss Granger, I might think that you had something to do with the time that that infernal creature showed up at my bedside." Though his tone was as calm as ever, there was a hint of humor in it, and the smallest twitch of the corner of his mouth made Hermione's heart leap. He wasn't mad!

"I was only carrying out my duty. I found him for you. His timing was his own." She was emboldened by his amusement, and couldn't help this lighthearted feeling in her chest. Was she flirting?

Snape gave her a slightly appreciative look. "At the risk of repetition, I will say again: you may have made a decent Slytherin." This time the words were soft, a compliment, and she couldn't help but wonder if he was flirting back a little, too. Before she had time to consider it, the look snapped away from his features, and he leaned forward, the tone changed. "Now, then, with the arrival of the house-elf, we have much work to do ..."

*

And work they did. Over the course of the next few days, they worked hard with the elf in stealth tactics...which was really just teaching him how to sneak around quietly without being noticed...and how to use the best concealment charms to his advantage. Wayfinding techniques was really just a fancy way of showing him how to read a map and having him memorize the best route into the Azkaban underground. All of this took an awful lot of patience.

"Remember, Hermione, the most important thing to remind Figgie of is that he must cast the Salterus charm over himself right before we begin. It is a very small thing, but of the most vital importance. Sometimes the smallest chinks in the armor can bring the whole thing down." Snape was looking at her intensely, and it was hard for Hermione to concentrate. She didn't want to think.

"I don't understand, sir. The Salterus charm? I've never heard of it." She didn't want to admit ignorance, but better to ask than to bungle it later.

They had had another long day, and Snape was packing their things up, but he stopped to explain. "It makes a house-elf's skin impervious to the sea water surrounding Azkaban prison. I have discovered that due to an anomaly in their genes, house-elves begin to sweat uncontrollably when they are exposed to the salty air of the ocean. He will only have a few minutes before his system shuts down from the toxins, like a fish out of water. It is some strange reaction. That is why house-elves can sneak into Azkaban; they can't normally be in the atmosphere of it. No one ever thought to spell the place against them, because they would die if they tried. The Salterus Charm allows them to change their natural reaction, for a time. The charm should hold for long enough to suit our purposes."

Hermione was looking at Snape's mouth as he spoke, and she heard the words, but she was more aware of his nearness. They were alone in his apartments, Figgie having left. They were working together so well, and Hermione suddenly realized it: she was falling for Professor Snape. She couldn't stop the slight gasp that the revelation caused to escape her lips. How could she not have recognized all of those feelings until just now? How could she have let it happen? Even as she tried to push the idea of it back down into her chest, it rose up and filled her chest, the biggest thing in her world.

Professor Snape heard her gasp, of course. "Miss Granger? Are you quite well? We have been working long hours, you need some rest."

She could kick herself, but the look of concern in his eyes was still delicious. "Could you ... maybe ... we have been working together a long time now. Maybe you could call me by my first name?" She held her breath.

Snape went still. He turned and looked at her with a liquid deliberation, and his eyes bored directly into hers, searching. "Hermione." A sigh. He closed his eyes a moment. "Miss Granger, I dare not, even if I ... No. You are not mi ... I cannot. Please understand." He wouldn't look away.

Hermione broke his gaze first, embarrassed. She had been too forward, ruined things. Of course he wouldn't return her feelings; she was just a student and one that irritated him, at that. She had to save her dignity. The problem was, she couldn't think of a thing to say over the lump of hurt in her throat. There were no clever comebacks in her quick mind this time, ready to toss out.

Snape came and stood directly in front of her, his hand tilting her chin up to meet his eyes. It was the most physical contact she had ever had with him, and even that small touch felt like everything, the electricity crackling. She didn't want to meet his eyes, afraid he would see the excess moisture in hers, would see too much, but he simply stood there until she was ready to look at him. He said, "Miss Granger," and it was a caress, better than her first name. It felt like she had come home.

"I can't give you what you seek, but I can tell you something else," Snape said gently. "I think you are as ready as you will ever be to hear about what this potion is going to do. Do you want to hear it?"

Hermione nodded, trying to clear her head. He was giving her time and a gracious exit. Perhaps he was not so unaffected by her as he was trying to appear? She wished that she were not so inexperienced!

Snape settled into his spot and gestured for her to do the same. "I trust you now as I never have, Miss Granger. So I may as well tell you the final piece of the puzzle. The potion that we are delivering is an anti-dementor potion. It will create the opposite of a dementor, essentially a being that has all of the properties in opposition of a dementor. We needed the thestral heart to do that. This potion deals with opposite forces in life ... you are familiar with the term yin and yang?"

Hermione nodded, her eyes huge. This was an idea that had never occurred to her before.

"Yes, well, balance and harmony can be restored, but we must deliver the potion to the very heart of darkness, where so much misery has been perpetrated onto mankind. The dementors represent all that is negative in the soul's life force, and this potion will create a sort of a chain reaction once it is in place, a sort of a virus, that will infect the dementors and turn them into forces of lightness and goodness. Dumbledore and I have been working on this for some time."

Hermione was surprised. "Dumbledore?"

Snape kept going. "Yes, of course. You know, Miss Granger, that a war is coming. It is nearly inevitable. Dumbledore has told me a lot of things are inevitable, but if they are, then this should at least be a big help on our side. If it can't totally avert the war, it will be one of the biggest weapons we have, and one of the biggest blows to the opposition. We must succeed at this venture. A lot of lives are at stake, more lives than you can imagine." At this, Snape stopped abruptly and seemed to fall into his own line of thought. "We will succeed, Miss Granger. Your happiness depends upon it."

Hermione didn't know why, but she believed him.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 10

Hermione has a secret that leaves her deeply indebted to an enemy. Can she turn the tables on him?

Disclaimer: It's all J.K. Rowling's, with a few quotes that I couldn't resist going to the great Tolkien. Sorry, again, about that. I recognize the cheese factor, but I can't seem to stop myself.

A/N: There may be some quibbles about an event that occurs in this part of the story and how it goes into the timeline. I tried to dovetail it pretty closely, but I know that it isn't exactly in the canon (I think I am a few months off). I thank you all very heartily for your kind words of support. This was my first real work, and you have all been great reviewers! I think it would be a bad soap if I kept dragging it out. Thanks again, and I hope you enjoy! And many thanks to my beta, Mel.

It was what they had been waiting for: the night of the first full moon following the vernal equinox. The time was ripe, and they had to do it now, ready or not. Hermione was as nervous as she had ever been in her whole life. She certainly didn't feel ready. It didn't matter, though; the time for preparation was at an end, and the time for action was at hand. She just had to hope that all the weeks of work were enough, now that the moment was so close at hand. She had a special dispensation to be out tonight, and she left by the back door under cover of darkness with Sir Figgie.

It was too dangerous for Snape to be seen as being part of this plan. His part was finished...he had developed the potion and helped train the elf; now he was waiting back in his rooms. He couldn't be associated with them if they were caught. They were on their own. Figgie and Hermione were dressed in black from head to toe. Hermione held the precious vial. She walked away from Hogwarts. The plans were running through her head, over and over. She looked down at the little elf by her side. He was strange, indeed, and rather annoying at times. Yet she had grown fond of him in the course of the long days of working with him. He was very excited to be part of a quest. She cleared her throat and tried not to appear nervous.

"So, Sir Figgie, are you all ready? You know what to do? Any last questions?" Hermione tried to convey comfort and calmness.

She needn't have bothered. Figgie was beyond excited. "Verily, Milady! I am readied and have no queries to ask of you, save one."

Hermione stopped and looked down. "What is it? Remember, that third turn is to the right, not the left; you always want to confuse it there. And don't forget that the stones are loose when you come up to the..."

"No, Milady, I would ask you a favor."

"A ... what?" Hermione blinked down at him, distracted. Her mind was still in the labyrinthine passages of Azkaban. "What do you want me to do?"

Figgie was patient. "A favor. A standard of yours to wear into this most heinous battle so as to court the whimsies of luck to smile upon me whilst I am in the fray. With your favor, I am sure to be blessed with it, indeed."

Hermione didn't take Figgie very seriously, but he was in earnest, and his eyes never left her face. She felt ridiculous, like she was playing a charade, but she couldn't help being pleased that he had asked, and that he put so much personal importance on it. "I don't think you will need to rely on luck, Sir Figgie, but if it will bring you comfort, then I will be happy to."

"You are most gracious, Milady," he cried, and grabbed her hand and kissed it. She snatched it back hastily and thought a minute about what she had on her that would do for a favor.

"I know in days of ... uh ... yore, ladies gave a length of cloth, right? Well, I don't seem to have anything like that on me. Will this do?" Hermione was wearing a pair of earrings. She took one out. It was a silver stud in the shape of a simple Celtic knot. It was beautifully done, not too small, but just the right size. She leaned down and pinned it on his collar.

Figgie thrust out his chest. "I vow to be the bravest knight to wear such an adornment!"

Hermione smiled at him. "Just bring it back in one piece, and yourself along with it. You really don't have any other questions? You remember all the plans?"

They walked on and talked a bit about how he planned to deliver the potion, and suddenly, with the paradoxes of time, they reached their destination both far too soon and as if it had taken forever. Hermione turned to Figgie. This was as far as she had intended to go. She went on her knees before him, so as to better gain his attention.

"Okay, Sir Figgie, some last reminders. The potion must be delivered *exactly* at midnight, and right at the place we agreed upon. If you release it too early, it will be disastrous, okay? It is of paramount importance that you remember that. Not before midnight, and not anywhere but the heart of Azkaban. I have spelled the device on your wrist to tell you when it is time." Hermione pointed to a device similar to a wristwatch.

Figgie nodded impatiently. "Yes, yes, we have practiced all of this. May I go yet?"

Well, he didn't appear nervous. That was a good sign. "One more thing. Once I Apparate you, you will be on your own. You will have to negotiate all of the hallways and passages by yourself. I will be able to see you, but not hear you, and I will not be able to come to your aid. This is as far as I can go. If you are in trouble, you must think of a way to get out of it on your own. If you can clear the prison grounds, then I can retrieve you again. Okay?"

Figgie nodded vigorously. "I am prepared to meet my foe in battle."

"No," Hermione groaned. "There will be no meeting of foes, if you can possibly avoid it."

"Right, right," he amended hastily. "Merely an expression, Milady. I am ready now. Let us begin."

Hermione had to quell the urge to hug the little elf. She took a shaky breath and stood up. "I suppose you're as ready as you'll ever be. Here is the solution. Be very careful, please. It is of the most delicate nature, may I remind you." She handed the vial over. It glowed pink in the darkness. Figgie secured it in his shirt and stood inside the Apparation spot.

Hermione took out her wand and thought carefully about the words of the spell she was going to perform. She was confident she could do it, but this was some of the most advanced magic she had ever performed. She had been practicing, of course, but this was practice no longer. "Good luck," she said softly.

Figgie nodded once, and fingered her earring on his collar.

She said the words forcefully, and he was gone, in the blink of an eye, almost before the last words were out of her mouth. That she was alone in a field was not unexpected, but it felt lonely, all by herself, and the long walk back gave her plenty of time to think. The stars had never shone so brightly in the sky before. Of course, the darkness had never seemed so complete for them to shine so. She couldn't help wishing it were some kind of omen, that goodness might triumph in the heart of the night.

The moon was just rising over the horizon, and she had enough time to get back to Hogwarts and find her way to Snape's rooms. He had enchanted a magic mirror, so they might watch the events unfold and be apprised of what was happening instantaneously. When she knocked on his door, it was with nervousness in her heart.

"Enter." She heard Snape's deep voice, and she stepped in.

The mirror was set up and waiting. She went over and stood before it. It looked a bit like a Muggle television, and she smiled at that. It must have taken some powerful magic for this to be allowed tonight. Snape was more nervous than he was letting on, too.

He had come up behind her, and she wanted to lean into him, but she stopped herself. "When does the mirror show something?" she asked without turning around.

"When he breaches the walls of Azkaban," Snape replied. She could feel the rumble of his words almost throughout her whole body. "As you know, it is not possible to Apparate into Azkaban. They have the same spells that we do here at Hogwarts. He Apparated as closely inland as was possible, and he will need to get close on his own, and break the defenses in the underground areas he was shown on the map. As soon as he is within the mirror's range, it will illuminate. The mirror is spelled to pick up the area of Azkaban itself, so as soon as he enters its defenses it will turn on. He isn't in any danger until then, anyway." Hermione was enjoying the feel of his breath on her hair. She didn't move. Neither did he. They were both standing there stiffly, both unable to make a move, when he spoke again. "Black suits you, Miss Granger."

Hermione felt a stab of liquid warmth run through her when she heard the yearning in his tone. She couldn't stop herself from slowly turning around, and what she saw made her knees weak. His eyes were ablaze with passion. She tilted her face up to him, an offering. His jaw clenched a moment, and she watched his internal struggle, wondering which side would win. She could only hope...but she had to stay silent and let him choose for himself. His eyes swept over her face, lingering on her lips, and his hands clutched at her arms, pinning them to her sides. After a brief moment, whatever fight he had was over, and she closed her eyes. His lips descended to hers, and they were as gentle as spring rain. She was so surprised. With the look on his face, and the way he was holding her arms, he was radiating tension, and she would have thought his kiss would have been a torrent of want, a brutality of lust. It was the opposite. He was so tender, so sweet, she thought she might float away from the purity of it. It was as if he was showing her a side of him that no one else had ever seen, and she almost felt the tears welling ...

... until the harsh light of the mirror jerked them both out of their bliss. Hermione gasped a little, startled. Snape swore. Figgie had breached the walls of Azkaban.

The kiss forgotten for the moment, they both turned and watched the picture in the mirror clarify. All was in darkness. Snape muttered a few words. Images came into focus. Figgie was in a hard-packed earth corridor. There were many tunnels to take. He chose the right one, but it seemed that his breathing was erratic. He was stumbling along.

"What's going on?" Hermione frowned. "He seems unwell."

"I don't know," Snape murmured a few more incantations, but the problem was not with the mirror, it was with Figgie. Snape reset the image to look at the elf, and they both gasped. His skin was pruned and shrinking. He looked as if he had aged fifty years. He was stumbling around the dungeons, and becoming incoherent. The mission was fast going awry.

"Oh, no! We have to get him out of there! What's going on? Something's wrong! He needs help!" Hermione was beside herself. Things were not looking good. With every step the elf took, it seemed he aged a year, and he was starting to babble. His eyes were shrinking into his skull, the skin was folding, his breathing labored.

Snape raked a hand through his hair, a sign of his extreme distress. "We cannot help him now. He is on his own."

Hermione watched, tears in her eyes. "He's going to die! We have to help! Professor, do something!" Hermione dared to touch him now. She grabbed his hand, his beautiful hand, which was not cold as she expected but as warm as her own beating heart.

"Miss Granger," Snape's eyes glittered at her dangerously. "Did you perform the Salterus charm before you Apparated the elf?"

Hermione felt as though he had punched her in the stomach. The wind felt completely knocked out of her, and the enormity of her error was literally right there in front of her face. She didn't need to answer. Snape turned away with what sounded like a hiss as they both wordlessly watched the scene play out. He yanked his hand out of her grasp.

Hermione watched with tears rolling down her face. She didn't turn away as Figgie's legs failed him and he collapsed. He had the vial in his hand, but he was not at the deployment point, and it stayed in his grasp, as he started to gasp uselessly, like a fish out of water. Hermione thought the mirror was cruelly enchanted for sound, but then she recognized the little whimpers as her own. Figgie's head fell back and he drew his last breath on a dirty dungeon floor in the world's worst prison, surrounded by filth and all alone, because of her. She looked at his sightless eyes and shivered miserably. The image of his little body, curled in on itself in the throes of an agonizing death, would haunt her for the rest of her days.

The drama was not done, however. A mockery of Hermione's musings on her walk home played out before her eyes, and she was helpless to tear her eyes away from the mirror. A bright star in the night sky was about to betray her, not be a hope to save her. One of the guards was drawn to the little corpse in the corner. The glint of the Hermione's silver earring on an otherwise black costume stood out, and the guard's eye was drawn. This was an omen, all right, but not in the way she had been hoping. As the guard approached to check out a rare glimpse of light in the depths of Azkaban, his boot crunched on the vial, breaking it and releasing the potion into the filthy air.

"No..." Snape moaned. It was too late. Events were set in motion. All they could do was watch everything play out. Snape pulled the view of the mirror out to encompass the whole scene in its mass chaos.

The potion, which when released at the right time in the right spot, would produce the powerful anti-dementor, now was only able to neutralize the existing dementors. It rendered the dementors guarding Azkaban impotent for a period of time. When the prisoners inside of Azkaban became aware of the fact that their jailers and tormentors were useless, utter pandemonium reigned. Anarchy broke out inside of the infamous prison, and Hermione and Snape watched with desolation in their hearts as the biggest jailbreak in the history of the wizarding world took place before their very eyes. All of the very worst of the Death Eaters managed to escape that night before things were set to rights again. Not only had they managed not to complete their mission and avert a war, but they had managed to help Voldemort and give him a head start. Hermione felt as empty as she ever had.

Hermione turned to Snape. In his eyes was all of the heartbreak she could ever imagine, and more so. He had always seemed so suave and self-assured. Tonight he was a broken man. She ached for him, and she wanted nothing more than to put her arms around him, to find the man who had kissed her, but she feared that she'd killed him when she'd killed the elf. They were two mirrors reflecting back at each other of the burdens of what they had done, the enormous responsibility that would forever weigh upon them.

"Now it is for me to do the unspeakable thing..." Snape sounded like he was talking in a trance, from far away. "It is all playing out like he said it would. I must do it, although I tried so hard to save him." He laid his head in his hands.

Hermione looked at Snape. She didn't know what he had to do that he didn't want to, but it seemed a terrible burden. Words didn't seem enough, but she still had to try. "Professor, I am so sorry, so very sorry. I should have listened, I should have done more. Is there anything you need from me? Is there any hope at all for us?" Her voice broke, as much for him as for what had happened.

"Hope? No, there never was much hope. Only a fool's hope. Still I had to try. I have to go now, and warn Albus. Your part in this will be just between you, me and Dumbledore. Go back to your real life, Hermione. There is going to be a war, but we are going to win. You will be just fine." He stared back at her, his mask back in place.

Hermione had no choice but to leave him there and go back to her common room. She couldn't help but notice that he finally used her first name, here, at the end of things. The irony reached around and bit her, the sting of it bringing bitter tears to her already swollen eyes. As she looked back, his head was bowed, and she couldn't help but wonder which part he had lied about, if they were going to win the war or if she was going to be fine. She thought he knew something, and as she left his rooms for the last time, she felt like nothing in the world could ever be fine again.