Derision

by HermioneDancr

When had a pledge of universal honesty become a practice of universal derision?
Severus in the classroom, 1987.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Oh, the botched potions of first years. Severus sneered. The young students' ability to misinterpret the instructions was remarkable. It would almost have been impressive, had they any intention of producing such an astounding array of results. But the open terror on their faces made it plain that they were not guided by creative aspirations.

They disgusted him. The Forgetfulness Potion the class was attempting to brew was almost painfully simple. It required only diced lovage, ground nettles, and Water of Lethe—which was, of course, already bottled and only needed to be measured and poured into the cauldron at the appropriate moment.

Yet despite clear instructions, it appeared that two-thirds of them could not dice lovage properly and half of them were incapable of grinding their nettles finely enough. Blasted impatient, incompetent, imprudent children!

He glanced around the classroom and felt his nostrils flare. Out of his twenty-three first year Gryffindors and Slytherins, only two had managed to prepare their ingredients adequately. And one of them—

"Mr. Weasley! Read the fifth line of the instructions aloud, provided that you can see them."

The boy's lower lip trembled slightly as he squinted through his horn-rimmed glasses. "Add ground nettles evenly while stirring six times counterclockwise," he recited, voice quiet but steady.

"And how many times did you stir?" Severus bore down on the boy, voice dangerously low.

"I'm not certain, sir. Six?"

"No, Mr. Weasley, not six." He could feel a headache coming on, clamping around his head like an iron ring. "Seven. You stirred it seven times. Are you such an imbecile that you cannot count to seven without making a mistake? Perhaps you have never bothered to learn, relying on your older brothers to do it for you? Or perhaps you were so fatuous as to believe reading the instructions beneath you?"

The boy paled, quivering, and his glasses slid down his nose. For once he did not reach to push them up again.

"Foolish, arrogant, thoughtless boy! Two more stirs and your cauldron would have melted." The iron ring around his head was contracting. "*Evanesco!* Three feet of parchment, Mr. Weasley, on the possible consequences of an incorrect number of stirs in potion-making. I hope it will not over-tax your intellect—"

He cut himself off sharply. "Clean up your workstations, all of you. Do not bother to submit your potions. Class is dismissed."

When had it come to this? His stomach dropped and he gripped the lectern with white knuckles, head pounding fiercely as he attempted to draw deep breaths.

When he had begun teaching, he had promised himself that he would be honest with his students. He would not coddle them, nor would he sugar coat the truth. He had never been an exponent of such methods; coddling and maudlin displays gave him indigestion.

He didn't mind scaring his students, either. Their ruined potions attested to their collective imprudence on a disturbingly frequent basis. All of them would do well to learn more caution. They needed to stop expecting people to be nice, as well. The magical world was not nice and he did not want a single one of his students to leave Hogwarts under the delusion that it was. He owed them that, if nothing else.

All the same, his remarks to little Percy Weasley had been unnecessary. Two months of classes had shown the child to be diligent and conscientious—far more than could be said for most of his classmates.

His own voice rang through his already aching head. *Perhaps you have never bothered to learn, relying on your older brothers to do it for you? Or perhaps you were so arrogant as to believe reading the instructions beneath you?* He knew both assertions to be untrue, had known them to be so before he uttered them. Yet utter them he had, just because the Weasley boy was so vulnerable to criticism.

When had he come to this? He had vowed to himself that he would be candid, but his honesty had been warped by his vitriol in the six years since he had started teaching. When had a pledge of universal honesty become a practice of universal derision?

Severus loathed himself. Of all the students in his class, he had chosen to castigate the most earnest, most reserved, most intelligent of the lot of them, with no better reasons than that though the boy was quick, he was by no means brilliant, and that he was far too dependent on praise. Severus swallowed convulsively.

He had failed the boy, lashing out at him like that. Better to ignore his presence completely in future, to pretend he did not exist. The memory of those eyes squinting at him from behind those glasses assured him that if he persisted in disparaging the boy, the child would eventually lose all interest in the subject. Severus' stomach churned at the thought. He would not coddle him, but if he disregarded the boy entirely, little Percy might be driven to work harder in hopes of earning praise.

Percy Weasley was not the only student he had failed. His contempt for students was as universal as he had meant his honesty with them to be. He loathed them for their pettiness, their idiocy, their thoughtlessness. But he loathed himself more—for his own foolish decisions, his own lack of foresight, and most of all, his own helplessness. Severus had failed his mother and he had failed himself in his misery. He had failed Lily, and he had failed six years of students—because none of them could match her brilliance.

Lily. How disappointed she would be. He buried his aching head in his hands.