

Phoenix Song (or, Hermione Granger and the H-B P)

by grangerous

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Song of Healing

Chapter 1 of 25

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Phoenix Song, Chapter one : Song of Healing.

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute. Where I have quoted dialogue from the original Harry Potter books, I have marked it with an asterisk.

I'd like to thank my betas, LAxo, for her keen eyes and the unerring hesitation with which she will pronounce a sentence mangled beyond redemption, and WriterMerrin for correcting my commas and more.

"*Rennervate*."

His voice pulled her back into her body, into the sharp awareness of pain and panicHarry. *The prophecy*. She struggled to rise, squinting her eyes against the bright light. A cool hand on her forehead pushed her gently, but firmly, back into the bed. *A bed? Where am I?*

"Miss Granger." She knew that voice: as cool as the hand on her forehead, deep, and deeply reassuring. "You are at Hogwarts, in the Hospital Wing, to be precise. I would ask you to lie still."

"Wh-where's Harry?" she gasped, panic pumping through her veins.

"Despite having dragged five of his fellow students on an idiotic and ill-conceived rescue attempt, neither Harry Potter nor any student other than yourself has been grievously injured. You, however, must lie still."

Gradually, her eyes adjusted to the lighted ward. Her Potions master loomed over her bed, his dark hair hanging forward across his face.

"I understand from Mr Potter that you were cursed by Antonin Dolohov while Dolohov himself was suffering from a Silencio Hex. Is this the case?"

With the first rush of adrenaline leaking away, speaking was more difficult than Hermione had anticipated. "Yes, sir," sounded more like "Yessss . . ."

"Neither Potter nor Longbottom were able to tell me which curse Dolohov used." Snape's tone implied that such ignorance was unforgivable. He quirked one interrogative eyebrow at her and waited for a response.

"I don't know either," she managed. Snape looked singularly unimpressed. "I'm sorry, sir . . ."

Snape stood upright and crossed his arms across his chest. "Miss Granger," he began, slipping reflexively into lecturing mode, "a spell cast under *Silencio* differs greatly from the non-verbal incantation of the same spell. The consequences can be difficult to predict. In most cases, however, the spell lodges in the recipient as magical potential, growing in intensity until an explosion of magical energy ensues. This situation is highly dangerous for the recipient. Do I make myself clear?"

Hermione's eyes were stretched wide, and she felt a different kind of panic rising in her chest. "You mean that the curse is bottled within me, liable to explode at any time."

Snape met her eye, a grim expression on his face. "Correct."

"What..." she began, but a raised finger cut her off.

"Without knowing which curse was used, there is nothing to be done." He paused, swallowing before continuing. "I need you to show me your memory of the event."

"Legilimency?"

"Correct."

Hermione could feel her heart beating hard against her chest. *I need to let him inside my mind? No wonder Professor Snape is here and not Madame Pomfrey* Everything was beginning to make sense, from the company at her bedside to the awful pain that was throbbing through her body. Hermione bit on her lower lip for a brief moment. "What do I need to do?" she asked.

"Skin contact can increase the connection," Snape replied. He sounded almost bored, a slight edge of distaste colouring his voice. "Otherwise it should be sufficient to maintain eye contact; try to relax as much as possible."

Relax? I'm in mortal danger from an unexploded curse, and Professor Snape is about to rifle through my brain. Should be a piece of cake.

He stepped towards her bed and took her chin in his left hand, raising her face to look directly at his own. With his right hand he touched his wand against her temple. "Are you ready?"

Hermione pressed her lips together and nodded with determination. The movement was so slight that had his hand not been wrapped around her chin, he might not have noticed.

His eyes narrowed in acknowledgement. "*Legilimens*."

She felt his presence then, at the edges of her consciousness. As he pressed forwards, the pain in her body swelled, crushing in against her from all sides. She was losing. Overwhelmed by the pain, she responded instinctively. "NO!" Did she really shriek? Was it all inside her head? In a desperate effort to keep control, she pushed the pain away, locking it down into the mental equivalent of a large trunk, not unlike the one she used each year to transport her clothes and books to Hogwarts.

"Miss Granger!" His voice, like his face, registered shock. "Am I to understand that you have studied Occlumency?"

"I . . . no, of course not." She looked up at him with confusion, realising suddenly that his presence, too, was gone from her mind.

"Of course not," he echoed, mocking her. "And yet, it would seem that you approach the subject with your customary enthusiasm."

"I . . ." Hermione grimaced at her seeming inability to construct a coherent sentence. The pain had faded somewhat, but she felt exhausted. "I was Occluding?"

"Yes." Snape sighed. "In other circumstances, I could break through or dismantle your mental defences, but given the curse bottled inside your body, the risks are too great. I need you to let me in." Infinitesimally, he hesitated. "This would be a lot easier if you could trust me, if only for the duration of the procedure."

"It's not that . . . it's just . . ." Even with the pain pushed deep down inside, breathing was tricky and conversation bordered on the impossible. She glanced away from her professor's hovering face up to the ceiling beyond, fighting the tears that prickled dangerously. *Breathe, Granger*, she thought to herself. *In, out. You don't want him to know how afraid you are.* "It hurts," she whispered finally, not meeting his eyes.

"Yes. It will hurt a great deal." Somehow his honest response took the sting out of the words, and her fear lessened slightly. "Given your current situation, however, facing the pain is unavoidable." She continued to stare past him, eyes fixed on the ceiling. *This is it, any moment now he's going to mention my vaunted Gryffindor courage; probably a bad time to confess that I don't have any.* In her peripheral vision she could see his face, unmoving, as he waited for her response. Agonising seconds slipped by. *Isn't he going to say anything?* Finally, she risked a look at his face. As she breathed out, he let out the breath that he'd clearly been holding in sympathy.

"Well, Miss Granger?"

"Professor, I do trust you. But I don't know how to let you in."

Snape looked at her appraisingly. "You have pushed the pain into a box deep inside of you." It was a statement, not a question. "You need only open the box and invite me to look in."

Snape continued to hold her gaze, and Hermione hoped that he couldn't read how desperately overwhelmed she felt. *Come on, Granger, Gryffindor, remember?* Finally, she nodded.

At her agreement, Snape's shoulders relaxed subtly. Once again he reached out and took her chin firmly in his hand. *Legilimens*."

At his words the pain thrummed, clouding the corners of her vision, her limbs aching. Struggling to stay calm, Hermione focussed on the dark eyes and long lashes of her Potions professor. *Professor Snape, Professor Snape.* His name was a mantra that offered a thread of rational thought through the red haze that threatened to swamp her. Superimposed over her vision of the Hospital Wing, she recognised scenes from her memories, each featuring the man before her. She watched his unconscious head bump and scrape along the tunnel back from the Shrieking Shack; she sat in his classroom during her first week at Hogwarts and thrilled to his voice, "I can teach you how to brew fame, bottle glory, and even put a stopper in death." She watched him tower over the unfortunate Professor Lockhart at the one and only meeting of the Duelling Club, menace written in every line of his body; then watched him push up his sleeve, in an abortive attempt to convince Fudge that Lord Voldemort had returned . . .

"Miss Granger," Snape's real voice cut through the string of memories. It echoed oddly, as if she could hear it both inside and outside of her head. "Pleasant as you might find it to reminisce over every meeting we have had in the last five years, I have not the time nor the temperament to enjoy the show. I need you to show me what happened at the Department of Mysteries."

Hermione sighed with reluctance, letting one last vision of Professor Snape delay the inevitable. Umbridge's office flashed into sight. Millicent Bulstrode had Hermione pressed uncomfortably to the wall while Snape scowled from the doorway. Before the scene faded, Hermione relived Harry's impassioned cry, "He's got Padfoot! He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden!" as well as the Professor's snarled response, "Potter, when I want nonsense shouted at me I shall give you a Babbling Beverage . . ."

Seconds later, Hermione was crouched under a desk, panic pounding in her veins. This memory was so vivid that the Hospital Wing had completely faded from view. Close at hand, she heard Harry stupefy one of the two Death Eaters who stood nearby, mere feet from where she hid. The closest set of legs ducked quickly, and her sphere of attention narrowed to the wand pointed directly at her. She couldn't move, she couldn't speak. As if from a great distance, she heard his voice.

"Avada..."

Only when Harry's body slammed into the Death Eater's knees, knocking him to the floor, did Hermione regain control of her recalcitrant limbs. Her best friend and the Death Eater who would have murdered her were struggling bodily on the floor, leaving no clear shot. Neville, however, threw himself forward regardless.

"*EXPPELLIARMUS!*" he shouted, gasping in horror as both Harry's wand and that of the Death Eater flew out of their reach. Hermione scrambled up and rushed after them. Neville continued to shout, managing to launch another hex, which thankfully went wide of both men, before finally Hermione succeeded in stupefying the Death Eater. She'd summoned Harry's wand and returned it to him before she noticed that the Death Eater had fallen onto and through the weird bell-shaped glass case that dominated the room. Horrifyingly, his head was shrinking on his shoulders, distorting his features and replacing them with those of an infant, although his body, which had remained outside the jar, stayed the same.

As the strange effect swung into reverse, Hermione realised what she was looking at. "It's Time," she whispered, *Time . . .*

Shouts and a scream from an adjacent room pulled her focus back to the larger problem of escape. She threw an arm out towards Harry, but before she could stop him, he shouted loudly after their absent friends.

"RON? GINNY? LUNA?"

"Harry!" she rebuked him, no hope now that their location would go unnoticed. Harry glanced back at her, immediately remorseful, then raised his wand at the baby-headed Death Eater who had managed to struggle to his feet. Horrified, Hermione grabbed at his arm. "You can't hurt a baby!" she hissed, pulling him towards the door.

For a second, Harry looked at her as if she was insane. He seemed ready to argue the point, but approaching footsteps drove him onward. "Come on!" he urged, pulling Hermione towards the hall of doors and gesturing urgently to Neville.

As they ran, two more Death Eaters appeared in the room before them and Harry swerved sideways, through a small doorway and into an untidy office. As Harry slammed the door, Hermione attempted to seal it.

"*Collo...*" she began, too late. The door burst wide open and two Death Eaters hurled themselves into the room.

"*IMPEDIMENTA!*" cried both Death Eaters at once. Hermione was thrown backwards across the room, slamming into a bookshelf with a painful crash. Automatically, she wrapped her arms protectively around her head, fending off several heavy volumes that had been knocked from the shelves by the force of her impact. Harry and Neville had also been flung across the room, Neville had disappeared behind a desk, and Harry looked like he might have lost consciousness. Scrambling to her knees, Hermione raised her wand, her first thought to silence the Death Eater nearest Harry, who had started to shout their location to the others.

"*Silencio!*" she cried. Hermione wanted to sob with relief when she heard Harry's voice behind her.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" he called, and the other Death Eater toppled forwards.

One down, one silenced. Hermione couldn't hold back a foolish grin and turned to congratulate Harry. "Well done, Ha..." Even before she had finished speaking, the horrified look on Harry's face spun her back towards the silent Death Eater. With a vindictive look on his face, he slashed his wand towards her; a streak of purple flame hit her chest and pain blossomed in her body. A soft "Oh!" left her on impact, and as the scene around her faded away, she was conscious of an overwhelming sense of stupidity. *Why silencio? Why didn't I petrify him when I had the chance?*

Once again she was losing against the pain, drowning under the red waves as she cursed her stupidity over and over. Snape's voice recalled her to the present, echoing through the interior-exterior spaces that they both occupied.

"Put it back in the box, Miss Granger, NOW!" Feebly at first, Hermione began to push back against the agony. With relief she noticed that Snape was helping. Only when the trunk slammed shut did the shapes and colours of the Hospital Wing come back into focus, Professor Snape's face hovering a foot above her own.

Straightening up, he let go of her chin and ran his hand roughly down his face. He looked shaken, but when he began to speak his tone was even.

"The curse Dolohov utilised is one that I recognise: a rare Slashing Hex that few know how to counter. Fortunately, I am familiar with the Counterspell." He ducked his head slightly at that point, and his hair slid across his face. His eyes thus concealed from view, he continued. "At this point, I need to trigger the curse. Your chest will burst open. While I will heal it immediately, the procedure will hurt a great deal. You also run the risk of a permanent scar."

Snape paused, waiting perhaps for Hermione to respond. At some level she registered the fact that he had stopped speaking, and turned her eyes blankly towards him, though she couldn't stop thinking about how stupid she had been. Her continued silence seemed to irritate her companion.

"A scar, Miss Granger. While I entertain no doubt that you find the idea repulsive, I should not need to point out that any other course of action carries the risk of permanent brain damage."

"Sir, I don't care about the scarring." Did he think her so shallow that she would care about a scar when she had very nearly died? Hermione felt suddenly sick with humiliation. Professor Snape had seen her error and clearly thought her a vain, foolish little girl. "Aren't you going to tell me how stupid I was?" Her voice was uncharacteristically bitter as she turned her head against the pillow.

Snape crossed his arms and leaned one hip against the bed. When he spoke, his voice was as sarcastic as always and yet somehow more gentle than she'd ever heard it. "Once this ordeal is over, Miss Granger, I will be delighted to tell you in exacting detail precisely how stupid the entire enterprise has been from the moment I saw you in Umbridge's office onwards. For now, however, time is of the essence. Your life remains in danger, and I need your co-operation to release Dolohov's curse. Are you ready?"

Hermione had pressed her eyes shut while he spoke, but turned almost immediately to look at him in response to his question. Once again, she nodded her agreement.

Snape looked unaccountably relieved. "Good," he replied. If a relieved Professor Snape was an unusual sight, the embarrassed look that followed sat even more uncomfortably on his features. "In the interest of efficiency, it seems best to remove your clothing before triggering the curse."

Hermione had time only to blink in surprise. Snape stepped towards the bed and grasped the sheet firmly in his left hand. At his actions, Hermione took in a sharp breath, but, unexpectedly, Snape drew the covers sharply up to the level of her chin. Waving his wand in an intricate circular motion, he muttered a charm that Hermione had never heard. The sensation of her clothes wriggling off was bizarre. Buttons slipped out of holes and layers of clothing extricated themselves from under the weight of her body. They edged out from under the sheets and soared over to a chair where they came to rest in a neatly folded pile. Hermione realised with relief that although she had lost her robe, jumper, t-shirt and bra, she retained everything from the waist down.

Snape stared determinedly at a point several inches left of her ear and took recourse in his most sarcastic tone, "You can rest assured that I will not remove the sheet until the last possible moment."

At that, he turned away. After looking down at his own clothes for a long moment, he removed his teaching robes and his frock coat, undoing the buttons carefully and

hanging both over the back of the chair. The removal of his coat revealed a black waistcoat and a white shirt, his silhouette oddly lean without his voluminous robes. Before turning back to the bed, he neatly rolled up his sleeves. Hermione caught a glimpse of the dark mark, shockingly visible against the pale skin of his forearm.

By the time he turned back towards her, his face was calm, the evidence of his previous embarrassment expertly smoothed away.

For the third time he reached for her chin and gazed into her eyes. "Are you ready, Miss Granger?" he asked.

Hermione was hyperconscious of the thin sheet that separated her body from view, teacher and student both peeled of several layers of their typical garb. His fingers were pressed against her cheek in an intimate and protective gesture that sat at odds with her previous experience of this strange and unpredictable man. Her heart beat loudly against her chest. When she opened her mouth to speak, her throat was dry, and her words sounded strange and rough.

"Yes, sir," she whispered.

"*Legilimens*."

Seconds later, an image of the locked trunk hovered before her eyes. She heard Snape speaking in that strange inside-outside voice that accompanied his forays into her mind. "On the count of three . . ."

On one, his hand left her chin and took hold of the sheet.

On two, he pulled back the sheet with a smooth gesture, exposing her body from the waist up.

On three, her world split apart. Her body tore from shoulder to waist, slicing diagonally across her chest. Opening her mouth to scream, she managed only a soft moan. In the struggle to stay conscious, Hermione watched Snape flinch as her blood splattered across his face and saturated his clothing. Yet he didn't break eye contact. Taking a deep breath, he began to sing.

Hermione heard his song inside her head and outside it, she heard it in the marrow of her bones and in the very vibrations of her flesh. It seeped through her body, erasing her pain and knitting the torn edges back together. In the rush of relief and release that accompanied his song, Hermione had a revelation that seemed so obvious that she wondered at never having noticed before.

Snape's eyes were still fixed on hers while his wand hand traced elaborate curves over the fast-healing wound. Euphoric with the rightness of her revelation, Hermione smiled up at her professor.

"Of course," she breathed, "you're a phoenix."

Still smiling, Hermione saw his eyes widen with surprise, though his singing never faltered. The sound wove a warm cocoon into which she settled gratefully, feeling safer than she could remember feeling ever before.

After three or four minutes of Snape's singing, the gash in Hermione's body was entirely replaced by a fresh and painful-looking scar. His voice faded into silence and Hermione felt his presence back gently away from her conscious mind. His wand hand dropped to the bed, and he glanced down at her exposed chest for the briefest second before turning his face away and hurriedly pulling up the sheet.

Hermione felt as if she were floating. She tried to speak, but no words came out. She wanted to say thank you.

"Poppy?" Snape called out in a quiet voice. He sounded exhausted, and his shoulders were slumped with tiredness. Hermione heard the approach of rapid footsteps, and the curtain around her bed was drawn back to reveal the concerned face of the school matron.

Pomfrey stepped immediately to Hermione's side and pulled back the sheet. Snape turned away, busying himself with his frockcoat. Pomfrey ran her hand lightly across the angry red scar on Hermione's chest. She cast several quick diagnostic spells before tucking her wand back into her apron. "Oh, Severus," she sighed. "Well done." With capable hands, she tucked the sheet back up around Hermione's shoulders and stroked a stray curl back from the young woman's forehead. "I will dress the wound very shortly," she whispered to Hermione. "Everything is going to be just fine."

Snape clicked the fingers of his right hand, and on the table beside the bed a self-inking quill leapt upright. Though he stood several feet away, the quill composed a list of medicinal potions in his distinctively spiky handwriting. "These are the potions she will need to take," he commented, still facing away from the bed.

Pomfrey turned and picked up the parchment, casting an expert eye down the list with some apprehension. "Severus," she began, tentatively. "We have only three of these in stock."

At this, Snape turned towards the bed. Pomfrey gasped at the sight of him. His face and clothes were liberally splashed with Hermione's blood, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He had replaced his frockcoat and teaching robes, but they remained unbuttoned. As he turned, he rubbed the back of one hand across his forehead, smearing the droplets of blood that hung there into a long dark smudge.

"Which ones do you have?" he asked, holding out his other hand for the list.

"We've the blood-replenishing potion, the dreamless sleep, of course, and the basic painkiller . . . but Severus, you need to rest, you can't possibly make the rest of these in your current state!"

Snape raised one eyebrow. A shadow of his habitual sneer twisted his mouth up at one corner. "Come now, Poppy," he rebuked her. "There is no rest for the wicked." He turned then, his unbuttoned robes billowing out dramatically as he did so. He took a step away, but Pomfrey's outstretched hand caught at his elbow.

"Wait!" she called. He half turned towards her, but didn't speak. Clucking her tongue softly against her teeth, Pomfrey pulled out her wand. *Tergeo*. There, that's a little better." The spell siphoned the blood from Snape's clothes and face, dramatically improving his appearance. Almost affectionately, she tapped him on the chest with her wand. "You're a good man, Severus Snape," she said.

Snape rolled his eyes at her, although a small smile pulled at the corner of his mouth and betrayed his pleasure at the comment. "If you've quite finished," he remarked in an exasperated tone. Shaking his arm free from her grip, he turned on his heel once more and strode quickly from the room.

As he left, Hermione tried again to thank him, but without success. Only a soft sigh escaped her lips. The sound caught Madam Pomfrey's attention however, and she turned back towards her patient, arms crossed over her chest.

"As for you, young lady. I hope you realise just how lucky you are. I shudder to think what would have happened had Professor Snape not been here and willing to help!" As she spoke, she removed several phials from the capacious pockets of her apron and lined them up on the table beside the bed. Uncorking them, she held them to Hermione's lips one by one, helping her to swallow. "These will make you sleep and will dull the pain, and right now, sleep is the best thing you can possibly do."

The Man with Two Masters

Chapter 2 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter two : The Man with Two Masters

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"Ah, Severus, I'm delighted that you were able to find the time to speak with me today." Though the words of the greeting were innocuous, Snape was immediately aware that Dumbledore was furious.

"Albus," he remarked in a noncommittal tone, seating himself opposite the headmaster's desk. No doubt the older man would come quickly to the point.

"What do I need to do, Severus, to impress upon you the gravity of your situation?"

"Of *my* situation?" His eyes wandered to find Fawkes. *Phoenix*. The word echoed in his mind and tingled in his gut.

"Your presence is absolutely vital in our fight against Voldemort. And yet yesterday you recklessly endangered your life."

Snape's eyes snapped back to Dumbledore. "Yesterday, Albus," he spat, "I saved a life...one of your precious Gryffindors, no less." Snape felt a cold anger rising in response to Dumbledore's reprimand. Leaning back in his chair, he crossed one leg insolently over the other and folded his arms. His voice dripped with sarcasm. "Do you hold my own more dear?"

"Is it such a surprise that I might?" Dumbledore's reply was swift. "The time for sentimental decisions has passed. We are at war, my boy, and I have but one spy placed as you are. The risk was not yours to judge."

How many years had Snape longed for this man to proclaim that his life had merit and was worth some sacrifice in order to protect it? And yet now, faced with just such a claim, the gesture was worthless, a cold-hearted appraisal of his value to the cause. Dumbledore's words twisted his belly. In a flash of memory Snape saw Hermione Granger's exposed chest rent and bleeding as the curse exploded. He blazed with anger on her behalf.

"And what if it had been Potter? You have always viewed some students as more expendable than others." As he spoke, Snape leaned forward, his hands gripping the arms of his chair.

"I . . ." Dumbledore broke off awkwardly, looking slightly ashamed for the first time in the conversation and dropping his eyes to the desk. One hand rested there in a loose fist, and as Dumbledore stared down at it, the wrinkled skin across his knuckles drew Snape's attention. Dumbledore looked old. The realisation was shocking and terrifying. When the headmaster spoke again, his voice was barely a whisper. "This is not about your childhood, Severus, but about your actions yesterday." Dumbledore continued, his voice once again under control. "I am relieved, of course, that Miss Granger survived. And grateful, too. However, entering her mind while she contained such a curse was foolhardy in the extreme. If she had lost mental control, you both would have died or suffered irreparable brain damage."

"Your logic is deplorable, Headmaster. Hermione Granger is as vital to the war effort as I am, if not more so. We have both seen the Arithmantic calculations: the girl is an essential element of the friendship those three share. Pureblood, half-blood and Muggle-born; male and female...there is potent magic in that combination. Think, Albus! What would Harry Potter have done were he to have found himself responsible for the death of his best friend? What consequences would her death have set in motion?"

"My intervention was necessary. Only you or I could have managed the required Legilimency, and only I know the cure for Sectumsempra. I can't say that I expected your fawning gratitude, Albus, but I do confess that I had anticipated some small words of congratulations for having rescued the brains of the Gryffindor trio. I cannot see how my position as the Dark Lord's whipping boy outweighs the benefits of her continued presence at Potter's side."

Snape was on his feet, hands pressed against the surface of Dumbledore's desk as he leant forward, staring into Dumbledore's eyes. Both men were breathing heavily.

"Severus?" Dumbledore sounded tentative. With one hand he reached out to cover one of Snape's. "Sit down, please. I owe you an apology."

After several long seconds, Snape sat. As he did so, he pulled his hand out from under Dumbledore's and folded his arms across his chest.

"Thank you, Severus." Dumbledore took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his long nose with finger and thumb. "I was wrong. You did the right thing, the honourable thing. For the second time in two days, I find myself in the same position: in each case I placed the safety of a young man whom I love above the greater good. It seems to be a recurrent fault of mine. You are essential to our cause, Severus, but more importantly, I couldn't bear to lose you...I spoke out of fear, and I hope that you will find it in your heart to forgive me."

Snape felt Dumbledore's words in the involuntary clench of his stomach. Since the incident with Miss Granger the previous day, his emotions had been in constant turmoil. He was not in the habit of visiting the minds of his students, quite the contrary. Yet, as an accomplished Legilimens, the surface thoughts and emotions of those around him flickered constantly at the edge of his awareness...a brightly coloured kaleidoscope of intentions and desires. He knew, for example, whenever someone attempted to lie and laboured under no misapprehensions with regard to the fear and disgust that his presence engendered in the student population at large. The students of his own house were an exception, of course, and several of the upper-year level students, particularly those from Ravenclaw, managed to eventually replace their initial terror with a grudging respect. Nevertheless, Hermione Granger's opinion had thrown him. She had said that she trusted him, and she had meant it. The strength of her instinctive Occlumency shields had suppressed this information throughout the years of their acquaintance, but once he was inside her defences, her respect had coloured her thoughts with an intensity that was impossible to ignore.

Now, here was Dumbledore, apologising and openly confessing his regard. The thick walls of Snape's emotional defences were angled to withstand hatred and suspicion, letting respect and concern slip through into tender interior spaces with an ease he found terrifying. Staring at Dumbledore's tired face, Snape felt uncomfortably vulnerable.

The silence that followed Dumbledore's apology was charged and awkward. Snape threw out one hand in a gesture that was both dismissive and defensive. "Enough," he rasped. His throat was dry. "Sentimental words will achieve nothing."

"That, my dear boy," responded Dumbledore, with a wry smile, "is one of the few points on which we disagree."

Snape snorted with some amusement. "Few?" he queried sarcastically, quirked an eyebrow.

Dumbledore laughed with relief, the weak humour of their exchange had done more to establish a tenuous comfort between them than further discussion would have done.

Dumbledore waved his wand and summoned a bottle of Firewhiskey and two glasses from one of the cupboards. Pouring two generous measures, he passed one glass to Snape.

"I think we both deserve a drink, don't you agree?"

Snape lifted his glass in reply and swallowed deeply. Afterwards, he rested the base of the tumbler on the arm of his chair and gazed across the table at Dumbledore.

"You will be happy to hear, Severus, that I finally took your advice and told Harry about the prophecy."

"It's a little too late for that, Albus." There was no heat in Snape's reply, merely resignation. "If you'd done so a week earlier, Sirius Black would still be alive and Miss Granger would not bear a scar that will stay with her the rest of her life."

For a moment Dumbledore said nothing, then he lifted his glass in a toast. "To Sirius Black, who died with the bravery with which he lived."

Snape followed suit. "To Sirius Black," he echoed, "the last of his line." He took a large mouthful, lowering his glass to notice Dumbledore eyeing him speculatively.

"Severus, tell me about Hermione Granger."

"What is there to tell? She lives."

"Nonsense. Something has changed. Though I can't say you have previously spoken of her with quite the level of vitriol that Harry Potter seems to inspire, neither have I had cause to think that you thought of her with anything but scorn."

Snape inhaled deeply and held his breath a few seconds before releasing it. Once again, his eyes slipped sideways to glance at Fawkes. *She called me a phoenix.* The words pressed forwards, but he couldn't bring himself to say them out loud; they seemed foolish. He was tempted to tell Dumbledore everything, and at the same time he was tempted to hurl his glass at the wall and run from the room...though he knew that last would merely postpone the inevitable. Dumbledore would get some version of the story from him somehow, he always did. Snape calculated his safest option: convey the general gist to Dumbledore, leaving the older man to come to his own conclusions.

"I think we're agreed that my attempts to teach Potter Occlumency were an unmitigated disaster." Snape couldn't help but let his lips twitch upwards at Dumbledore's dry chuckle. "His hatred for me was a poisonous component of each foray into his memories...and I have no doubt that the feeling was mutual. I had no reason to think that his best friends felt any differently. As a consequence, Miss Granger's mind came as a complete surprise. Firstly, the girl is a natural Occlumens. Indeed, were she not, I doubt that she would have made it out of the Department of Mysteries alive. Secondly, she doesn't hate me at all. She even seems to enjoy her Potions classes." Snape shrugged, feigning nonchalance in the vain hope of fooling a headmaster as skilled in reading body language as he was in reading minds. Behind his Occlumency shield, Snape shouted silently: *I exposed the unblemished skin of her chest and watched her tender flesh rent open by a curse that my younger and eminently more foolish self invented. She should hate me, yet she would have thanked me. She called me a phoenix.* "In retrospect," he continued, no sign of his thoughts visible on his face, "it is clear that with regard to Harry Potter I should have utilised the only pedagogical method that has yet proven effective: I should have taught Miss Granger directly and left her to pass the information and skills on through the process of educational osmosis. Don't laugh, Albus. I'm quite serious. You haven't had the dubious pleasure of attempting to teach anything to Potter or Weasley; it is Granger who provides the brains of the operation. As a *first-year*, she managed to solve my logic puzzle..."

"I see that still rankles . . ."

"I'd leave the sarcasm to me, Albus, you don't do it justice. As a second-year, Granger was the first to realise that the monster was a basilisk and acted with a foresight that saved her own life and that of another student, and we know she was experimenting with polyjuice earlier that year...at an incredibly early age. Dumbledore's Army was her idea, and I feel certain that she was behind whatever trick they managed to pull on Umbridge. At every turn, Granger has been there to help Potter; he wouldn't be alive today if she hadn't been.

"You may have apologised for the callous disregard you expressed for her life today, but what of the disregard you have displayed these last five years?"

Dumbledore was clearly offended at Snape's words; he sat up straight in his chair and drew his eyebrows together. Snape noted smugly that he had successfully distracted the headmaster from probing more deeply into the incident with Granger, as he realised that he did indeed care about the smokescreen he had thrown up. Interrupting Dumbledore before he could protest, he pushed on.

"I'm talking about the Defence Against the Dark Arts classes. These children are involved in a deadly war, Albus. What preparation have they had? Five years, five teachers: each one more inept than their predecessor. You *must* hire a qualified candidate this year, and if you don't, I will teach it myself."

Dumbledore sighed. "You're right, Severus. They have been under-prepared, though not for want of trying. Yet we've been over this so many times: the position is cursed and I cannot subject you to that risk."

"And, as I have replied each and every time, it was the Dark Lord who laid the curse. Appointing his *loyal Death Eater* to the position is the surest means to have the curse removed."

"Perhaps." Dumbledore sighed again, more heavily. "You would miss Potions, you know." He smiled lopsidedly at the younger man. The conversation was now safely travelling along well-worn paths, and equilibrium was restored.

"I know. Though few would believe you." Snape let his own lips soften up at one corner and raised one eyebrow. "They might be more easily convinced of my reluctance to let anyone else loose in my precious lab than of the pleasure I take from the subject . . ."

"Talking of teaching, Severus, I believe I can see a way to salvage something from our earlier argument. Next year, you must give Miss Granger private lessons."

Severus was taken completely by surprise. "I beg your pardon, Albus? You can't be serious."

"Why ever not? It was practically your suggestion after all. You can begin by ensuring that she has full control of her Occlumency and Legilimency skills and, from there, move onto advanced defensive techniques. By your own account, she is an apt student and does not object to your company. Since you no longer have the responsibility of teaching Harry in the evenings, you will have plenty of time."

Once again Dumbledore had managed to negotiate Snape into a corner. He opened his mouth to protest, but shut it quickly with the realisation that this time he didn't mind at all. Running one long finger across his lower lip, he sat back in his chair. Opposite him, humour twinkled in Dumbledore's eyes. Unwilling to capitulate too easily, Snape turned and looked at Fawkes for a long moment. It was his turn to sigh, and he did so as dramatically as possible. "Very well, Headmaster," he grumbled. "Your wish is my command."

Moments later, he stiffened suddenly. His left hand clenched involuntarily and his eyes widened with pain.

"Voldemort?" queried Dumbledore urgently.

Snape nodded curtly and stood.

"I can drop the wards in my office, and you can leave from here..."

"No, don't bother. I have to fetch my cloak and mask." Snape lifted his whiskey glass and emptied it in one swallow. As he threw a handful of floo powder into the fireplace and stepped towards his office, he heard Dumbledore's concerned farewell in the background.

"I'll wait up for your return. Good luck!"

Minutes later, Severus stood outside the Hogwarts gates. Several deep breaths sufficed to restore the composure that had eluded him in Dumbledore's office before he touched his wand to his dark mark and Disapparated away.

He recognised the Apparation Hall of Malfoy Manor immediately. No need for his mask here. He tucked it back into an inner pocket, straightened his robes and walked towards the drawing room. The corridor was oddly empty, and Severus wondered apprehensively as to the state of his erstwhile master's temper: the consequences of the Ministry incident could not possibly have left the Dark Lord in a pleasant mood. As he drew closer, he heard a pitiful keening that proved to come from within the room itself.

Narcissa Malfoy was slumped at Voldemort's feet weeping. At the sound of Snape's arrival, she staggered awkwardly to her feet.

"Get out," said Voldemort to the distraught woman, his distaste evident. "I have business here with the loyal professor."

Narcissa stepped away towards Severus, swaying slightly. She reached out and grasped at his sleeve. "Severus, please . . ." A note of sheer desperation marked her voice. The pale skin of her face was blotchy and a thin line of snot was streaked across one cheek. Snape looked down his nose at her hand, flaring his nostrils slightly.

"Ah, Narcissa," he drawled, removing his sleeve forcibly from her grasp, "always the gracious hostess." Sarcasm provided a useful release of his irritation. At his words, Narcissa drew a sobbing, hiccupping breath and flinched as if he'd struck her. Throwing one last terrorised glance toward Voldemort, she fled the room.

Alone with Voldemort, Snape dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "My Lord," he said.

"My dear boy." The irony of the address was not wasted on Snape. "Get up. Come, have a seat. Have a drink."

Muttering his thanks at such a great honour, Snape rose and seated himself in the armchair beside Voldemort. Such conviviality was a rare occurrence*Either the ranks of favoured Death Eaters have been so depleted by events at the Ministry that I've been promoted by a process of elimination . . . or it's a trap. Or both.*

"You know, Severus, there are those among the Death Eaters who doubt your loyalty."

Snape knew he was on treacherous ground. "Indeed."

Voldemort laughed, a hard, mirthless sound. "You don't seem too bothered."

Snape shrugged. "No-one could hope to fool the world's greatest Legilimens and survive."

"You speak the truth, my spy." Voldemort looked pleased, his red eyes narrowed slightly as a travesty of a smile shifted the planes of his flattened face. "What news do you have for me?"

"Dumbledore hasn't held an Order meeting since the debacle at the Ministry...it seems that he has been too busy answering owls from Fudge. The headmaster doesn't trust the bureaucracy enough to put them directly to work, and Fudge is so panicked that he is taking up time Dumbledore could have better spent elsewhere."

"And Potter?"

"The brat is sulking. He's unable to appreciate the luck that saved his own life and those of the students he took with him, or the irony that saw the man he raced to save killed as a consequence of his actions."

"Severus, you paint a promising picture of events I had seen as disastrous." Voldemort reached out his hand and allowed one finger to skid along the curve of Snape's cheekbone. Severus felt his breath catch in his throat and willed himself calm. Voldemort hissed out Severus' name, the sibilant sounds extended as his control over his voice lapsed momentarily. "I have underestimated the dangers you face on a daily basis. You must let me reward you . . . this coming summer Wormtail shall come and work as your assistant."

A spy to spy on the spy? Snape had absolutely no desire to spend time in Wormtail's company, let alone host him for months at a time. "My Lord, you are generous."

Still Voldemort smiled: it was unnerving. "Indeed, Severus, I am. Do you know why I invited you here tonight?"

"No, My Lord."

"I wish to share with you the details of a highly confidential plan."

"My Lord, I am honoured." Snape's senses were on high alert; he felt his imminent danger as a palpable force.

"I was very displeased with how events at the Ministry transpired." Voldemort's face darkened. "The prophecy was broken, my Death Eaters captured and my return to power made incontrovertibly clear...even to that idiot Fudge. Yet I have resolved to allow the Malfoy family a chance to redeem themselves."

The Malfoy family . . . Draco, he means Draco Snape schooled his face into an interested expression.

"Yes," continued Voldemort, "the problem, as I see it, is not Harry Potter, but the presence of the interfering Dumbledore."

Don't dwell on it now, time enough later. Just react like a Death Eater. "My Lord..." Voldemort stopped Snape's comment with an upheld hand.

"Quite. Draco is aptly placed within the school and below the kind of suspicion you attract. I will give him a year. If he kills Dumbledore, he shall be honoured above all others."

And when he doesn't, he'll die. "Draco, my Lord? But he's underage..."

"He's sixteen, Severus. Both you and I had killed before our seventeenth year came to an end."

"My Lord, forgive my impertinence, but both you and I were more talented than Draco is now. He has some small academic talent, to be sure, but Dumbledore is an extraordinarily powerful wizard. Draco's chances of success are negligible!"

Voldemort smirked. "But it is a chance, none the less." He leaned in towards Snape, once again reaching to touch his skin. "Don't fret, my little spy. If Draco fails, I will ensure that you are freed by some other means: this year will be the last you spend answering to Dumbledore."

Snape repressed a shudder as Voldemort's fingers dragged the length of his chin. *Thus the trap is set, the warning given.*

Voldemort laughed. "A toast, Severus: to Draco!"

Snape wasted no time leaving Malfoy Manor. For a moment, he considered a quick visit to Spinner's End, but he knew that the obligations of his long evening were not yet complete. His arrival outside the Hogwarts' gates was marked by the customary observer: a tabby cat sat near the Apparation point, her tail curled neatly around her feet.

He glared at her. "Safe and sound," he snapped. "Be off with you."

The cat yawned and stretched before stalking into the underbrush with her upheld tail twitching. Her behaviour was an impeccable performance of supreme unconcern at his sudden arrival and the tone of his address.

Snape scowled after her and strode into the castle. The look of delight with which Dumbledore greeted his second appearance of the evening only deepened the scowl. The Pensieve lay ready on the desk. Snape began to siphon his memories of the evening into the bowl without bothering to respond to the headmaster's greeting. The silvery strands swirled innocuously, and for a moment, Severus imagined that they might be memories of anything, of something lovely and innocent, not of plots to kill one or both of the two men present.

He gestured presumptuously at the bowl. "After you, Headmaster."

Dumbledore looked back at him apprehensively. "Severus, are you alright?"

As a response, Snape merely gestured once more at the Pensieve. Dumbledore exhaled gently out from his nose, then leant forward and placed his face into the silvery liquid. Seconds later, Snape did the same.

The First Lesson

Chapter 3 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter three : The First Lesson

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute.

I'd like to thank my betas: LAxo, for her convictions regarding split infinitives, and WriterMerrin, who has eyes like a hawk.

There it was again Hermione Granger would recognise the sound of a softly turned page anywhere. Someone in the same room as her was reading and...that scratchy noise sounded just like a quill...taking notes, too. *Not Ron, that's for sure. And certainly not Umbridge, either. Madam Pomfrey? Why would she be up in the middle of the night?* Whoever it was, he or she sat close at hand. Hermione had opened her eyes and was aware of a soft, reddish glow coming from somewhere behind her. Lowering her eyelids in order to feign sleep, she rolled over, muttering as if she were dreaming and using the opportunity to glance around the Hospital Wing.

Professor Snape! There was no mistaking the distinctive silhouette seated only a few feet from her bed. A book was open in his lap, a quill poised in his hand. The point hovered over a half-finished annotation that he was writing directly into the margin of the page. At her movement he had frozen, and his dark eyes peered at her through the curtain of his hair.

Hermione held her breath. Being caught spying on Professor Snape was low on her list of priorities, even if he was sitting beside her bed at some ungodly hour of the morning. After what seemed like an interminably long time, Snape dropped his eyes back to his book. Hermione began to breathe once more. Watching through her lowered lashes, she saw him finish writing the interrupted comment before placing the quill along the crease of the spine. Folding the book, he held it almost closed with one hand, his long forefinger inserted between the pages, marking his place. Only then did he acknowledge her presence.

"Miss Granger," he said calmly, nodding towards the bed.

Hermione caught her breath involuntarily. "P-professor," she stuttered. *He knew all along*, she thought, a little resentfully. He didn't seem like he was about to hex her or take off house points, however, and that had to count for something. Indeed, with Harry absent and Ron fast asleep if close at hand, this might well provide her only opportunity for civil conversation: an opportunity she intended to seize.

Before she spoke, she levered herself up onto one elbow. "Professor," she began, "I want to thank you for your actions last Friday. You saved my life..."

"Enough." His free hand was upraised to cut her off. "You have no need to thank me: I was merely doing my job."

"Not merely," she insisted. "Madam Pomfrey told me of the risks you took. If that horrible curse had erupted while you were in my memories, we both could have died..."

"I said, *enough*." His tone brooked no argument and Hermione fell silent, though not without a small huff of annoyance. His next comment, however, rendered her momentarily speechless with surprise. "Unless you are capable of talking about a more interesting topic, I shall leave."

Was he really inviting her to talk with him? The tone of his voice had a cruel edge to it but the words he spoke were almost friendly. "P-professor?" she stuttered again.

In response he sneered slightly and stared disdainfully down his nose. "Surely you of all people, Miss Granger, can think of a question?"

Provoked by his customary rudeness, Hermione blurted out the question hovering closest to the tip of her tongue.

"Why are you here, anyway?"

"Even Madam Pomfrey deserves an occasional night of uninterrupted sleep." Snape sounded bored.

His oddly tender exchange with Madam Pomfrey from the day of her accident popped into Hermione's mind, prompting a tart reply: "I guess you don't consider ~~her~~ wicked, then." *Oops*, she thought. Rather than snapping at her, however, Snape smirked.

"Hmm," he stroked the forefinger of his free hand along his upper lip, "o~~o~~ll my colleagues, I certainly wouldn't number Poppy Pomfrey among the wicked . . . Bellatrix Lestranger, however . . ." He let the sentence tail off.

A small, extraordinarily shocked gurgle of laughter escaped Hermione's lips. *This is surreal*. Surreptitiously she pinched the skin on the inside of her left arm, hard. It hurt. *Not a dream then*. Though her mind was reeling at the situation in which she found herself, Hermione Granger wasn't about to let such an opportunity slip by. "Actually, Professor, I do have a question," she ventured.

"Miss Granger, if you ever find yourself in a situation where you do not have a question to ask, please inform me."

"Does that mean you'll answer me?"

"That, Miss Granger, depends on the question."

Fair enough. Hermione took a deep breath. "How come, at the Ministry, the Death Eaters didn't just kill us all?"

"That is a good question, to which there are several likely answers." Snape rested the spine of the book he was holding briefly against his lower lip. "Firstly, the Killing Curse, like all the Unforgivables, expends a great deal of magical energy. The process becomes easier with practice; however, in a combat situation, it can leave the caster at a disadvantage: the energy drain slows the reflexes and the strength of subsequent curses. Secondly, the Death Eaters are accustomed to playing with their food." Snape's mouth twisted with distaste. "They were facing six underage opponents, mere teenagers. Almost certainly they felt themselves adequate to the situation without having to use such powerful magic. Thirdly, the Dark Lord...as you may, or may not, have noticed...has a rather unhealthy obsession with Harry Potter. It leads to the occasional lapse of logic. He is intent on the boy's death, but determined to do the deed himself. To do otherwise would be nothing less than an admission of his own fallibility. Were one of the Death Eaters to kill Potter, even by accident, it would guarantee their own death. As a consequence, his presence gave you all some measure of protection; only when there was no chance of hitting Potter by accident were you at risk of the *Adava Kedavra*."

"So," Hermione's voice was barely a whisper, "when I was under the table, when Harry saved me," she couldn't bring herself to say the name of the curse, "that was because the Death Eater had a clear shot and knew he wouldn't hit Harry?"

"Precisely."

Hermione swallowed heavily. The horror of her brush with death washed over her, leaving an oddly metallic taste in her mouth. A sense of relief was followed by cowardliness, and then, as Sirius and Cedric came to mind, by guilt.

"You said," she began, her throat dry. "You said that you would tell me exactly how stupid we were. I guess now is a good opportunity."

"It seems to me that in your current mood you could perform that task for yourself quite adequately."

True. For a long couple of minutes, silence stretched between them. Hermione contemplated the edge of the sheet, distractedly pleating it into folds with the fingers of her right hand. In retrospect, the visit to the Ministry had been a tactical disaster from start to finish.

Finally, she spoke. "I wish we'd had more than one meeting of the Duelling Club."

In response, Snape made a barely disguised noise of disgust. "Do you think that a few more lessons would have tipped the scales?"

"It might have helped me." Hermione had flinched at the scorn in his voice. Her answer was more despairing than defiant.

"Six students, all underage, each of whom has suffered under an incompetent string of Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers. The Death Eaters would have been more than a match for the lot of you no matter how many duelling classes you'd attended! Didn't Black's death teach you that much?"

Hermione pressed herself a little further back into her pillows. Snape's anger was palpable. Still, she muttered again, this time more to herself than her professor, "It might have helped me."

He looked at her then, his eyes narrowed appraisingly. "That it might have. Your reflexes are poor, and your defensive spells lack force."

Hermione knew that the critique was deserved, but his words hurt nonetheless. The back of her eyes prickled with tears, and she blinked rapidly, determined not to let Snape see.

"If you hope to match Potter's Defence Against the Dark Arts marks," he continued, "I suggest you work on your technique over the summer holidays."

"I would, if I knew how." Hermione cursed herself for sounding petulant, although at least she wasn't crying.

"Think, Miss Granger." Snape had adopted his most sarcastic tone. "Apart from Defence exams, what does Potter do better than you do?"

"Nothing!" *Definitely petulant. If not downright sulky*. "Nothing except Quidditch, that is."

"Exactly."

"You can't be serious?" Surprise forced out self-pity in an instant. "Harry's good at DADA because he's good at Quidditch? No, that can't be true...or Ron would be better than me, too!"

"It's not quite that simple, Miss Granger. Mentally, you are quite capable, but your physical fitness is below average. It is a combination of mental and physical strength that allows each spell to be cast with precision and force. Potter is physically stronger than you, as, admittedly, is Ronald Weasley. Yet, while Potter seems...to all intents and purposes...as intellectually deficient as Mr. Weasley, he has a remarkably pig-headed tenacity in regards to the practice of defensive and offensive spellwork."

Hermione was so astounded that the insults to her best friends barely registered. Her brain churned with new information. She pulled herself up into a seated position against the head of the bed. "So," she theorised, "in that case, I'll never be Harry's equal in DADA...he's taller than I am, and much stronger. In fact, I'll never match any of the boys."

"Nonsense." Snape sniffed derisively. "Have you lost all ability to reason logically? Just a few moments ago you claimed to be better than Ronald Weasley."

"Oh. Then . . ." Hermione tailed off. *What, then?*

"Ginevra Weasley is probably a better example with which to compare yourself."

"Of course! She plays Quidditch, she's incredibly fit *and* her hexes are remarkably strong!" The excitement of realisation bubbled through Hermione's body, and she wrapped her arms tightly round her knees in an attempt to control the urge to jump around in delight.

"Cause and effect," remarked Snape. "Comparative strength is less important than relative strength. It is enough to be in peak physical shape."

"But, why has no-one ever told me this before?"

A grimace passed quickly across Snape's face. "It is information that most people take for granted."

Hermione stilled, her excitement dissipated entirely. "You mean that it is information that most purebloods take for granted," she stated, her tone expressionless.

"Yes."

Hermione took a deep breath and let it out slowly through her nose. "Well, I know now, I guess. And you think I should learn to play Quidditch over the holidays?"

Snape raised one eyebrow. "Not Quidditch necessarily. You would be hard pressed to learn to fly well at your parents' house without breaking both the Reasonable Restriction on Underage Magic and the International Statute of Secrecy. Furthermore Quidditch is impossible to learn by oneself. I suggest running, perhaps supplemented with yoga. In your case, running has the distinct advantage in that it, unlike other sports, can be learnt perfectly adequately from a book."

Ouch. Cruel, but accurate. Why pretend that she would learn physical fitness any differently from the way she learned everything else: from a book? *At least Dad'll be pleased.* Her father was always trying to convince her to go running; at one point he'd even run a few half-marathons. *Ha.* So maybe she wouldn't learn everything from a book after all, but that was information Snape didn't need to know. *Professor Snape.* Hermione glanced at him from under her eyelashes and reviewed the strange...and curiously useful...conversation they'd had. He hadn't exactly been nice, but neither had he behaved in his usual fashion. He didn't normally answer her questions. *Weird.* She wondered whether she dared ask one more.

"Professor?"

Snape looked up, his dark hair sliding across one cheek to reveal his eyes, and cocked an interrogative eyebrow.

"Sir, why are you telling me these things?"

Snape sighed softly through his nose. He folded shut the book that he had returned to reading, placing it on the small table beside her bed. Rising to his feet, he came and stood as close to the bed as he could without touching it and folded his arms firmly.

"Miss Granger, the information I am about to reveal must go no further." He glared at her down his long nose. "There included the two imbeciles you call friends."

"Harry and Ron are not imbeciles!"

"I beg your pardon?" Snape leaned forward slightly, looming across the bed. The charmed light by which he had been reading was behind him, and he cast an ominous shadow across the bed.

"Err . . . I beg your pardon, sir." *Oops. And he was just about to tell me something important, too*

Snape straightened and raised one eyebrow. "Better," he conceded.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe she hadn't blown it, after all.

"I want your word, Miss Granger, that you will not reveal the contents of our conversation to anyone."

Ah. Well, it wouldn't be the first time. All through her third year she'd kept the Time-Turner hidden from everyone, Harry and Ron included.

"You have it, sir."

"Very well." Snape turned away and paced several feet from the bed before spinning suddenly back towards her, his robes swirling around his thin frame. He stayed there, his arms tightly crossed over his chest. "The headmaster has decided that during the next year, you will take private lessons with me."

"Occlumency?" The question left her lips before Hermione was conscious that she meant to speak, and she bit her lip, horrified to have interrupted.

Snape shrugged dismissively. "Among other things."

She knew that he was watching her closely, knew he was sneering at her, yet she couldn't suppress a little shudder of joy, nor a barely voiced exclamation of anticipation: "Wow!"

"To begin with, I have several books for you to read over the holidays. I will leave them on your bedside table sometime during the next few days. Do not show them to anyone. They contain mental exercises as well as theories and practical applications of Occlumency. I want you to practice the relaxation and mind-clearing techniques every day. I will know if you have not. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Once you have your sixth-year schedule of classes, we will need to find a time during which your absence will not be noticed."

Hermione was already well aware of the times during term at which she could guarantee her solitude. "Sir, assuming that Umbridge's life-time Quidditch ban is lifted, we could meet during the Gryffindor training times. Harry and Ron will both be occupied."

"Indeed, that does seem likely." Snape stepped towards the bed and picked up his book from the table. He looked down at her. "Lie down," he ordered. Feeling somewhat like an obedient dog, Hermione shuffled back down under the covers. "For now, you need to rest."

Snape settled back into his chair, the conversation clearly over. Hermione closed her eyes tightly, yet strained her ears for the sounds of his turning pages. Though convinced that her whirling thoughts would keep her awake, she was very quickly deeply asleep.

The Agreement

Chapter 4 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

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I'd like to thank my betas: LAXo, for her time, her mad skills and her love of verb-subject agreements, and WriterMerrin, who is quick at the draw and straight to the point.

Finally, Severus straightened, surveying the neat shelves of carefully placed potions ingredients with a sense of achievement. His back protested against the sudden movement, and he stretched languorously, loosening his tight muscles. In the thirty-six hours since the Hogwarts Express had departed for the summer, emptying the school of students, he had tidied his office, packed up his clothes and a selection of books, reorganised his filing system and meticulously inventoried the supply cupboards. He'd missed dinner and even sent Hooch away when she'd dropped by with the intention of luring him out to Hogsmeade for an end of semester drink. His stomach rumbled, and for a moment he paused indecisively: dinner and bed, or should he move back to Spinner's End tonight? Indubitably, breakfast courtesy of the house-elves was going to be better than anything Wormtail might cook up, and that thought alone decided him.

Stalking back into his office, he seized a handful of Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace, intending to Floo to the kitchens. As he did so, not only did the flames turn green, but a loud bang echoed through the space accompanied by a blinding flash of light. Instinctively, Severus drew his wand; although, when his eyes readjusted only seconds later, he realised that there was no need: Fawkes hovered before him. Assailed by a different form of panic, Severus paused only long enough to summon a nondescript black leather satchel that hung from the back of his office door, then he took a firm hold of the phoenix's proffered tail feathers. Before Fawkes transported him elsewhere with another loud bang, Severus had time for only one thought: *Let Albus be alright*.

Severus absorbed the scene in Dumbledore's office within seconds: the sword, the ring, Dumbledore slumped in his chair, green flames licking at his wand hand, the wand itself discarded on the floor. *Green flames first* Severus cast several elaborate diagnostic charms with one hand, rummaging in his black satchel with the other. Pulling out a small bottle of viscous gold liquid, he uncorked it one-handed and placed it open on the desk.

"Fawkes," he ordered, pointing at the bottle. "Tears." Obediently, the phoenix fluttered down to the surface of the table and lowered his head so that he could weep directly into the mouth of the small phial.

Stepping around the table, Severus began to chant a modified freezing charm, translating the Latinate sounds of the traditional spells into their Parseltounge equivalents. Relief flooded his system as the flames flickered briefly, then died. He closed his eyes for a long second, then turned towards Fawkes.

"Thank you," he whispered, his throat dry. Taking the bottle, Severus placed his thumb over the opening and shook it thoroughly, transferring it to an empty goblet that stood on the desk. With his wand hand, he took hold of the front of Dumbledore's robes, pulling him upright. Severus poured the potion slowly into Dumbledore's mouth as he began to sing incantations over his injured hand. With a little luck (and the potion should provide that much) he could contain the curse, but with such powerful dark magic, there was little chance that he could cure it entirely.

"Severusss . . ." the slurred syllables of Dumbledore's return to consciousness reminded Snape sickeningly of Voldemort and the all-too-real possibility of Dumbledore's death. For another long moment, Dumbledore was silent, then his eyelids fluttered open and his eyes focussed.

"Why, *why* did you put on that ring?"* All of Snape's concern coagulated into anger. "It carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"*

"I . . . was a fool. Sorely tempted . . ."

The weakness of Dumbledore's voice did nothing to cool Snape's temper. "Tempted by what?"* His peremptory question got no response. "It is a miracle that you managed to return here!"* he continued. "That ring carried a curse of extraordinary power, to contain it is all we can hope for; I have trapped the curse in one hand for the time being..."*

"You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?"* Dumbledore sounded stronger. A tone of mild curiosity coloured his voice, and he looked at his damaged hand with an interested expression.

"I cannot tell."* Snape let out a sigh of defeat. "Maybe a year. There is no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually, it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time..."*

"I am fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I have you, Severus..."*

Goddamn the man. Must he always sound so noble? "If you had only summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more, buy you more time! Did you think that breaking the ring would break the curse?"*

"Something like that . . . I was delirious, no doubt . . . Well, really, this makes matters much more straightforward."* Dumbledore settled himself upright in his chair and straightened his cuff around his blackened wrist. "I refer to the plan Lord Voldemort is revolving around me. His plan to have the poor Malfoy boy murder me..."*

The "poor Malfoy boy" has a name, you could use it Snape scowled at Dumbledore and took a seat on the opposite side of the desk. "The Dark Lord does not expect Draco to succeed. This is merely punishment for Lucius's recent failures. Slow torture for Draco's parents, while they watch him fail and pay the price."* *And slow torture for me as I watch him suffer and contemplate my own eventual death.*

"In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have."**No, as surely as I have.* "Now, I should have thought the natural successor to the job, once Draco fails, is yourself?"*

"That, I think, is the Dark Lord's plan."* *At which point, I will die, too...unless, of course, it becomes apparent earlier that I have betrayed him: in that case I'll die first*

"Lord Voldemort foresees a moment in the near future when he will not need a spy at Hogwarts?"*

"He believes the school will soon be in his grasp, yes..."*

"And if it does fall into his grasp, I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students of Hogwarts?"*

Does he honestly believe that I might be alive to see it? The other night's post-Pensieve discussion had been shorter than was typical. Perhaps Dumbledore hadn't grasped the full consequences of the trap into which Snape had been led. Snape stared blankly at the older man, who, for his part, was looking back at Snape enquiringly. Belatedly, Snape realised that his answer was required and nodded mechanically.

"Good."* Dumbledore beamed at him. "Now then. Your first priority will be to discover what Draco is up to. A frightened teenage boy is a danger to others as well as to himself. Offer him help and guidance, he ought to accept, he likes you..."*

"...much less since his father has lost favour. Draco blames me, he thinks I have usurped Lucius's position..."*

"All the same, try. I am concerned less for myself than for accidental victims of whatever schemes might occur to the boy. Ultimately, of course, there is only one thing to be done if we are to save him from Lord Voldemort's wrath..."*

Snape had every intention of trying. The only productive conclusions he'd come to over the last few days regarded the fierce necessity to save Draco and to teach Granger as much as possible. The second task would be fairly straightforward, but he'd spent hours already attempting to solve the first, and Dumbledore's casual commentary

needed him sharply.

"Are you intending to let him kill you?"* he bit out.

"Certainly not. *You* must kill me."*

For a long moment, Severus couldn't reply. His blood pounded so loudly in his ears that he wondered whether he would ever hear anything ever again. Several beats later, he regained his composure, even his heavy sense of irony, "Would you like me to do it now? Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?"*

"Oh, not quite yet,"* Dumbledore affected a tone of breezy unconcern. "I daresay the moment will present itself in due course. Given what has happened tonight, we can be sure that it will happen within a year."*

"If you don't mind dying, why not let Draco do it?"* Though he tried hard, Severus couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. He glared at the desk in front of him, furious at the hot prickle of tears that threatened to spill over.

"That boy's soul is not yet so damaged. I would not have it ripped apart on my account."*

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"* It was barely a whisper, and it hung in the air between them as Snape continued to stare down at the table top.

"You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation."* Dumbledore leant forward and reached out to take a gentle hold of Severus' elbow. "I ask this one great favour of you, Severus, because death is coming for me as surely as the Chudley Cannons will finish bottom of this year's league. I confess I should prefer a quick, painless exit to the protracted and messy affair it will be if, for instance, Greyback is involved...I hear Voldemort has recruited him? Or dear Bellatrix, who likes to play with her food before she eats it."*

Snape's head was spinning. *One great favour. As if I haven't given him everything..everything...for the last seventeen years. And as if I can refuse him now, even if it meant the end of my own life . . . certainly it will mean the end of every part of my life that makes it worth living.* He might have put off his response a little longer if he hadn't looked up and met Dumbledore's intensely blue eyes. Hating himself, hating Dumbledore for asking such a thing of him, he nodded.

"Thank you, Severus . . .".*

Dumbledore wanted to hash out the details of several possible post-homicide scenarios, but Severus couldn't bear the idea. Instead he threatened to Floo-call Poppy Pomfrey until Dumbledore capitulated and retired to bed, first having swallowed various different healing potions pressed on him from Severus' satchel and then promising to visit the nurse first thing in the morning.

For a couple of seconds after Dumbledore left, Snape considered the Floo, but decided that the walk to the dungeons might do him good. At the base of the stairs leading from Dumbledore's office, Snape paused and glanced at his watch. It was only ten thirty. *And to think, a mere hour and a half ago I was avoiding the thought of my impending death through the time-honoured practice of physical-labour-cum-procrastination . . . and now, the continuation of my miserable existence is all-but-guaranteed by a promise to murder the one man who sees me, and likes me, for who I truly am.* Severus looked at his watch a second time: only ten thirty. As surely as the Chudley Cannons would finish bottom of this year's league, this early hour of the night would find Hooch down the pub...if not Poppy and Minerva as well. If ever Severus Snape had need of a drink, this was the moment. Without bothering to fetch his cloak, he strode off to Hogsmeade and the promise of company.

A/N : I know, I know! This chapter is a) short and b) mostly written by J.K. Rowling. I want to take this opportunity to reassure you, dear reader, that while this story parallels the events of HP6, the year was experienced very differently by Hermione and Severus than it was by Mr Potter. In general, I only repeat scenes where absolutely necessary (though I will try to make mention of enough of the original plot that my story makes sense)...thus, this story will probably seem like complete nonsense unless you've read HP6 (and HP7, given that this scene only appears there in Snape's memories). I thought it crucial to present this scene in its correct place and to have Severus' POV.

On a more cheerful note, Ch5 is already written, and you can read it here as soon as it makes it through the queue . . .

Preparations

Chapter 5 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter five : Preparations

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I'd like to thank my betas: LAXo, for her way with words and wayward commas, and WriterMerrin, for giving me the chance to use a correctly placed semicolon.

Hermione was released from the hospital wing three days before the end of term. She hadn't seen Professor Snape since their late-night conversation, but several times she woke with the feeling that she'd just missed him, and on one occasion she found a neat pile of books beside the healing potions on her bedside table. The scar across her chest had faded significantly. Madame Pomfrey had left her with a cream to apply every morning and a potion to be taken once a week, but had warned her that it was unlikely ever to fade entirely. Hermione didn't mind. She felt that she'd got off lightly and had developed a habit of rubbing at the newly lumpy skin up near her collarbone. Touching it made her feel stronger somehow, less lost and more determined.

She spent the first two weeks of the holidays at home with her parents. Her mother had taken time off work, and even her father managed to spend a couple of afternoons away from the practice. He was delighted with her newfound interest in running and couldn't stop talking about it. He gave her copious instructions about long runs and tempo runs and easy runs and stretching, he loaned her several books and showed her a number of websites that made it easy to calculate training plans and target speeds to run at. Furthermore, he ran with her, happily modifying his speed to her slower pace and holding-up both ends of the conversation whenever she ran out of breath (which at first, was frequently).

Hermione had dithered for a long while as to how much she should tell her parents about the events of the preceding year. Hogwarts had odd policies concerning Muggle parents and magical injuries. Quite rightly, the Grangers had been furious at the end of Hermione's second year to discover that she had spent much of the year in a coma, with them none the wiser. They had threatened then to put an end to her magical education, and it took a fraught meeting with Professor McGonagall full of dire warnings about the awful consequences of living with an untrained witch to change their minds. Still, they needed to know about the return of Lord Voldemort, for their own safety as much as anything else, and she was pretty certain that they would be less furious about her new scar if they heard it first from her. Eventually, she obfuscated slightly: she told them of Dumbledore's confrontation with Voldemort at the Ministry (leaving out her participation along with that of Harry and the others), and attributed her injury to an accident during "duelling practice." "Given the war, Mum, they've been taking self-defence really seriously; and Professor Snape healed me straight away so there wasn't anything much to worry about . . ." It left her feeling a little nauseous that her parents found her lies so convincing, but she just rubbed at her scar surreptitiously and kept her mouth firmly shut.

Once her mother went back to work, Hermione began to spend most of her time at the Burrow, returning home only on the weekends. Several years earlier, Mr Weasley had had the fireplace in her parents' bedroom attached to the Floo network, which made commuting back and forth very easy. Harry was staying at the Burrow, too, and the crowded Weasley household was much more fun than rattling around a London terrace by herself. Still, she was often a little relieved to get away from the noise and bustle on the weekends, and the long runs that she went on with her father each Sunday morning became an increasingly precious part of her summer routine.

Hermione was following a running schedule meticulously. Professor Snape had been correct: the math and logic of learning to run fascinated her, she could run by herself and she could learn from a book. Quidditch was another matter entirely. Though she gritted her teeth and played two-a-side with Harry, Ron and Ginny every time they suggested it, she was a pretty dire player and improving only slowly. The game seemed to move too quickly, and she almost always felt humiliated by the end of each match. Even with the height limitations that were imposed by playing in the back yard of the Burrow, the empty air between her and the ground left her dizzy with anxiety. *If you can't be brave, Granger, she told herself, be stubborn. Professor Snape would probably say that there's no difference*

She was also practicing the mental exercises Snape had set her. Before leaving Hogwarts, she'd charmed the covers of the books he'd loaned her to look like back-issues of *Arithmancy Today*. Only Bill might have evidenced any interest in opening such a publication, and he was so caught up in flirting with Fleur that she'd been able to keep them close to hand without concern, had even read them through several times in the kitchen of the Burrow. In fact, she'd realised that the figure of Hermione Granger lost in a book was, to most intents and purposes, invisible. As long as she didn't move suddenly or look up, the adults would talk as if she were not there at all, dropping small tidbits of information concerning other Order members or news of another Death Eater attack. Snape's name, in particular, always caught her attention. Hermione had told no-one of his role in healing Dolohov's curse or of their odd night-time conversation. The only time she'd even wanted to was when Harry had mentioned his upcoming lessons with Dumbledore, though she was certain that Ron and Harry would have been far less enthusiastic about her lessons with Professor Snape than she was. Snape's commitment to teach her was a little like her scar...new, lumpy, hidden from sight; she kept touching on the memory of it like a talisman. The idea scared her and yet reassured her; next time she would fight better, next time she would be stronger.

His name was rarely mentioned, and then only in passing: "Snape will be at the Order meeting tomorrow," "Snape said to make sure Dumbledore speaks with Minerva." Unfortunately none of the meetings were held at the Burrow itself, and Hermione was sorely disappointed that she hadn't seen him.

*In fact, she rebuked herself sharply the morning after Harry's birthday, when she found herself lying in bed thinking about her absent professor**you're fast developing an unhealthy obsession with the man!* Slipping out from under the covers, she grabbed her running clothes and snuck out without waking Ginny. Before leaving the Burrow, she Disillusioned herself and stuck her wand into a sweatband so that it sat flat along the inside of her arm. She ran almost four miles through the farmland outside the village. The sky was clear with a pleasantly cool breeze; Hermione felt wonderful. Just in the last week or so, the running had become easier. In the home stretch she pushed herself, bursting back into the Burrow yard with her legs pumping and chest heaving.

"Who's there?!" Harry frightened her as much as she'd obviously just scared him. He had frozen into a duelling stance, his wand pointed directly towards her.

"Whoa, Harry! It's me, Hermione." Hurriedly, she de-Disillusioned herself, the warmth of the counter-spell trickling down her back.

"Bloody hell, you gave me a fright," he replied, running his hand back through his fringe and flopping back down onto the ground.

"Yeah, you too." Hermione leaned forward and rested her hands on her knees. She struggled to get her breath, fighting the combined effects of her run and the adrenaline rush triggered by Harry's sudden appearance.

The relief on Harry's face had faded into annoyance. "I wish I could leave the yard," he remarked bitterly.

Hermione had the grace to look a little guilty. "I, er, um, didn't exactly ask permission," she responded, then added lamely, "I had my wand."

Harry looked at her in surprise. "That's not exactly your style, 'Mione," he commented. "In fact, exercise isn't exactly your style, either. What's got into you?"

Hermione took hold of one foot and stretched out her quad. "Well, I, er, read somewhere that improving your physical strength improves your magical strength. I guess I was kind of disappointed in my DADA mark." She pulled a wry smile at Harry and switched to stretching her other leg. "Next year I want to do better. Next time we fight the Death Eaters I want to do better."

At her last words, Harry sat up a little straighter. The grumpy look that so-often sat across his face lifted slightly. "You're amazing, Hermione."

"Nonsense." She sat down beside him. "You saved my life at the Ministry, Harry. And if I had been a bit better at DADA, I would have Stupefied Dolohov, not silenced him. I might not have got injured at all."

Harry's face darkened once more. "It's my fault that any of you were even there! You said yourself that I've got a thing for saving people. If I hadn't believed Voldemort..."

"Harry! Voldemort tricked you. He tricked you because he's evil, and you fell for it because you're fundamentally good. That is nothing to be ashamed of! If you let his actions change you, then you're letting him win."

"God, Hermione," Harry had pulled his knees up towards his chest and buried his face in the gap between his thighs. "You sound like Dumbledore."

Hermione deepened her voice as much as she could. "My dear boy," she replied in a passable imitation of the headmaster's bemused tones. "I always have been a dab hand at Polyjuice."

The snort of laughter with which Harry greeted her feeble joke left Hermione feeling ridiculously pleased. He had been far too prickly since Sirius' death for her to take his laughter for granted. "Come on," she laughed back, leveraging herself to her feet and holding out a hand to haul him up. "I bet Molly's got breakfast well on the way."

As he took her hand, Harry paused for a second, his eyes narrowed as he regarded the generous expanse of leg revealed by her running shorts. "You know, Hermione, I'd say you're getting a few secondary benefits from that strengthening program you're following!"

"Watch out, Harry James Potter, I don't take that kind of cheek from anyone!" Despite her argumentative words, Hermione flushed with pleasure. It was nice to know that one of her two best friends had noticed she was a girl, even if she'd rather it had been the other one.

Inside they found not only Molly and breakfast, but Ron, Ginny and their Hogwarts letters. Hermione opened hers and skimmed the cover letter...congratulations on your OWLs, welcome to sixth year, beginning of NEWTs, once again prefect, all pretty standard stuff...and turned quickly to the book list. *Wow, these Arithmancy books look excellent!* She'd wanted a copy of *Advanced Practical Applications of Arithmantic Principles* for simply ages. As her eyes skimmed down to the bottom of the page, her heart skipped a beat. There, appended to the end of her booklist were three extra titles in the distinctively spiky script of her Potions professor: *Elemental Warding, Defending the Mind and Body* and *Exercising Caution: Improving Magical Reflexes. This is for real*, she thought. Her heart was racing, and she unconsciously reached up

and rubbed gently at her scar.

A shout from Harry interrupted her reverie. He had his own letter open and was holding a gold and red badge in his hand. Hermione looked at it stupidly for a second.*Was he a prefect, too?* Harry held it out towards her, a delighted grin on his face: Quidditch Captain.

"That gives you equal status with prefects!"* remarked Hermione with real pleasure. "You can use our special bathroom now and everything!"*

Over the next few days, Hermione tried not to look at her booklist too frequently. Though salivating over books was typical behaviour for her, she didn't want either of the boys noticing Professor Snape's handwriting and asking her about it. When they finally did go into Diagon Alley to do their shopping, however, she couldn't hide her disappointment at Arthur's suggestion that the group split up.

"Molly, it doesn't make sense for all of us to go to Madam Malkin's,"* he remarked. "Why don't those three go with Hagrid, and we can go to Flourish and Blotts and get everyone's schoolbooks?"*

Hermione surrendered her booklist reluctantly, to Ron's evident amusement.

"Come on, Hermione," he laughed, throwing an arm around her shoulders. "You can visit the book shop some other day when we have more time up our sleeves. Besides, all too soon you'll be back at Hogwarts and you can spend as much time as you desire in your blessed library."

"Really, Ron?" she tried to maintain her grumpiest voice, but couldn't help the edge of laughter that crept into her tone. "You will let me spend as much time as I want there? You won't *ever* try to drag me outside?"

"Only when it becomes absolutely necessary for your health!" Ron protested. "It hurts me a lot more than it hurts you."

"You can say that again!" Hermione giggled and punched him lightly in the ribs.

Afterwards, Hermione reflected that the trip to Diagon Alley was no more eventful than life with Harry tended to be. Draco Malfoy was definitely up to something; his behaviour in Borgin and Burkes was far from innocent. She certainly didn't disagree with Harry on that point. Hadn't she gone into the shop and tried to find out more? But still, there was something disturbing with the obsession Harry had developed. Even Ron had noticed. Sometime on the third or fourth day after the shopping trip, the two friends caught each other's eye in the middle of one of Harry's tirades, and later that day, Ron cornered her alone in the staircase.

"Hey." Ron caught hold of her elbow as she passed.

"Hey, yourself." They were standing really close together, and she could smell the faint scent of him, sweet and summery, like freshly-cut grass.

"D'you reckon Harry's okay?"

She felt bad talking about Harry when he wasn't there, but there was something nice about it too. For one thing, Ron had such an adorably concerned look on his face, and for another, they were his best friends: who else had a right to be worried about him?

"You mean the chosen-one thing...or the look he gets in his eyes when he talks about Malfoy?" They were both speaking very quietly, and she leaned in a little closer still.

"Both, really. He's acting weird about Malfoy, for sure. Like it's personal . . . or he's got everything out of proportion or something."

"Oh, Ron. I'm glad that we've both noticed. He gets that same look on his face whenever anyone mentions Sirius, too. All closed-up and angry." Hermione chewed on her lower lip briefly. "What do you think we should do?"

"God, I dunno. Let's just downplay the whole Malfoy thing. I don't think we should encourage him."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Hermione felt reluctant to end the conversation. There was something really nice about standing so close to Ron and talking so softly.

"Well, um, I, er, guess I'll see you round."

"Yeah, I guess so."

Wow. How can a conversation go from so comfortable to so awkward so quickly? Hermione flushed a little and ran up the stairs towards the room she shared with Ginny as quickly as she could. The youngest Weasley was already there, and Hermione threw herself onto her bed and picked up a nearby textbook, pretending to read. *The sooner next semester starts, she thought, the better!*

Happy Returns

Chapter 6 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Six : Happy Returns

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I'd like to thank my betas: LAXo, for persisting and insisting, and WriterMerrin, for knowing what a compound predicate is and not being afraid to use it.

Less than a minute after Narcissa and Bellatrix left, Wormtail sidled back into the sitting room, rubbing his silver hand against the flesh of his other palm.

"How lovely of the Black sisters to visit, purely a social call, I imagine?"

By that stage Severus had already put on his travelling cloak.

"Clear away the glasses," he ordered.

"Certainly, certainly. But where are you going?"

One word sufficed as a reply..."Out,"...before Severus put word to deed and swept from the house. Had Wormtail not been present, he would have left via the back garden, ducking through the hole in the fence for old-time's sake. Although even using the front door, it didn't take him long to meet up with the back lane. For about half a mile he travelled a meandering route that rarely obliged him to step out of the shadows. Then he stopped and glanced around. It seemed that he had arrived...if the dilapidated children's playground in which he stood could be classed as a destination. Eventually, Severus made his way over to a swing, one of the few pieces of play equipment that remained intact. Manoeuvring his narrow hips into the child's seat, he sat down. His left arm wound tightly around the chain, he leant his forehead against his hand.

It was late, it was dark, it was unseasonably cold. He was 36 years old and sitting alone in a children's playground. He had just sworn an Unbreakable Vow to murder Albus Dumbledore in the inevitable circumstance that Draco Malfoy failed to do so.

Hell, he told himself, *it doesn't make a difference. Once Draco fails, my choice was always going to involve Albus' death or my own*He reviewed the terms of the promise he had made.

"Will you, Severus, watch over my son, Draco, as he attempts to fulfil the Dark Lord's wishes?"

Done. Severus and Lucius had spent hours of their lives scheming to keep Draco from direct participation in the Dark Lord's battles. The boy had been a sickly child, preceded by three miscarriages, and was loved by both his parents to an obsessive degree. He alone was valued more highly by the Malfoys than their sycophantic allegiance to Lord Voldemort's cause.

"And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?"

Again, this was nothing he hadn't already intended to do.

"And, should it prove necessary . . . if it seems Draco will fail . . . will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?"

Well, it was safe to say that it already seemed as if Draco would fail. And Severus had already promised Dumbledore to complete the deed himself. Why then, did he feel so sick at heart?

Severus glanced around the desolate playground and imagined himself as a young boy. *I must have looked frightful* It did help, though, being there in the park where, in a sense, it had all began. He sat there a little longer, letting the odd July chill seep into his bones and thinking over the moments in his life when he might have made different choices. He knew that he sat, poised, at a similarly important moment, with personally devastating consequences. This time he intended to act in full awareness of the possible ramifications.

It was close to an hour later when he finally stood. "Come, Snivellus," he spoke out loud. "You know full well where your loyalties lie."

Severus Snape walked out of the park and into the shadows, where he Disapparated with a crack.

That evening there was no cat to mark his arrival at Hogwarts. He stalked up to and through the castle without meeting a soul. He greeted the gargoyle with a long-suffering sigh. "Acid pops," he muttered.

Dumbledore was still up and, after viewing Snape's Pensieve memory, ridiculously delighted.

"Well done, Severus! No-one but you could have pulled off such a performance. Jealousy makes Bellatrix a harsher critic than Voldemort himself, but tonight you have gone a long way towards convincing her!"

Dumbledore busied himself pouring them both a drink, smiling happily. On the other side of the desk, Snape scowled. He tried very hard not to think of killing the headmaster or of how unpleasant his life would be once Dumbledore's plan came to pass.

Not since his first few years at Hogwarts had Severus been happier to see the holidays end. This year, leaving Spinner's End had been a pleasure, and in comparison with the ever-present irritant Wormtail, he was positively looking forward to spending time with his students.

He was standing to one side of the great doors, watching groups of students arrive at the castle. Hidden from sight by the light streaming from within the entrance hall, he was but one of the "extra security measures" put in place for the evening. At the sight of Horace Slughorn squeezing his portly body out from one of the carriages, Severus instinctively stepped further back into the shadows. A wave of resentment threatened his good mood, and he squashed a childish instinct to hex the man while he wasn't looking. *Enough*, he thought, and as Slughorn disappeared into the hall, Severus turned his attention back to the students. When Hermione Granger and the youngest Weasley boy emerged onto the stairs without Potter, arguing in furious whispers, his eyes narrowed with suspicion. When they walked past him, Severus fell into step behind them.

"I'm serious, Hermione, there's no way I'm telling Snape!"

"Ron! Firstly, it's *Professor* Snape, and secondly, if we'd just gone to him last year..."

Unbeknownst to the two students, Professor Snape was listening to every word.

"No bloody way! Harry wouldn't thank us for dobbing him in to Snape, you know!"

"Grow up, Ron! This is not about students versus teachers, and it never has been! It's about Order members versus Death Eaters!"

Time to intervene, I think Severus reached out and took a firm hold of Ron's collar. Leaning down, he hissed in his ear, "Missing someone, Mr Weasley? Your kind of trouble tends to come in threes."

The look of shock on Weasley's face was comical and intensely satisfying. Granger, for her part, looked ridiculously relieved to see him *idiot girl, anyone could be watching*.

"Close your mouth, Miss Granger," he snarled, before she could speak, "I have no more use for your chatter here than I do in the classroom. Now then, Mr Weasley, where is Potter? Did you abandon him?"

"N-no," Weasley sounded choked and desperate. "He's gone up ahead." The lie was so blatant it was hardly worth calling him out on it.

"Leaving you behind to carry his belongings. Dear me, the famous Mr Potter gets more conceited each year."

"Sir..."

"Miss Granger, I said to be quiet!" He didn't even bother to look at her. The churning guilt and worry emanating from Weasley was so strong that he had no need for the details of what happened: Potter clearly hadn't left the train. "Twenty points from Gryffindor, Weasley, for lying to a teacher." He relinquished his hold on Ron's collar and spun away quickly so that his robes billowed, setting off for the station.

He was well across the grounds when he intercepted Tonks' Patronus, and with the knowledge that the boy-who-lived continued to do precisely that, Severus relaxed his pace somewhat. As he walked, Snape smirked to himself: he was going to enjoy escorting Potter back up to dinner. He really had missed Hogwarts.

Sitting at the dinner table that evening, Severus took no small measure of consolation in the student response to Dumbledore's introduction of Horace Slughorn. No-one applauded. Instead, eyes had turned his way, and his occupational transfer had caused a small scene. If only he could piss off Potter and cheer up his Slytherins to such an extent every night. And if only his replacement had been someone other than Slughorn.

Hooch had leant around Minerva and winked at him, "Ah, to be notorious," she commented.

Severus merely smirked.

Planning the new lessons had been interesting. It was an inordinate amount of work, of course, to compose new syllabi for the entire seven-year sequence, but it made a nice change from re-teaching Potions classes that he'd perfected years ago.

Once the students were dismissed...*what kind of man actually uses the phrase "Pip pip?"* Severus wondered...Dumbledore turned to the teachers. "I assume that everyone received word of the staff meeting this evening? I shall expect you all in the staff room shortly."

"Lovely," chuffed Slughorn. "We can all have a nightcap and get to know each other a bit better!"

Snape rolled his eyes as he got to his feet. "Albus," he said, with a slight bow, "I must first attend to my duties as Head of House."

"Jolly good, Severus," Dumbledore called after him as he swept away. "We can wait."

The Slytherin prefects had done a good job of shepherding the first years away towards the common room, and as Severus strode past the dining table, the stragglers leapt up and hurried. Late could be defined as arriving after Professor Snape did.

His entrance into the common room was met with applause. Several students rose to their feet, and a number called out their congratulations.

"Enough," he said, but gently, raising one hand slightly for silence. "Our first duty tonight is to welcome the new students. Please step forward." Seven very nervous-looking first-years stepped out into the space at the front of the room: four girls, three boys. Severus took the opportunity to examine them closely as he'd missed the sorting. Only one looked malnourished...and the Hogwarts food would fix that problem soon enough. She and one of the boys had the bluish, pinched look that spoke of neglect; he would need to make extra time to spend with them. A couple of the other new students were obviously siblings of higher-year students; they would have no trouble fitting in.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," he said, "and more importantly, welcome to Slytherin house. For the next seven years, this school will be your home, these students will be your family. I have no doubt that a number of you have heard terrible things about Slytherins...about dark magic and evil people. If so, put them from your mind. Such stories are spread by ignorant fools who know nothing of what they speak.

"There is a great deal of inter-house animosity at this school, encouraged by the point system and by the house Quidditch competition. Do not take it personally. Do, however, take pride in your house. Earn house points, beat the other teams at Quidditch. Slytherin is a noble institution. We are proud to have you, and you will be proud to be here. The Sorting Hat has chosen you from among your colleagues, and every one of you is here by equal right. As Slytherins, you will stand, or fall, together. Each of your fellow Slytherins will defend you whenever and wherever it is necessary to do so. You will treat each other with respect and there will be no bullying or teasing of your own housemates in any form. Do I make myself clear?"

The seven small children in front of him nodded obediently, and a number of the higher level students applauded and called out in encouragement.

"The door of my office is always open. If you need me...at any time...it is sufficient to speak with the portrait of Lady Florinda de' Medici that hangs by the door." He gestured towards the portrait, and Lady Florinda waved obligingly. "She will come and find me immediately."

"Very well then," he continued, turning from the first years and addressing the rest of the room. "Slytherins, may I present your new housemates." He paused for the outpouring of applause. "Now then, those of you in first year have had a long and surprising day. The second-year students will show you up to your beds. I expect you to use them. As for everybody else, you will retire before midnight. I do not want to find anyone awake when I return to the common room at that time. One last thing...Malfoy, Bulstrode, Nott, Parkinson, Goyle, Crabbe, Daphne Greengrass, Baddock, and Lorrelie...I want a word, in my office, now."

His office was crowded once they all tramped in. Draco took the only available seat (not including Snape's chair), and the others stood around looking uncomfortable. Severus sat, regarding them in silence until all chattering stopped and Parkinson began to look wary.

Finally, he spoke. "I have called you here this evening because each of you became involved in the so-called Inquisitorial Squad." Several other students developed nervous looks. Draco looked bored. "I am disappointed."

"But, sir,"...it was Millicent Bulstrode who ventured to speak..."last year, you told us that it would be useful to demonstrate our loyalty to the ministry."

"Incorrect. Last year I told you that it would be in your interest to ~~appear~~ appear loyal to the ministry. It is also in your interest to appear loyal to Dumbledore. Dolores Umbridge is a fool. A fool who is now mentally incapacitated and may never return to full-time ministry work. You...all of you...chose the wrong side. A consummate Slytherin is capable of seeming loyal in each and every instance; your primary loyalty is to yourselves and to your housemates. As members of the Inquisitorial Squad, you lowered yourselves to do somebody else's dirty work. You need to be far more careful before you abdicate mastery over your own choices and actions. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir." Most of the responses were muttered, but several of the students were looking thoughtful. Draco, on the other hand, was staring up at him under long blond lashes, an unreadable expression on his face.

"Dismissed. Draco..."

"Sir?" His tone was cold. In conjunction with the blank look on his face, it bordered on insolent. A far cry from the warmth that had tinged their rapport in previous years.

"I want to see you tomorrow after classes finish."

Draco inclined his head and followed the others out.

Alone in his office, Severus pinched the bridge of his nose briefly and sighed. For a few moments he sat with his eyes closed, struggling to recapture the sense of joyful return he'd experienced only hours earlier. Giving it up as a lost cause, he sighed once more before heading for the staff room.

Unsurprisingly, he was the last to arrive. Speaking to the older students had delayed him longer even than Pomona, who tended to spend the most time with her new Hufflepuffs. The meeting had not yet started, and the other staff members were milling around or seated in small groups chatting. Severus caught sight of Slughorn

expounding in one corner to a bemused looking Sybil Trelawney and immediately turned in the opposite direction, where Minerva McGonagall was watching him with an amused expression.

"Here, drink this," she pushed a cup into his hand, "I'll get myself another."

He sniffed it: tea, with a generous slug of brandy. "What on earth did I do to deserve your cast-off beverages?" he asked, his voice acidic.

"Oh, you just looked like you needed it."

Severus glared at her, but took a swallow anyway. The hot tea and the heat of the liquor burned on the way down, and the warmth of it loosened his body slightly.

In the centre of the room, Dumbledore clapped his hands and called for everyone's attention. "Now that we're all here, I think we can begin. Please find a seat and make yourselves comfortable." Only once everyone was seated did he continue. "Once again, I would like to extend a welcome to the new member of our staff. Horace, of course, will be no stranger to many of you as he taught here previously, several years ago." There was a brief smattering of applause. "Horace's presence has allowed Severus to take on the arduous and challenging task of teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, imparting a set of skills that have, perhaps, never been so crucial than they are at this juncture. Precisely for this reason, I'm delighted to announce that...contrary to his usual practice...Severus will accept all students with a passing OWL grade at NEWT level."

Severus smirked at the several astonished glances he received.

"Well, that is good news!" exclaimed Filius, "I thought I might have to disappoint a number of Ravenclaws tomorrow who had hoped to continue with only an E!"

"Which reminds me, Horace," interpolated Dumbledore, "for the benefit of those working on scheduling tomorrow, what is the cut-off point for entry into your NEWT classes?"

"Why, Albus, I'd be happy to accept any students with an O or and E, even an A if they are prepared to work hard." Slughorn smiled at the assembled staff in a manner that Snape could only think of as fatuous.

"I would imagine that if you cannot be bothered to be selective about the syllabus," drawled Severus, "there is little point in being selective about the students."

"Severus!" McGonagall sounded outraged.

Hooch kicked him surreptitiously on the ankle. "Watch it," she hissed.

Slughorn spluttered, "Wh-what do you mean by that, Snape?"

"Do you need me to spell it out for you?" Severus was looking particularly vicious.

"Enough!" Dumbledore's voice cut commandingly through the uproar. "Severus! Horace! You are colleagues now, and you will treat each other with respect."

Severus held his tongue. Slughorn muttered, "Well, I never," under his breath.

"Gentlemen?" There was an icy insistence in Dumbledore's tone.

"Very good, Headmaster." Severus inclined his head toward Dumbledore and decided to ignore Slughorn completely.

Dumbledore moved on quickly to other administrative matters, and the meeting wound up around forty-five minutes later. Severus went to leave immediately, but was held back by Hooch, who caught at a handful of his robes.

"Oi, not so fast," she exclaimed and then lowered her voice. "Why don't you like Slughorn?"

"Hooch," he sneered, glaring at her handful of his clothes, "I don't like anyone."

She rolled her eyes, but didn't let go. "Yeah, right. Forgot that. What makes it so personal in this particular instance, then?"

"Slughorn," bit out Snape, savagely, "is a terrible teacher who can't be bothered to point out the mistakes that litter the textbook. He cannot think of anything beyond his own...limited...circle of influence and plays terrible favourites among the students."

Minerva, whom he hadn't noticed was listening in, sniffed loudly with disapproval. "Come on, Severus, you play terrible favourites yourself!"

Severus spun to glare at her, pulling his arm forcefully out of Hooch's grip. "My favourites, Minerva, are chosen for me, by the Sorting Hat! I look out for my Slytherins because no-one else will!"

"Even still," replied Minerva, undaunted, "we could all benefit a little from the kind of inter-house co-operation that Horace tends to encourage!"

"Tell that to your precious Gryffindors! How many Slytherins did they include in their inter-house vigilante group last year? None!"

Minerva's face softened and she reached out a hand towards Severus' arm. He flinched away. "Forget it," he snarled. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Hermione's Helping Hand

Chapter 7 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Seven : Hermione's Helping Hand.

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I'd like to thank my betas: LAxo, who is always first, and WriterMerrin, for appearing out of the ether to solve all problems.

Hermione had hoped that once she returned to Hogwarts, her lessons with Professor Snape would start immediately, but beyond snarling at her to keep her mouth shut and mocking her for knowing the answers in class, he made no sign that he was aware of her existence. All attempts to hang back after DADA were foiled by the presence of Harry and Ron, and the one time she'd passed him in a corridor without the boys in tow, Snape had swept past her without a glance. Occasionally, she even wondered whether she had dreamt the whole thing, both the healing and the night-time conversation...she might have been delirious, after all. To reassure herself, Hermione took to carrying her booklist around in her pocket and would frequently check that his handwriting was still there. She'd read big chunks of the books he'd set several times over and was itching to talk to someone about them. *Elemental Warding*, in particular...now there was a book with a misleading name: the contents were far from elemental, but instead well above NEWT standard.

Her scheduled classes had been a mixed bag. Snape was as good and as scary a teacher of Defence Against the Dark Arts as he had been in Potions while the degree to which Slughorn played favourites was irritating and Harry's success using the instructions of his bloody Half-Blood Prince was driving her up the wall. Arithmancy, on the other hand, had been an unadulterated joy.

Hardly anyone took Arithmancy at NEWT level, and the sixth- and seventh-years had class together. From Gryffindor it was just her, but there was a bunch of Ravenclaws, and two of the Slytherins from her year had continued on...Blaise Zabini and Tracey Davis.

At the start of their first class, Professor Vector had outlined the syllabus:

"I don't need to tell you how delighted I am that you have all decided to continue with Arithmancy. Now, as the seventh-year students already know, and I hope will forgive me for reiterating, in order to pass Arithmancy at the NEWT level, it is necessary not only to learn the theoretical aspects well enough to pass the written exam but also to complete an independent practical application of Arithmantic probabilities. As a consequence, much of our year will be spent on individual projects. During the first term, we will have classes as scheduled; we will cover any new numerical theory and revise the more complex forms of imaginary and magical number calculus, including multi-dimensional arrays. We will also spend a great deal of time looking at the issues raised in fitting theoretical models to practical situations. During this term, I expect each student to develop a research proposal that will be due just before break. After Christmas, however, regular lessons will be much rarer. I will make the scheduled classroom time available for one-on-one meetings in which we can focus on your independent projects.

"Now, before we go any further, I want to remind you all that the application of Arithmancy to gambling is strictly forbidden by Ministry law and that no projects involving Quidditch will be acceptable to me, or to the examiners. Understood?"

Professor Vector smiled at her class, and they smiled back. By NEWT level, the warning against betting on Quidditch matches was anything but new. While Vector was obliged by law to mention the ban, she tended to treat it as something of a running joke.

From there Professor Vector launched into a complicated re-cap of the graphical transfer between m -space and i -space, leaving Hermione little chance to dwell on her independent project.

At the end of class, Professor Vector's voice interrupted Hermione's thoughts as she was putting away her notes. "Miss Granger, if you could remain behind for a moment, I would like to speak to you briefly."

"Of course, Professor." Hastily gathering the rest of her things, Hermione stepped up towards Vector's desk.

Vector gestured for Hermione to seat herself on the nearest chair and came around her desk to perch on the edge closest to where Hermione sat. She looked to be about sixty years old, though Hermione knew that the way witches aged, she was likely to be much older. She was short...no taller than Hermione...and wiry, and apart from one lock of hair near the front that shined a bright, silvery grey, her hair was dark. She wore it long enough to tuck behind her ears and no longer. Her hair was thick enough that from some angles her head assumed a slightly triangular aspect. She spoke English with the hint of an accent and from what Hermione had gathered, slept and worked at odd hours, surviving on a constant stream of black coffee that she drank from tiny cups without handles. She smiled a lot.

"Now then, Miss Granger, I don't want to leap to any assumptions, but it seems likely to me"...something about the twinkle in her eye convinced Hermione that her professor had calculated the likelihood precisely..."that you would choose to do your independent project on the ongoing war. Would that be correct?"

"Oh, indeed." Hermione swallowed. She realised...with shock...that she hadn't ever thought about the relevance of Arithmancy to Harry's survival. *How can I have been so stupid?* She loved Arithmancy, with a passion, but had never extrapolated the elaborately theoretical work of her favourite class beyond the limits of academia.

Vector smiled. "As I'm sure you have gathered, this is a topic on which I have done quite a lot of work."

Hermione hadn't realised anything of the sort, but she nodded regardless.

"Anyway," continued Professor Vector, "it makes no sense for you to redo work that I have already done. I would like to suggest, instead, that we work together. I would be very happy to make my calculations available to you. It will take some time for you to familiarise yourself with the workings of the matrix I have developed, but after that point, I feel certain you could devise some modifications or supplemental calculations that would serve adequately for the purposes of assessment."

Hermione's eyes shone with delight, and she felt near to bursting with excitement. "Thank you! Wow, I . . . I mean, wow."

Professor Vector waved a deprecating hand at her speechless delight. "Without wishing to boast," she added, "the equations that I have completed are far above the level required of NEWT students. In fact, it is by far the most complicated set of calculations that I have ever attempted. I have no doubt, however, that you would be perfectly capable of understanding and working with the material."

Hermione flushed with pleasure.

"I suggest that you take the opportunity to come to my office sometime soon, tomorrow even, if you happen to have a free period, and you can start to familiarise yourself with the calculations." An uncharacteristically serious expression crossed Professor Vector's face. "I'm sure that I do not need to warn you that the existence of these calculations is highly confidential. If they fell into the wrong hands, it would be disastrous for our cause. Only a select number of Order members know of their existence, and I would ask you to tell no-one, not even your classmates."

"Oh, of course." Hermione blanched at the potential ramifications. "You have my word, Professor, I won't tell a soul." There seemed to be an awful lot of things in her life lately that she couldn't talk about. A sudden thought occurred to her. "Professor," she queried, "doesn't the other side have Arithmancers, too?"

"None as talented as I am," replied Professor Vector, humour softening her face once again. With a wry grimace, she added, "Apparently, Tom Riddle could have been a very good Arithmancer had he not been so sceptical of the value of Muggle mathematics. We know for a fact that he didn't bother with projections and calculations during the last war, and our information suggests that if hasn't occurred to him this time, either."

Hermione processed this information. "I've a double free period tomorrow morning," she ventured, "are you free?"

"First thing in the morning?" Vector winced at the thought.

When Hermione nodded apologetically, Professor Vector sighed.

"Alright then, as long as you don't mind the smell of coffee, I can probably manage it."

When Hermione presented herself at Vector's office the next morning, she was astounded to see her professor dressed in what looked suspiciously like tracksuit pants and a knitted cardigan. Vector merely smiled at her look of astonishment.

"I never wear robes before midday, if I can help it. I don't suppose you drink Greek coffee?"

Hermione bit back a comment to the effect that avoiding robes was one thing and wearing tracksuit pants was another. "Um, I've never had Greek coffee, but I like espresso. Is it very different?"

"Different enough. It's stronger, and slightly gritty. You drink it sweet. Try it, I'm about to make myself some more. If you don't like it, I'll finish it for you."

Vector made coffee as if it were an important ritual, mixing coffee grounds, sugar and water in a small pot that...as she informed Hermione...was called a briki. She set it to heat over a low flame that she ignited magically and gave the brew her full attention, letting it boil up and settle down several times before she pronounced it ready to drink. Only once she had a cup in hand did she turn her attention to the Arithmantic equations Hermione had come to see.

Waving her hand at a long, bare wall, she revealed an enormous blackboard covered in calculations and formulae. On the opposite wall, a partial matrix appeared.

"This will do to start with," she said. "Basically, the matrix is over here. Currently, it's stacked in 18 dimensions, which makes it tricky to view the entire thing at once, but if I simplify it any further, we start losing detail. On the other side, I have the unifying calculation, and here," at this she waved her hand again and several panels of the blackboard slid sideways along runners in the floor and one that had been previously hidden emerged from behind the wall, "these are some of the embedded formulae. You can work through these slowly; it should be pretty clear to you what I've done."

Hermione had stepped closer and was trying to follow the logic of the math in front of her. This was the most complicated thing she'd ever seen. She took a sip of her coffee: *weird, but not entirely horrible*.

"Come over here, this will interest you," Vector called to her from a spot over by the corner. "This is the probability projection that Harry Potter will survive and Voldemort will not."

Hermione traced the length of the calculation with her finger. "51%." She paused. "It's not great odds."

"Much better than they were before, my dear. Watch this, it's fascinating. See these two runic coefficients here, this is Ronald Weasley, and this..."

"That's me!"

"Correct. Watch what happens when we remove you from the equation."

Vector conjured a duster and wiped out the coefficient representing Hermione. The formula shimmered for a second as it recalculated the probability.

"12%." Hermione was stunned. *My presence alone increases Harry's chances by 39%?* She felt frightened at the thought.

"Remove Ronald," Vector did so, "it decreases further, to only 3%."

Hermione was speechless.

"Put you back in," continued Vector, tapping her wand on the board, "and Harry's odds go back up to 46%. You, my dear, are a crucial factor in his success. Only with you and Ronald, however, can we get Harry to tip the balance past 50%. You look startled." Vector narrowed her eyes in concern and conjured Hermione a chair. "Have another sip of coffee, it does wonders. I guess it does take some getting used to, seeing the actions of your own life and those of your friends reduced to numbers."

Vector conjured another chair for herself and the two women sat, staring at the calculations together as they drank their coffee.

By the end of the second week, Professor Snape still hadn't spoken with Hermione about her private lessons. She'd worked through several panels of Professor Vector's calculations, but the process was slow, and she went down to the Quidditch pitch to watch the trials in a very grumpy mood. That stupid tart Lavender making eyes at Ron on the way didn't help. Hermione wished that she had brought along something to read, but reflected that the moral support she was there to offer would have seemed a little tenuous had she done so. *Not that Ron seems to want my support* she grumbled bitterly, seating herself in the stands and looking around at the large number of students that had turned up. *These can't all be Gryffindors*, she thought suddenly, having noticed several younger kids that she would have sworn were in Ravenclaw. Hermione put her feet up on the back of the seat in front of her and pulled up her robes so that she could feel the warmth of the sun on her legs. Crossing her arms, she leant back and stared off into the distance. *This is going to take forever*, she mused. The morning's breakfast conversation between her and the boys crossed her mind, and for several minutes she drifted, thinking about Dumbledore's frequent absences and wondering whether Snape was just waiting for Quidditch practices to begin. *That would make sense*. Her mood lifted slightly, and she looked over at Harry, who had begun to shout out instructions.

Cormac McLaggen was wandering her way, a belligerent look on his face. Self-consciously, she pulled her robes down to cover up her legs, but not before McLaggen had given her the once-over, his eyes sliding up from her ankles to her hair. Hermione felt a little sick. She grit her teeth and hoped...hard...that he might go and sit somewhere else, but with no luck; he sat down only a few seats away and, worse still, started up a conversation.

Despite her monosyllabic and non-committal replies, McLaggen talked incessantly throughout the Chaser and Beater trials, gracing Hermione with long-winded opinions of talents and tactics. Hermione did her best to ignore his inane commentary...biting her tongue during McLaggen's assessment of Ron's performance during the last season...but eventually a remark about Ginny sent Hermione's temper over the edge.

"Well, you've got to wonder," he commented, "which of her talents got her on the team! Not that I'm complaining, mind you...I can't wait to see her in the locker room after a match..."

"How dare you!" she fumed. "Ginny Weasley is an excellent Quidditch player and a very good friend of mine! Leaving aside the fact that she just scored seventeen goals, I can't believe that you would make such a comment about any of your potential team mates!"

McLaggen seemed unperturbed by her outburst. In fact, he laughed at her and stretched out his arm along the back of the seats between them, dangling his fingers perilously close to her shoulder. "Ooh, not jealous, are you? Don't worry, I like girls with a bit of spark to them. Pity you're not trying out for the team."

Hermione was momentarily speechless. "I assure you, Cormac McLaggen, what you do or do not like in a girl is absolutely no concern of mine! And, for your information, Gryffindor has an exemplary Keeper already. Your chances of making the team are slim indeed."

Luckily for both parties in the conversation, Harry had gotten around to the Keeper trials and called McLaggen over at just that moment. McLaggen swaggered away, clearly oblivious to the very real danger he'd been in, and Hermione cursed herself for not having hexed him when she had the chance.

She sat fuming through the trials of the first few candidates for the position, dwelling on several satisfying scenarios involving McLaggen in highly compromising and painful situations. *There's no way Harry would ever let someone that horrible on the team!* When McLaggen saved the first couple of goals, however, her sense of certainty wavered. She stole a glance at Ron: he looked terrible. He was so stressed that he was green around the edges. As McLaggen saved the third penalty, Hermione's tension mounted. *If Ron doesn't make the team, he'll never get over it! And I'll never get a chance to have lessons with Professor Snape!* Hermione skittered away from thinking about which outcome would be worse. McLaggen saved the fourth penalty, and Hermione caught a glimpse of Ginny's face: it bore a grim and shuttered look. That settled it. No way was Hermione going to let that creep have a chance to look at Ginny in the locker room. Surreptitiously, she slipped her wand out of her pocket into her

hand.

"*Confundo*," she whispered, then sighed in relief as McLaggen chose the wrong direction to lunge and missed the fifth penalty completely.

Watching Ron's trial was nerve-wracking. Hermione held her breath and clenched her fists so tightly that her fingernails dug into the palms of her hands. The relief she felt when he saved all five penalties left her dizzy. With a slightly hysterical laugh of delight, she leapt out of her seat and ran towards him, her previous annoyance with him forgotten: compared to Cormac McLaggen, Ronald Weasley was a prince.

"You did brilliantly, Ron!" she cried, giving him a quick hug. Ron grinned back, and after a few organizational conversations between Harry and the newly-formed team, the three friends set off together towards Hagrid's. It felt so wonderful to be out in the sunshine, to have Ron and Harry so excited about Quidditch and to know that McLaggen had deserved the punishment she'd dished out, that when Ron snickered that McLaggen had looked Confunded, Hermione felt only the tiniest twinge of guilt.

Slytherin Politics

Chapter 8 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Eight : Slytherin Politics

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As always, I'd like to thank my betas, LAXo and WriterMerrin, without whom my grammar would be appalling and my punctuation nonsensical. Any errors that remain are entirely my own.

While the blood status of new Hufflepuffs might be considered irrelevant, Severus deemed it crucial information with regard to his Slytherins and made it his business to look them up as soon as possible. Five purebloods, one half-blood, and a Muggle-born. It didn't really surprise him to discover that the malnourished young girl and the Muggle-born witch were one and the same person. As was his wont, Severus took the time to meet with each of the new students within the first week. Morris Bletchley and Terrence Harper were having no problems. They both had brothers already at Hogwarts to show them the ropes. Raquel Garside and Milton Hammerbright both came from such well-established pureblood families that they could claim familial relationships with half the common room and had probably holidayed on the Riviera with a number of others. Pubert Cavendish, on the other hand, was probably related to just as many individuals but came from a family where money was a problem. His clothes were obviously second hand, and he looked a little lost. In the past, Severus would have assigned him to the capable hands of Draco Malfoy...typically ready to share the sweets and other largess sent to him by Narcissa at regular intervals...but Draco hadn't bothered to show up to talk with his Head of House. Instead, Severus had a word with Blaise Zabini. Chelsea Gladstone, half-blood, had come well-prepped by her mother and had no trouble gliding over the elements of her family background that her housemates might look down on. Severus overheard her glibly inform one of the third-years that her father had immigrated from Canada many years earlier...conveniently explaining away her Mugglish surname. He made a mental note to tell Tracey Davis to keep an eye out for her. Jocelyn Smith, however, was cause for concern.

She arrived for her appointment precisely on time and took her seat in front of Snape's desk without a word. Her legs stuck out awkwardly, too short to reach the ground. The size of the chair made her appear younger than she actually was. As she waited for Snape to speak, she held her body tightly wound, her hands clenched in her lap.

Snape regarded her intently for a moment before he spoke: Miss Smith was not an attractive child. She was too thin and small for her age. Everything about her was slightly colourless. Her hair was a lank, dirty blonde that hung down to just below her shoulders. The ends were ragged and desperately needed a trim. Her eyes were a washed-out pale blue that looked too large in her pinched face. A shadow of a bruise bloomed across one cheek.

"Miss Smith," he began. There was something slightly unnerving about the way the child stared, unblinking. "You may have heard that only pureblood wizards and witches are sorted into Slytherin house." The girl made no reply, so he continued. "Obviously, such statements are untrue, as are the vast majority of statements about the magically-inclined offspring of Muggle parents. There are, for example, no measurable differences in magical ability. The circumstance remains, however, that certain political factions within Slytherin house continue to spout such rhetoric. It would be expedient for you to abstain from discussing your genealogy. Fortunately, the surname 'Smith' is as common in the wizarding world as it is in Muggle England."

Still the girl said nothing. *Has she even blinked?* Severus wondered.

"Do you have any questions?" he asked.

"No, sir," she replied promptly in a clear, high voice. After a short pause, she added, "And I have absolutely nothing to say about my family to anyone." Her voice was simultaneously childish and disturbingly serious.

For a moment, her response took Severus aback. With a jolt, he realised that the neutrality of her voice extended to her thoughts: he couldn't sense her at all.*The girl is Occluding, and heavily so.* The realisation perturbed him. It was surprising enough to discover that Hermione Granger...an obnoxiously precocious fifth-year student...had developed a talent as an Occlumens. But a first-year with no previous exposure to magic? Something wasn't right. He kept her with him for another few minutes. She gave noncommittal answers to a few questions regarding her first day of classes, and he decided to let her go. As she reached the door, he called her back.

"Miss Smith?"...she turned at once..."Who was it that came to visit your family and deliver your Hogwarts letter?"

"Professor McGonagall, sir."

"Very good, you may go."

Once the door closed behind the girl, Snape checked his watch. There was still a little time before dinner. If he hurried, he might catch Minerva in her office.

He chose to walk, rather than Floo, relishing the chance to stretch his legs. McGonagall's door was closed, but when he knocked, she called out for him to come in.

At the sight of Snape in her doorway, Minerva gave him a wry look, their argument from two evenings ago clearly fresh in her mind.

"My, my," she teased. "Look what the cat dragged in."

Snape gave her a revolted look. "You are the only cat around here, Minerva, and I have no desire to contemplate the objects you may or may not drag around."

Minerva chuckled. "Sit down and have a biscuit," she offered, pushing a tin of shortbread towards the visitor's side of her desk.

Snape sat and crossed his arms, ignoring the biscuits. "I'm here to discuss a student...one of mine."

At his last statement, Minerva shot him an interested glance. "I thought for a moment you'd come to complain about one of my Gryffindors."

"No. It's Jocelyn Smith."

"Ah." Minerva's lips pursed disapprovingly and she shook her head. "I was very surprised to see her, of all people, sorted into Slytherin. She needs looking after...don't glare at me like that, Severus! It's perfectly clear that you're here for exactly that reason, I wasn't implying that you..."

"And why would you think Slytherin a bad place for her?" Severus' voice was low and dangerous.

"Tchk, Severus! She's Muggle-born! She'd be better off in a place where she needn't hide her family history."

"The Sorting Hat didn't think so."

"Calm down, Severus, I have no intention of having this argument with you again." Minerva reached out and rattled the shortbread tin where it lay on the desk. "Go on, have a biscuit."

Severus sighed heavily. With a great display of reluctance, he reached for a shortbread and took a bite.

"That's better. I suppose you want to know what her family was like when I visited?"

"Yes," said Severus thickly through a mouthful of biscuit.

"Not good, I'm afraid. The mother was barely older than a child herself and the father was long gone. From what I gathered, there was a constant stream of men through the flat and her mother's bed, few of whom were caring towards the child. The place was owned by the council...and filthy, from top to bottom. The entire visit was terribly depressing. Jocelyn's here on scholarship, of course." Minerva paused for a moment before continuing. "I took the girl to Diagon Alley to buy her school things, too. She didn't say much. Didn't seem to believe that it was all really happening, either. After I bought her books, she asked, 'Can I keep them?'...as if she was expecting to have to give them back. It was heartbreaking."

Severus felt a stab of sympathy for his littlest charge. For a long moment he looked at Minerva, speechless, a second biscuit forgotten in his hand.

"Severus," she said gently, "I'm really relieved that she has you to look after her. Now, let's go down to dinner...before you eat too much more of my shortbread."

Later that evening found Severus sitting in his office, nominally working on his lesson plans for the third- and fourth-year students. In reality, he was lost in thought. His mind kept returning to the issue of Jocelyn Smith and Hermione Granger...two Muggle-born witches, both natural Occlumens. Occlumency skills rarely developed without instruction, and for children the necessary mental control was incredibly difficult to master. Was it merely co-incidence? The circumstances seemed so different, yet the result was the same. Severus sighed with frustration.

For one thing, he had wasted more than enough time already thinking about Miss Granger. Since their few conversations at the end of last year, she seemed to be continually on his mind. Now, with school back in session, he found that her presence repeatedly leapt out at him from among the crowds of students, catching at his attention. If the dratted girl would just stop looking at him and trying to speak to him, they could get on with her lessons, but until then it wasn't safe...for her or for him. Severus had just started to ruminate on the question of how much time he would have to teach her before the more drastic elements of Dumbledore's plan were put into action when his Dark Mark burned. Sucking in a sudden breath at the ferocity of the pain, he pushed aside his lesson plan and moved through to his living quarters. Severus summoned his mask and cloak, sent a Patronus to inform Dumbledore of his departure, and slipped out into the grounds.

The evening was lovely. The sky was clear and the stars shone out above him. Had his arm not ached infuriatingly, he would have enjoyed the stroll to the Apparation point. As he walked, he disciplined his mind, pushing away the niggling anxiety engendered by the summons. He was rarely called during term time: something important must have happened. By the time he stepped beyond the wards, his mind was clear. He touched his wand to the Dark Mark and Disapparated.

Once again, he found himself in the Apparation foyer of Malfoy Manor, although this time, both Narcissa and Bellatrix were on hand to meet him. Narcissa ran forward as soon as he arrived and took hold of his forearm with both hands.

"Severus," she gasped. "I'm so sorry."

His eyes glanced from her distressed face to look at Bellatrix, who hadn't moved from where she leant against the wall. Even she wore a slightly apologetic look.

"What have you done?" he asked. His voice echoed harshly against the tiled surfaces of the room.

"He found out about the Unspeakable Vow, and...Oh Severus, he's not happy . . ."

The corners of Snape's mouth drew downwards in anger, emphasising the harsh lines of his face. He shook his arm from Narcissa's grasp and moved quickly towards the door. As he passed Bellatrix, he turned towards her without slowing his pace. "Trouble-making again, Bellatrix?" he inquired, not bothering to wait for a response.

Severus prostrated himself immediately on entering the drawing room.

"Ah, Severusss . . . how lovely of you to make the time to come and see me. I know you are terribly busy at this time of year."

Not for the first time Severus caught himself pondering the similarities between Dumbledore and the Dark Lord. Somehow, with his face pressed to the floor and the certainty of punishment in his future, he felt less worried than he had earlier, when he was contemplating the possibility of physical pain.

Seconds later he was jerked airborne.

"My dear boy, allow me to help you closer." Voldemort had his wand out and was levitating Snape towards him. When his floating body was close enough that Voldemort could have touched him, it was dropped unceremoniously to the floor.

"My Lord," he managed, though the wind was knocked from his body.

"It seems you neglected to tell me something, Severus."

"Indeed, my Lord. I apologise."

"Not good enough, Severus. You see, if you go around recklessly making vows to people, how can I know that your loyalty to me remains?" There was a long pause. "Severus? Look at me!"

Snape looked up into the red eyes and pointed wand of the Dark Lord. Voldemort leaned forwards and smiled at him in a sickening parody of friendliness *L'egilimens*," he whispered.

Lord Voldemort's excursions into the minds of others inevitably involved a certain amount of pain: he took great delight at pushing against the seams and causing harm. Severus, however, knew what to expect. He concentrated hard on the memory of the Unbreakable Vow, throwing up a smokescreen of other, more recent memories, so that Voldemort wouldn't realise the control Severus had maintained. He thought about walking up to the castle with Potter and about the welcoming speech in the Slytherin common room. Both caught briefly at Voldemort's attention, but he pushed onwards to the scene at Spinner's End. Only once he'd viewed Narcissa and Bellatrix's departure did he retreat from Severus' mind. As the energy of the spell dissipated, Severus' head thudded back down onto the carpet. The part of his brain that wasn't throbbing with pain blessed Lucius for having decided against floorboards.

Severus wasn't sure how long he lay there, perhaps no more than a few minutes. At that point Voldemort inserted the toe of his boot under his shoulder and rolled him face up. Looking upward, Severus found Voldemort leaning over him and noticed, for the first time, the presence of Nagini.

"Well, Severus, I confess that you proved yourself more loyal than I had imagined."

Was this a reprieve? Voldemort seemed impressed by the memory he'd viewed, but Snape wasn't yet convinced that the immediate danger had passed. He thought it safer to say nothing. Voldemort was absentmindedly tapping his wand against his thigh. With the other hand, he was stroking the back of Nagini's head.

It was to the snake that Voldemort eventually spoke, crooning gently as if to a small child, "I'm sorry, my sweet one, but I'm going to let him live this time." Looking back down at Severus, the Dark Lord prodded him once again with his boot. "Get up," he ordered.

Severus pulled himself onto his hands and knees and pressed his forehead to the ground near Voldemort's feet. "Thank you, my Lord," he said.

When he lifted his face, Voldemort had leaned forwards once again, narrowing the distance between them. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was angry with Bellatrix, my Lord; I was furious that she had questioned my loyalty to you. I thought myself above carrying tales of petty jealousies back to bore you."

"You regard an Unbreakable Vow as a trivial matter? How many others have you made?"

"None, my Lord. I swear it. I didn't promise anything that I wouldn't have willingly done already." After a beat, he added, "I am fond of the boy."

"You know, Severus, you could be my greatest servant." Voldemort was looking at him with a curiously appraising expression.

"My Lord, you honour me."

"Next time you do something so stupid, Severus, make sure to tell me yourself, that way I won't have to punish you." At that, Voldemort raised his left hand and placed it momentarily on Severus' head, as if in benediction. Then, waving his wand lazily, he laughed, "*Crucio*."

An hour or so later, Severus made it back to Hogwarts, his eyes searching for the cat the instant he Apparated into the clearing. He stumbled slightly on landing, and the cat leapt forward with concern, wrapping briefly around his legs once he righted himself.

She meowed querulously.

"I've been worse," he replied, setting off on the long walk up to the castle, the cat pacing beside him.

Re-living the night's experience in the Pensieve was singularly unpleasant. Prostrating yourself before a homicidal maniac is one thing, watching yourself do so is another. Luckily Dumbledore was content to spend only a short period dissecting the conversation and excused Severus not long after midnight.

Severus left the office via the stairwell and let the walk back down to the dungeons clear his mind. His body ached with the after effects of a prolonged bout of *Crucio*. Walking hurt, but he knew from experience that everything would hurt worse tomorrow if he didn't stretch out his limbs before curling up in bed.

He ran into the cat just outside his chambers. "What do you want?" he asked, with customary rudeness. The cat merely stretched and, when he lowered the wards, followed him in. Severus shrugged off his robes and hung them on the back of his door. Crossing the room, he lowered himself into a comfy armchair and pulled off his boots. Once his socked feet were perched on the coffee table, he summoned a bottle of Firewhiskey and a glass from the mantle and poured himself a generous measure. With a small mewl of disapproval, the cat leapt onto the arm of his chair and arched her back. "Ridiculous," muttered Severus, scowling down his nose at her. She meowed again, and with a sigh, he summoned a saucer that he balanced in the air beside her. Shaking his head, he poured her a dose of the amber liquid. "You do realise that you look preposterous?" he asked as she lapped happily. Severus stowed the bottle on the floor, closed his eyes and leant back in his chair, cradling his whiskey against his chest.

The cat finished her drink, licking first the plate and then her whiskers clean. Stepping daintily, she moved from the arm of the chair into the lap of the man beside her. As she began to knead his thighs, he grimaced. "Must you make such a nuisance of yourself?" he grumbled. His complaining continued at intermittent intervals even once she was settled, but an astute observer would have noticed that one hand had crept to rest on the back of her head, and one long finger stroked gently behind an ear.

A/N : The upcoming chapter is *entirely* HG SS interaction . . . stay tuned!

Birthday Surprises

Chapter 9 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter nine : Birthday Surprises

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute.

I'd like to thank my betas: LAxo, for her time, her mad skills and her love of verb-subject agreements, and WriterMerrin...neither does she berate me for my errors nor does she leave them unacknowledged.

On Thursday morning, Harry and Ron waited for Hermione in the common room before breakfast. When she arrived, they made a big fuss of her and escorted her down to the dining hall as a guard of honour, one either side, their arms linked in hers. They cleared the way with loud cries, and their mock heroics and elaborate gallantry had her laughing and flushed with pleasure. It went a long way towards making up for the fact that Harry had inconsiderately scheduled the first Quidditch practice of the season on the night of her seventeenth birthday. You only come of age once, and Hermione couldn't help feeling a little put out that Harry, Ron and Ginny would be spending the evening elsewhere.

They'd remembered, though, which was better than some other years. While Ron had thought it amusing to present her with *The Idiots' Guide to Chess*, Harry had given her an inordinately generous gift voucher to Flourish and Blotts. Thoughts of what she might buy with Harry's voucher were exciting enough that she found the grace to recognise the humour behind Ron's gift. She got mail from her parents, of course...a card, a letter, and another gift voucher; her mum had bought her a number of pieces of clothing while she was home, as well. And breakfast that day was wonderful. With good grace, Hermione managed to enjoy it rather than sit sulking over her prospective evening of solitary library research. Ron promised to go the entire meal without chewing with his mouth open, and very nearly succeeded. All in all, it was lovely to be the centre of attention for once, with all of her housemates, the DA members from other houses, and several of her other classmates coming over to wish her many happy returns.

It was thus with more reluctance than usual that she said goodbye to the boys and left the breakfast table to head to her first class. Close to the door of the Great Hall, she was stopped by a tiny blonde girl in a Slytherin tie.

"Are you Hermione Granger?" she asked in a clear but quiet voice.

"Yes," replied Hermione, bending down to the small girl's level. "But I'm afraid I don't know your name."

The girl, whoever she was, ignored the implied question. "I have a message for you from Professor Snape. He said to remind you that you have detention tonight, at eight o'clock, and that if you're late, you'll regret it."

Hermione's mouth dropped open in a silent exclamation of surprise. She turned towards the staff table. Snape was there, and for a moment she caught his eye before he turned away, a scowl twisting bitterly at his mouth. Hermione turned back to thank the girl for her trouble, but she was gone.

Huh, thought Hermione. *Detention, he calls it? Well*, she added, walking out of the Hall with a noticeable spring in her step, *at least I won't be spending the evening alone*

Hermione was so excited about her first lesson with Snape that she got to the dungeons fifteen minutes early. For a long quarter of an hour, she paced up and down a nearby stretch of corridor, unwilling to be early, terrified of being late. Every twenty seconds or so, she checked her watch until finally, at precisely eight o'clock, she knocked on his door.

"Come in," he called.

"Good evening, Professor," said Hermione politely as she walked to the seat in front of his desk.

Snape didn't bother to look up from his grading, let alone reply. For several minutes, he continued to scratch comments on the essay before him as Hermione struggled with a growing urge to ask one of the many questions she had ready. Nervously, she rubbed at her scar through her school robes, right at the point where it crossed her collarbone.

Eventually, Snape sighed as if with annoyance and put down his quill. He neatened the pile of parchments in front of him, squaring up the corners, and pushed them to one side.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" he asked, an angry edge to his voice.

Hermione's eyes widened slightly with surprise and she bit back a startled noise. Is this a trick question? she wondered, searching his face for some sign of the more relaxed man with whom she'd spoken in the hospital ward.

"Um, this isn't really a detention, is it?" By the end of the question, Hermione sounded uncertain.

Snape raised one eyebrow. "Why not?" he asked.

The anticipation Hermione had experienced all day dissolved quickly, leaving her throat dry and an unpleasant, congealed feeling in the pit of her stomach. She bit down sharply on her lower lip, unsure what to reply.

"Confused anyone lately?" asked Snape.

Hermione froze. Panic thudded in her veins. *Oh my God, how? I'm in so much trouble. How does he know?* "I..." she began,

"Don't waste my time denying it, Miss Granger." He leaned forward across the table. "I saw you."

"How?" Her question was barely a whisper.

"You may not have noticed, Miss Granger, but there is a war on. Do you think we leave children out in the grounds, unattended, for hours at a time?"

Hermione felt dizzy. "What...?" She seemed unable to utter more than word at a time.

"What is going to happen to you? Hmm . . . an interesting question." Snape tapped one finger against his lip as he pretended to consider it. "Under normal circumstances, you'd be expelled. Potter, too...you know, I've always wanted to have him expelled."

Hermione found her voice, "Harry had nothing to do with it!"

"Really?" his voice dripped with disbelief. "So, Potter knows nothing about it, at all? I'm sure the news will come as a complete surprise."

Hermione bit down again on her lower lip. "He...oh, he found out about it afterwards, but it was all my fault!"

"Interesting. And what did he do after realising that his best friend had illegally interfered with the results of a sporting competition? Nothing, I imagine. How unspeakably noble. Perhaps not expulsion for Mr Potter, then, pity. Never mind, his lifetime Quidditch ban should console me somewhat." Snape smiled nastily. "I imagine that Mr Weasley will be banned, too."

Nausea flooded through Hermione's body in waves. "You mustn't...you mustn't involve them, Professor," she pleaded, "I alone am responsible for my actions; I am the one that should be punished."

"Interesting theory," pondered Snape. "However, once this story gets out, no-one will believe that the-boy-who-lived-to-make-news-headlines wasn't involved. It might be quite a blow to his reputation. Rita Skeeter will have a field day."

Hermione couldn't bear to hear any more. She squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in her hands. She'd fucked up, big time! *m going to be expelled. Everyone will think Harry is a cheat. Ron is going to kill me.*

"Do you know what happens now, Miss Granger?"

She shook her head wordlessly, her face still buried in her hands.

"Sit up, Miss Granger," he rebuked her. "You will answer me when I ask you a question!"

She sat up, quickly. Her face was pale with shock, and her eyes stood out sharply against the pallor of her skin. "Yes, sir," she gasped.

"Do you know what happens now, Miss Granger?" he repeated.

"No, sir."

"You and I are going to visit the headmaster, and you will tell him exactly what happened. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir." It was as if she were looking down on the scene from a great height. She couldn't feel her limbs. She wondered how she would make it to Dumbledore's office without collapsing into a small heap.

Snape had left his seat and moved towards the fireplace. "Get up," he snapped.

She struggled to her feet. With an irritated noise, Snape reached out and took hold of her upper arm, pulling her towards him. At the same moment, he grabbed a handful of Floo powder and threw it into the fireplace.

"Dumbledore's office!" he called loudly and pushed her forward into the green flames.

The spinning sensation of Floo travel lasted only a few seconds before Hermione was ejected, stumbling, at her destination.

She'd never been in the headmaster's office before, and it was surreal to find herself in a space that Harry had described to her several times. Dumbledore was seated behind his desk and looked up as she scrambled out onto his hearth.

"Good evening, Miss Granger!" he greeted her, smiling over his glasses. "I have been expecting you. Come, sit down. I imagine Severus has told you why you are here."

The professor had just stepped through the grate behind her, unfolding his lanky form gracefully and dusting off the front of his robes with one elegant hand. Hermione shot him a frightened glance.

"Yes," she offered nervously.

Hesitantly, she sat down. Dumbledore was still smiling at her, only intensifying the nervous clench of her stomach. Professor Snape didn't sit. He stood just behind and to the side of her, his arms crossed and an imposing look on his face.

"Albus," he said, "Miss Granger has something to tell you."

Dumbledore looked at her with an expression of mild curiosity. "Go ahead, my dear," he instructed encouragingly. "Would you like a lemon sherbet?"

"Ah, no thank you, sir." Hermione wasn't ready to watch his pleasant demeanour fade into anger, and she vaguely considered running from the room and throwing herself out the nearest window. *Gryffindor, remember?* she berated herself, and a small choked noise escaped her. *Get on with it...at the very least, make it clear that Harry wasn't involved.*

"Last Saturday," she began, concentrating her attention on an otherwise unremarkable section of Dumbledore's desk, "During the Gryffindor Quidditch trials, I happened to be sitting near Cormac McLaggen." She stole a glance upwards at Professor Snape. He was staring at the wall behind Dumbledore, his face completely devoid of emotion. "He was making a nuisance of himself, as usual, but I did my best to ignore him..."

"Pardon my interruption, Miss Granger," Dumbledore interpolated gently, "but what do you mean by 'nuisance'?"

"Um," she blushed, humiliation overlaying her fear and nervousness. "Looking at me and, um, saying rude things about my friends." Trying to explain McLaggen's behaviour and its effect on her made her feel like a stupid little girl. "I managed to ignore a lot of it, but then he said something really inappropriate about Ginny, and I lost my temper."

Dumbledore interrupted again, his face serious, "What did he say, exactly?"

"Er, he said, um, that he couldn't wait to look at her in the locker room while she was changing." Hermione wanted to crawl into a hole and die. Repeating McLaggen's comments aloud upset her all over again, as it made her feel stupid for having responded to such a trivial insult. She glanced sideways again at Snape. He hadn't moved.

"Indeed," said Dumbledore, reprovingly. "What did you do in response?"

"I shouted at him, and I probably would have hexed him, but he had to go and take his trial." Hermione didn't think she could go on with the story, and she drew a long, shaky breath. Dumbledore conjured her a glass of water and pushed it towards her. She drank, deeply, and managed to continue. "He, um, McLaggen that is, was doing very well. And I did something very stupid...I just couldn't bear to think of him in the locker room with Ginny, and I," she paused for a second, then let it out in a rush, "I Confunded him. I'm so terribly sorry."

Dumbledore sighed. He removed his glasses and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "My dear girl," he began, "such comments would be more than enough to warrant his removal from any team. Why didn't you speak to your Head of House?"

"I didn't think, Professor." Hot tears prickled at her eyes, and one slid down her cheek. She scrubbed at it roughly with the heel of her hand. "I acted out of anger, I'm an idiot."

"There, there, Miss Granger," Dumbledore offered her a handkerchief. "No need for tears."

She took the proffered handkerchief gratefully, as her tears began to fall in earnest. "But, there is. Now you'll have to expel me, and I don't want..."

"Good gracious, Miss Granger!" Dumbledore sounded astonished. "There will be no need for your expulsion, whatever gave you that idea?"

"But..." relief and surprise warred for supremacy, "but I Confunded someone during a sporting event! That's illegal!"

"Well, yes, true. But under such extenuating circumstances . . . after all, justice was served in the end, even if the method was a little unorthodox."

Hermione's face was a study in blank disbelief. "But I should be punished..."

"Miss Granger," cut in Dumbledore, the humorous twinkle gone from his eye. "Do you want to be expelled?"

"No, of course not, but..."

"Good. Because we can't afford to expel you. Statistically, it would be a disaster for Harry's success."

Hermione stared at the headmaster. 39%, she thought. Everything Dumbledore had said in the last few minutes suddenly made perfect sense. She was going to get away with it. Not because she deserved to, certainly not because she had done the right thing, but because Harry was The Chosen One and Dumbledore wasn't prepared to punish her at the risk of jeopardising the fight against Voldemort. The twisted ethical implications of the situation left her feeling a little sick.

She looked up at Professor Snape. He was watching her closely, and as she met his eye, he raised one eyebrow. From the slight twist to his lips Hermione realised that he understood her complicated response to Dumbledore's decision. He had known all along that she wouldn't be punished. She pushed the thought aside to think about later.

Hermione looked back at Dumbledore. His twinkling-old-man persona was safely back in place. "Well, now that's settled, we can move onto other matters." He clapped his hands together and beamed at her. "Do sit down, Severus. There's no need for you to loom over us both."

Hermione expected Snape to snap at the headmaster, but he merely conjured himself a remarkably comfortable-looking chair and sat down. Dumbledore summoned a bottle and some glasses from a nearby table and made himself busy pouring drinks. For the first time since her unceremonious arrival in his fireplace, Dumbledore's blackened hand was in full view. Hermione tried not to stare at it and, instead, took the opportunity to glance around the room. She drank in the sight of Fawkes, the phoenix, and Dumbledore's many books and weird gadgets. Vaguely, she wondered why she was there. Her thoughts were interrupted when Dumbledore offered her a glass of amber liquid. She took it and sniffed at it dubiously: it was clearly Firewhiskey.

"Um, sir," she began, hesitantly.

"Today is your birthday, is it not?" queried Dumbledore, smiling.

"Yes. It is." Hermione couldn't keep the surprise out of her voice.

"Well, then, as an adult member of the wizarding world, you can now assume full rights to many things. Drink, among them. Normally, of course, drinking on school grounds is not permitted by students of any age, but I think we can make an exception for tonight." Dumbledore held up his glass. "Many happy returns," he exclaimed.

Professor Snape did the same thing, and Hermione was astounded to find herself clinking glasses with Snape and Dumbledore to drink a birthday toast. Her first mouthful of Firewhiskey burned her throat and left her spluttering. Dumbledore chuckled, and she thought she caught a glimpse of amusement in Snape's dark eyes.

"It does take a little getting used to," said the headmaster kindly.

"Albus," drawled Snape, "I think it's time that we got to the point."

Hermione looked curiously from one man to the other.

"You're right, as usual, Severus," agreed Dumbledore. "Well, Miss Granger, with the achievement of your majority, it is my great pleasure to invite you to join the Order of the Phoenix. As you have no legal guardian in the magical world, the decision is yours to make alone."

Hermione's heart was beating almost painfully hard. "Oh...of course. Yes. I mean, of course I will," she replied, incoherent in her enthusiasm.

"Not so fast, Miss Granger," Professor Snape cut across her pleased babbling. "You are about to make a binding magical oath. It will require you to place the needs of the Order above your own desires, to act according to instructions...whether you like them or not. It will require you to keep secrets from your friends and, occasionally, to lie to them. Are you prepared to commit yourself to the Order, even unto death?"

Dumbledore was nodding gravely.

"Of course, I am!" She looked from Dumbledore to Snape and back again. "I'm ready," she said resolutely, unconsciously reaching to rub at the top of her scar. "I've been preparing for the fight against Voldemort since the day I arrived at Hogwarts."

Dumbledore gave her a warm smile. "I'm proud of you, Miss Granger. I expected nothing less. The task that I will ask of you is in one sense very difficult, but also perhaps nothing more than you might have done on your own: your mission is to keep Harry alive. There will come a time when this might mean contradicting other Order members. There will be instances where the right choice is not necessarily easy to discern. Through it, however, I want you to remember that your loyalty...as a full member of the Order and as Harry's friend...is to him and to the task that lies before him."

Hermione creased her brows slightly at his words: where Snape had warned her that she would need to prioritise the Order over Harry, Dumbledore had suggested the opposite. "I have every intention of standing by Harry, sir," she glanced at Snape. "Both to keep him alive and to follow him unto death if necessary."

Dumbledore took out his wand and gestured for her to do the same. He reached across the desk with his blackened hand and touched the tip of his wand to hers. Snape rose smoothly to his feet and lowered his wand vertically between theirs, until the three wandpoints met in two right angles.

"Repeat after me," instructed Snape. "I, Hermione Jean Granger," Hermione blinked with surprise that he knew her middle name, "pledge my loyalty to the Order of the Phoenix, under the leadership of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

As Hermione echoed the words of the oath, the tip of her wand glowed gold.

"I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, accept your fealty to the Order of the Phoenix and welcome your assistance in the fight against Voldemort." At his words, Dumbledore's wand glowed, too, and the light reflected off the faces of the three participants.

"I, Severus Tobias Snape, witness this oath and proclaim it as binding, on this day, Thursday, September 19, 1996."

The light in the room grew so bright that Hermione had to squint her eyes against the golden glare. Fawkes let out a single resonant note. It spread through her body like a flush of pleasure. As the musical sound of his cry faded, so did the light, and the room around her came into focus once more.

Snape returned to his seat, and Dumbledore beamed at her as he polished his glasses on the long sleeve of his robes.

"I think that deserves another toast," he proclaimed. "To the newest member of the Order!"

Once again, Hermione clinked her glass and drank another toast, although this time her sip of Firewhiskey was slightly more circumspect.

"Now, then, Miss Granger," remarked Dumbledore. "Before you toddle off to bed, there are just a few more things we should discuss."

The warmth of the whiskey was pooled in Hermione's stomach. "Very good, sir," she replied, obediently, sitting up slightly straighter.

"While your primary task as an Order member is the most important thing you need to do, I imagine that it need not take up much of your time on a day-to-day basis, at least for now." He smiled at her. "I would like you, therefore, to focus your admirable intellectual powers on two specific projects. The first of these is the Arithmantic calculations...I believe that Professor Vector has already spoken to you on this topic." Hermione nodded. "The other is your lessons with Professor Snape. There are many ways in which both of these projects may prove more important than your regular scheduled classes." Hermione went to speak, but Dumbledore continued before she had a chance. "As your work in this regard falls under the category of your responsibilities as an Order member, and not as a student, neither Professor Vector nor Professor

Snape will be able to award or deduct house points nor give detentions. I trust that you will find other motivations in order to strive and succeed."

Hermione couldn't resist sneaking a glance at Professor Snape. He caught her look and the upward twitch of her lips as Dumbledore mentioned the house points.

"Be aware, Miss Granger," he sneered, "I can still deduct points at any other time."

"Yes, sir." There was laughter underlying her reply, and she washed it down with another mouthful of Firewhiskey. The taste was definitely growing on her.

"I feel sure that there is no need to remind you," continued Dumbledore, "that this meeting, and every other meeting, must remain strictly confidential. You are not to reveal the contents of your meetings with Professors Snape and Vector to anyone outside this room...not even other members of the Order. Similarly, your induction into the Order will remain known to only a limited few. I am confident that I can rely on your discretion."

"Yes, sir," she replied, this time with complete sincerity.

Snape finished the last of his whiskey with a long swallow and placed his empty glass on the desk with a decisive thud. "Miss Granger,"...he managed to make her name a command..."if you hurry, you will make it back before curfew."

A glance at her watch was sufficient to verify the truth of his words. With an "Oh" of surprise, she rose to her feet. "Professor Dumbledore," she began, "thank you." She turned towards Snape. "When shall we have our first..."

"Tuesday," he interrupted her. "Now get out."

Hermione took one last look around the room, her eyes lingering for a second on the figure of Fawkes, then did just that. Soon after, she lay in her bed, her head swimming with the various and unexpected turns of her evening. *This year*, she thought just as she drifted off to sleep,*my birthday truly left me feeling older than I did before.*

Occlumency

Chapter 10 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Ten : Occlumency

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Severus suppressed a sigh of frustration. Hermione Granger's first Occlumency lesson wasn't going as well as he had anticipated. She had just picked herself up off the ground for the fourth time running and hadn't yet managed to repel any of his attacks. Even Severus himself was feeling battered by the stream of Granger's memories. Her childhood had not been as miserable as Potter's had seemed, yet Hermione had been a solitary and lonely child until her arrival at Hogwarts, ostracised with the cruelty of children towards the effortlessly bright. And based on the memories he'd just witnessed, one could be excused for thinking that her life since had unfurled as a series of violent or terrifying experiences: he'd watched her threatened by a troll, petrified by a basilisk and turned into a cat; he'd seen her watch in horror as Minerva's giant chess set beat Ronald Weasley senseless, and they'd several times re-lived the battle at the Department of Mysteries. Now, her hair was slipping out from the control of numerous hairpins and her face was streaked with exhaustion. She moved gingerly under the cumulative impact of her repeated falls and the pinched look around her mouth told him that she felt as frustrated as he did.

On her feet once more, Hermione rubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hands. "What am I doing wrong?" she asked.

Severus gestured for her to sit down. She did so with a sigh.

"Where do you do your homework?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon?" The seemingly abrupt change of subject threw her.

"Just answer the question, Miss Granger." Severus took his own seat behind his desk.

"Oh, well . . . it depends. Sometimes in the library, sometimes the common room. Occasionally in my bed . . ." She flushed slightly at the mention of her bed.

"Isn't the common room rather noisy?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Always," she confirmed.

"How do you concentrate with all that noise?"

"I just block it out,"...he raised one eyebrow..."Oh."

Severus turned in his chair and considered the bookcase behind him. After a moment's thought, he reached out and selected a thin volume with a long title.*The Polyjuice Menagerie: Theoretical Approaches to Potion-Based Inter-species Transfiguration*...passing it to Hermione with a smirk.

She pulled a wry face. "I didn't realise it was a cat hair! It's not like *wanted* to turn into a cat!"

Snape looked at her with narrowed eyes. "Really? Whose hair did you think it was?"

Hermione gave him a wary glance. "No house points, remember?"

"I remember."

She shifted a little uncomfortably on her seat. "Millicent Bulstrode's." She paused, then added defensively, "I made the potion just fine, you know. Harry and Ron transformed perfectly."

"Indeed." Severus was fired with curiosity, though no sign of it showed on his face. "And, pray, which of my Slytherins did they become?"

"Crabbe and Goyle." Her arms were tightly crossed over her chest, and she looked simultaneously apprehensive and a little proud of her achievement. At his raised eyebrow she sighed and offered up the desired explanation, "They snuck into the Slytherin common room and interrogated Malfoy about the Chamber of Secrets, all right? It was my idea."

It was, Severus had to admit, an audacious plan. And while he had known of the Polyjuice attempt...her presence in the hospital ward complete with whiskers and a tail was a fairly unsubtle clue...he hadn't realised that she had successfully brewed the potion.

"Who stole the Boomslang skin?"

Hermione winced. "I did." She visibly braced herself, clearly expecting a tirade.

Severus kept his tone deliberately light. "Curious. I assumed it was Mr Potter."

"Well," Hermione relaxed slightly but still looked wary, "he'd been in so much trouble already I thought it had better be me."

Fair assumption. "Read the book, now," he instructed, changing the topic abruptly once again. *Keeping her off kilter is fun*, he noted as she obediently opened the book, confusion writ large upon her face. Snape pointed his wand at the wall separating his office from the Slytherin common room. Softly at first, but getting quickly louder, the sound began to filter through.

Hermione looked up from the book with interest. "An eavesdropping charm? How did you do that?"

"There's a reason the charm is nonverbal, Miss Granger." His voice was curt. "Read the book."

She grinned sheepishly and ducked her head back to the book. For several minutes, he watched her read. One hand played absent-mindedly with a stray curl, and she bit down on her lower lip. Her eyes moved rapidly, and her brow creased intermittently as she processed information. Only when he was convinced that she was completely engaged in the task did he speak.

"Miss Granger,"...she looked up at him, her eyes slightly unfocussed...*"Legilimens."*

For a brief second, he felt the edges of her Occlumetic shields before they collapsed. He saw her eyes widen fractionally as she felt it too. Before he could press forward into her mind, however, she broke the connection entirely, wrenching her gaze away from his.

"Wait!" she called, scrunching her eyes closed and pressing her hands to her temples. The book slid unheeded to the floor. A few moments later, her eyes flew open once more. "Try again," she commanded, her hands still pressed to the sides of her head.

This time, Severus felt her conscious engagement with the shields. As he pushed against them, she kept them intact *Finally*. He blinked and severed the contact.

"I did it!" Granger had fisted both hands in triumph and grinned with delight.

Fighting an urge to smile back, Severus snapped at her instead. "If you wouldn't mind restraining your enthusiasm long enough to pick my book up from the floor?"

Hurriedly, Hermione bent and retrieved the book, smoothing a hand over the cover solicitously before placing it on the desk. Her smile slipped several notches. "Shall we try again, sir?" she asked.

"No." Severus took a small phial of potion from his desk drawer and handed it to her. "Drink this," he ordered, cancelling the eavesdropping charm with a wave of his wand.

"What is it?" she asked, as she uncorked the bottle.

"Miss Granger!"...she froze with the potion halfway to her lips..."Only a fool takes a potion without knowing what it is!"

"But, Professor," she protested, lowering the phial, "You just told me to drink it!"

He rolled his eyes with frustration. "Are you this trusting of everyone?"

"No."

He raised one eyebrow.

"Well, I'm not. If you wanted to poison me, sir, you would have done so long ago."

"Miss Granger, just tell me what the potion is."

Hermione sighed with exasperation. She held the vial up to the light, swirled it, then sniffed at it. "It's a muscle relaxant," she concluded. "Like the ones we brewed in third year." Suddenly, she smiled at him. "Thank you," she added.

"Your comfort is not my primary concern," he replied dismissively. "These meetings would not stay secret long, however, were you too stiff and sore to walk tomorrow. Now, take your medicine and go."

For a second he thought she was about to argue with him, but she drank the potion instead...closing her eyes and tilting back her head to reveal the line of her throat. Severus stood up abruptly and turned to replace the book on the shelf behind his desk.

"Professor?"

"What?" he replied, without turning around.

"Should I come back on Thursday?" She sounded hopeful.

Slowly, he turned back towards her. She looked hopeful. "Very well," he conceded. "Don't be late."

Hermione smiled delightedly and walked to the door. "Good night, Professor," she called as the door shut behind her.

Severus sank into his chair and ran one hand down his face. *You have to watch yourself, Snape*, he berated himself. For a moment he'd . . . *No*. House points or no house points, Hermione Granger was a student, and he would comport himself accordingly.

Thursday's lesson was more straightforward. Granger had got the hang of consciously conjuring her shields, and they no longer collapsed under the slightest Legilimetic pressure. For about an hour, she worked at withstanding various levels of attack and controlling the amount of energy she utilised to Occlude. At a certain point, Severus called a halt. Granger hadn't yet fallen over; however, he had no desire to push her to the point of magical exhaustion.

"Sit down," he ordered.

Hermione sat. From the way she bit down on her bottom lip, he could tell that a question was imminent. Within seconds, he was proved right.

"Professor," she inquired, "may I ask a question?"

"Was that it?" was his dry response.

"I...er, no." She smothered a giggle. "That was not the question I meant."

"Say what you mean, Granger"...her eyes widened slightly at his omission of the honorific, but she didn't seem displeased..."that way you won't waste my time."

"Well, I guess what I meant was: if I ask a question that is only tangentially related to the practice of Occlumency, will you answer it?"

Severus ran one finger along his lip as he considered the request. "It depends. Ask your question, then I'll decide."

"Well," Hermione hesitated a second. "I understand that you had to learn Occlumency because Volde...what?" His snarl of anger interrupted her. "Okay, fine. I won't say it, but there's no way I'm calling him 'the Dark Lord', either. That's a Slytherin prerogative." She crossed her arms and scowled back at him, exhaling through her nose before continuing. "As I was saying, if You-Know-Who is such a strong Legilimens, how come he doesn't suspect something when he can't access any of your memories?"

"If I blocked all my memories," replied Severus, "he would suspect something immediately. Occlumency, in its purest form, is designed to defend the mind against attack, not to deceive the attacker."

"Then how...?"

"Think, Granger."

She paused for a second, drawing her lower lip into her mouth. "You show him some of your memories."

"Correct." She really was clever. Liberated from the burden of dragging her classmates along beside her, her mind sprung ahead in huge leaps. "The Dark Lord hasn't realised that I'm hiding anything from him. If he had, I wouldn't have survived."

"But surely it must be inordinately difficult to siphon off the incriminating memories from the innocuous ones?"

"Not really," he demurred. "The vast majority of my time is spent in the classroom or on Hogwarts business, and when the need arises I have plenty of material involving suspicious order members and antagonistic interactions with Mr Potter."

Hermione was staring at him wide eyed, her mouth hanging slightly open. "But, . . . hmm."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Severus quirked an eyebrow at her and smirked. "Surely Miss Granger hasn't yet run out of questions?" he mocked.

"Yes," she replied, shutting her mouth into an uncharacteristically grim line. "For the moment, I have."

"Well, then," he countered, slightly taken aback. "This concludes your lesson. When is Quidditch practice next week?"

"Tuesday and Thursday again, but"...she grimaced..."Professor Slughorn has scheduled one of his get-togethers for Tuesday." Her face brightened slightly. "I could always decline and come here instead!"

Curious, that she doesn't seem so keen on Slughorn, either noted Severus. "And broadcast your presence here to the school at large? Don't be an idiot. Besides, if you think that I have the time or the inclination to do this more than once a week, you're sadly mistaken. Thursday will be soon enough."

Hermione underwent a valiant attempt to keep the disappointment off her face, but to little avail. "Thank you, sir," she ventured. "Good night."

As she closed the door behind her, Severus let out a long breath.

Although, technically, the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom was less convenient to his office than the Potions classroom had been, Severus relished the walks that the change entailed. Transiting through the corridors gave him a feel for the school mood...and gave him unparalleled opportunities to deduct house points. It was with this...less altruistic...purpose in mind that he detoured down an infrequently used corridor on Friday afternoon. He could hear voices tinged with the unmistakable cadence of cruelty, though the words themselves only became clear as he drew closer.

"Go on then, do some magic!"

"She can't! She's a Squib, that's why."

"Hey, Squib! You don't deserve to be here."

A group of four third-year Ravenclaw students had someone backed up against the wall. "My, my," he drawled. "What a pleasant surprise." Only as the aggressors leapt back guiltily, did he see the target of their jibes: Jocelyn Smith stood frozen, her body rigid. Her wand was held tightly in one hand, and her eyes were wide with fear. Severus felt anger rip through his body. He drew his own wand and turned on the Ravenclaw students. At the sight of his face, they pulled back in terror, stumbling in a desperate effort to put something between them and him...even the body of a friend would do. With an extraordinary measure of self-control, Severus restrained himself, pulling himself up to his full height and looming over the recalcitrant students rather than hexing them.

"Fifty points from Ravenclaw, apiece," he snarled. "And detention, Saturday. Now get out of my sight!"

They didn't need further encouragement. One of the boys was sobbing with fear, and the one girl was hyperventilating.

Alone with Smith, Severus opened the nearest door and gestured into the empty classroom. "In here," he ordered. She peeled herself off the wall and stepped through the doorway. He followed her in and shut the door.

"Are you hurt?"

She shook her head.

"What was that about?"

She shrugged and glanced away.

"Miss Smith...Jocelyn, look at me. That's better. When I ask a question, I expect you to answer it. What was that about?"

Almost imperceptibly, her lower lip trembled. "I can't do magic," she whispered.

In Defence classes the first years were working through a preparatory program of balancing and strengthening exercises while they studied the identifying features of a number of dark creatures...Inferi, werewolves, etc. The only practical session they'd had was during the first week, when Severus had introduced Expelliarmus. True, Jocelyn hadn't mastered the spell, but neither had half the class. Besides, it wasn't unusual for Muggle-born students to take a few weeks to get the hang of voluntary magic. He hadn't thought anything of it. Now, however, he was having second thoughts.

"What magic have you done since you got your wand?" he asked.

"None," she replied, mortified. "I don't deserve to be here."

"Nonsense." *Squibs can't Occlude, for one thing* "Come with me."

He swept out of the room and strode off towards the Hospital Wing, slowing his stride only when he glanced down and noticed Jocelyn jogging to keep up.

"Poppy!" he called as they stepped inside.

"Coming!" was the reply, and within moments Poppy had emerged from her office.

"Poppy, this is Jocelyn Smith, of Slytherin house. Jocelyn, this is Madam Pomfrey, the school nurse and eminently trustworthy." He turned towards Poppy. "Miss Smith is in need of a full check-up."

Poppy smiled kindly at the apprehensive young girl. She bustled her patient off behind a curtain, leaving Severus to pace the length of the ward. "Well?" he demanded when Poppy emerged a full fifteen minutes later.

Poppy's face was grim, and she cast a privacy charm before she answered.

"Severus, why wasn't that child brought to me at the beginning of term?"

"Just give me the details, Poppy; save the lecture for later."

She sighed and rubbed the nape of her neck with one hand. "Fine. She's blocking."

"That much is obvious, Poppy. What else?"

"What *else*? You're impossible." Poppy crossed her arms and glared at him. "She's malnourished and she's been beaten regularly. The bruises from the most recent thrashing haven't yet faded, and we're three weeks into term."

"How long will it take to treat her physical injuries?"

"Severus, you're not listening. She's *blocking*! She's a danger to herself and to others. We have to send her to St. Mungo's."

"No!"

"Severus, listen..."

"No, Poppy, you listen," he stepped close to her and took hold of her shoulders, shaking her slightly. He looked slightly manic. "There's a new method that has been developed in the States. It's experimental, but I've read the literature. They haven't introduced it yet at St. Mungo's. If you send her there, they'll lock her up."

Poppy looked up into his face with a dubious expression. "How long?" she asked.

He shrugged without letting go of her shoulders. "I don't know. A couple of weeks?*Please*, Poppy."

She pursed her lips, weighing the options. "Alright, you've got two weeks."

"Don't tell Albus."

"Two weeks and not a moment longer."

Severus slumped forward with relief, momentarily resting his forehead on the crown of her head. "Thank you," he breathed.

"Oh, Severus," she sighed, "the things I do for you." She pushed him away with an exasperated noise, but the look on her face was entirely gentle. "Listen, she's going to need more multivitamin syrup than I have in stock...and if you really want to do something useful, you could modify some Skele-Gro so that she can take it as a calcium replacement."

"Since I wouldn't trust the current Potions professor to do the work adequately," he replied, regaining something of his usual demeanour, "I will be happy to oblige." Before leaving the Hospital Wing, he stepped through the curtains to stand by Jocelyn's bed.

"You will stay here tonight," he instructed. "Madam Pomfrey will give you several potions and monitor the results. After breakfast, you are to come and see me. I will expect you in my office at 9:30; do not be late."

"Professor Snape?" The clear sound of her voice stopped him as he turned away. "What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing we can't fix," he replied. "Tomorrow, I'll explain as much as I can."

As he walked away he heard Poppy in fully-fledged bedside mode: "Come on, my dear, swallow this down. Professor Snape made it, you know . . ."

Fortunately, Severus was used to surviving on very little sleep. He had spent several hours brewing...modifying Skele-Gro was a fiddly process, though quick, while the multivitamin syrup was a simple potion that simmered over several days...and much of the rest of the night reviewing the literature on Jocelyn's condition. The girl, he acknowledged when she arrived promptly at half-past nine, looked better for her night in the infirmary. While still pale, her colour had improved, and Poppy had trimmed the ragged ends of her hair. She sat across the desk from him now, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"The genealogy of magical ability is imprecisely understood," he began, effortlessly slipping into lecture mode. "As a consequence, when a child is born to magical parents, they watch closely for the first signs of magical ability, celebrating them and encouraging the child. When a magical child is born to non-magical parents, however, the situation is quite different. Manifestations of natural magic can surprise and, in some cases, frighten the parents. Faced with circumstances they are ill-equipped to

understand, some Muggle parents make the grave mistake of punishing the child."

As he spoke, Jocelyn sat very still, her large eyes fixed on his face.

"In the short term, such punishment can compound the problem: the body has several self-defensive mechanisms, the first of which works to remove the child from harm or impede someone who attempts to harm them. Imagine, if you will, a hypothetical scenario in which a young witch is smacked or beaten for a magical phenomenon over which she had little control. In self-defence the child's magic is likely to Apparate her to a position of safety, somewhere that the aggressor cannot reach, or, to throw the aggressor bodily across the room, away from the child."

Severus scanned Jocelyn's face for any indication that the scenario was familiar to her, but her face was inscrutable.

"In instances where such punishment is either disproportionately harsh or frequently meted out, the body resorts to a more extreme defensive mechanism, commonly referred to as 'blocking.' The brain constructs a protective shield between itself and the outside world. Nobody can get in, and no magic can get out. The shield works to prevent the outbursts of magic for which the child was originally punished, but it also prevents the child from performing magic at will." A beat later he continued. "In addition, if the shield remains in place over extended periods of time, it can prove dangerous for the child. Eventually, the magical force within them builds to the point of explosion, potentially harming the child or those around them."

Uncharacteristically, Severus wasn't sure what to say next, and he felt unaccountably relieved when Jocelyn broke the silence. Her small chin was lifted slightly, and the tension with which she held her body was palpable.

"Professor, you said we can fix it." The utterance was halfway between statement and question.

"Yes," he concurred.

"How?"

"I will teach you to control the shields that are blocking your mind."

"You will?" Jocelyn asked, the emphasis on the first word.

"Yes."...Just barely, the muscles around her eyes relaxed..."It won't be easy," he warned. "You will have to remember everything, and you will need to let me inside your mind. Do you think you can do that?"

She nodded decisively. "When do we start?" she asked.

"Monday, after classes. Before then, however, I want you to do some preparatory exercises . . ."

Slytherin Conversations

Chapter 11 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Eleven : Slytherin Conversations

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Hermione was spending a considerable amount of time in Professor Vector's office. Mostly, she went in the gap between classes and dinner, when Vector was likely to be there, too...pottering around in her tracksuit bottoms...although the professor had generously modified the wards so that Hermione could drop in at any time.

On this particular Saturday morning, Hermione had woken early. Reluctant to waste any part of her day, she crept out of the castle before any of her fellow Gryffindors were up and went for a run. By eight a.m. she had showered, breakfasted...on a handful of toast with Marmite and an apple...and made her way up to the seventh floor. Surprised to find Vector in her office when she entered, Hermione paused apologetically.

"Hermione," exclaimed Vector with a smile. "Come on in."

"Good morning, Professor, I wasn't expecting to see you at this time."

"A logical assumption, my dear. The truth is that I haven't yet gone to bed." Vector had a cup of coffee in her hand and gestured towards the briki. "I can make you one if you want," she offered.

"Maybe later," replied Hermione, smiling back at Vector's friendly face. This morning, her professor had a long sprig of basil flower tucked into the buttonhole of her cardigan, and the subtle perfume of the herb was mingled with the persistent smell of coffee. It occurred to Hermione that only Luna Lovegood might copy the style, yet the two women couldn't have been more different. "Actually," she ventured, "if you've got a moment, I've got a few questions."

In working through Vector's calculations, Hermione had come across several irregular runic coefficients that she had been unable to decipher. Hermione pulled some loose sheets of parchment from her bag and shuffled through them to find the list she was looking for.

"Here," Hermione pointed at the first symbol, *'hollow at the core'*? What does that represent? At times it features quite prominently."

Vector chuckled. "Ah, yes. That's the Ministry of Magic. Perhaps not the most likely rune, but I tested it against Mickelham's axioms and it proved both efficient and stable."

Hermione could see the relevance and the humour of Vector's choice. "A depressingly apt runic reduction," she replied with a small laugh.

"I'm afraid, Hermione, that I'm not very fond of governments," said Vector, wrinkling her nose to emphasise the point.

"Did you have a run in with the Ministry?" asked Hermione curiously before her manners got the better of her.

"Not the Ministry exactly . . . It's a long story."

"I'm sorry..." exclaimed Hermione apologetically. "I didn't mean to pry."

"Nonsense!" Vector replied, "don't ever be sorry for asking questions." She took another sip of her drink, looking at Hermione appraisingly over the brim of her cup. "If you sit with me while I make another cup of coffee," she added, "I'll tell you the short version."

Hermione was astonished by the offer and readily settled herself into a chair.

As Vector spooned coffee grounds and sugar into the briki, she began to talk. "You know, back in Greece before the Wars...the World Wars, that is...the magical and Muggle populations were not separated to the extent they are today. When I was a girl, I studied mathematics...not magic per se. Those that had the talent studied Arithmancy; those that didn't studied some other branch of mathematics, but no hard and fast distinction was made between the two. After graduating, I worked as a mathematics professor at a university in Thessaloniki. I worked there for many years. Eventually, I fell in love." Vector smiled self-deprecatingly at Hermione. "He was my student. Don't look so surprised, young lady!"

Hermione couldn't restrain herself, "But..."

"These things happen. We were both adults. For your information, I was 46 and he was 23."

Hermione's eyes were wide with surprise. "What was he like?" she asked with evident curiosity.

"He was wonderful. Full of energy, aflame with politics. He could seduce anyone, convince anyone to join his cause. He was very sweet, and he was very angry. He wanted to change the whole world to make it a better, fairer place." She quirked a knowing eyebrow at Hermione. "The sex was fantastic."

Hermione blushed. She bit down on her bottom lip and pulled her knees up to her chest.

"Under his influence, I became a communist...I still am one, as a matter of fact. To cut a long story short, we joined the resistance during the Second World War and fought together in the Civil War that followed immediately afterwards. Yanis was killed...by government forces...in 1949." Hermione gasped, but Vector continued over the interruption, an uncharacteristically grim look on her face. "I was forced to leave the country. Because of my record, and because the northern borders were closed, I had few options. I chose to change my name and leave the Muggle world behind entirely. As a witch, I fled to England; I've been here ever since."

Hermione had so many questions, she didn't know where to begin. "Professor, I . . . I don't know what to say. Thank you for telling me."

Vector had a far-away look in her eye. "You're welcome, Hermione. It's been a long time since I thought about such things."

"Do you miss him?"

"Yanis? I used to miss him everyday, but it was a long time ago." Vector shrugged, the beginnings of her customary smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. "I am sorry that he died, of course, and I'm sorry we didn't win, but I'm not sorry for anything else. If I had to do it over, even knowing the end result, I'd still fight." Vector poured two cups of coffee and handed one to Hermione.

"Was it the killing curse?" she asked as her fingers closed around the warm mug.

"Goodness, no. He was shot."

Hermione furrowed her brows briefly. "Was he a Muggle?" she asked with some surprise.

"He was an extraordinary mathematician," replied Vector with a chuckle. "But, it's true, no great shakes as an Arithmancer. His talents lay elsewhere."

Hermione's head whirled as she processed everything Vector had said. For a moment she struggled to remember how they'd arrived at such an unexpected topic. "It certainly puts your dislike for governments into perspective," she remarked.

"I'm sure it does, though that wasn't my motivation in telling you the story." Vector pulled a wry face. "At the risk of sounding like a crummy, new-age psychologist, I wanted you to know that there are many reasons for entering a war, and love is among the most important...love and politics are a fierce combination. Know, too, that though the healing process can be difficult, becoming a whole and healthy person afterwards is a possible and admirable goal."

Hermione took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her teacher had hit on one of the deep concerns that girded her days. "Thank you," she said. "I think they're important things that I needed to hear."

Any further commentary was interrupted by a knock on the door. Vector leaned towards Hermione and whispered conspiratorially, "Ah ha, the reason why I remain awake has just arrived." Lazily, she waved the hand that was not holding her coffee, and the blackboards covered in the Order's calculations disappeared. Even the writing on Hermione's pages of notes faded away. "Come in," she called.

The door opened, and Tracey Davis (one of the Slytherins from the NEWT Arithmancy class) stepped into the room. At the sight of Hermione Granger, she visibly stiffened.

"Good morning, Professor," she remarked awkwardly, "I didn't realise you were already occupied."

"Nonsense, Tracey," replied Vector. "Pull up a chair. In fact, I imagine that Hermione would be very interested in hearing about your independent project."

Tracey walked towards the desk with obvious reluctance. "I wouldn't want to bore you, Granger," she lied, the antagonism in her voice only thinly veiled.

Thirty seconds earlier Hermione hadn't cared about Davis' project in the slightest, yet now a tendril of curiosity unfurled within her breast. "I'd love to hear about it," she enthused, trying (in vain) for a note of sincerity, "I'm sure it wouldn't bore me at all."

Davis graced her with a smile that stopped an inch below her eyes. "Well, maybe once it's a little further developed we can get together and talk about it."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea!" interpolated Vector, smiling as if oblivious to the undercurrents of the conversation, "You see, Hermione, Tracey is working on an attempt to counteract the curse on the Defence Against the Dark Arts position."

Hermione blinked, overwhelmed by a rush of excitement. "That's a wonderful project!" she exclaimed. Her enthusiasm at this point was completely genuine, although the look Davis gave her was as confrontational as ever. "I'd love to have a look at it."

"Well, as soon as I'm ready," replied Davis, "I'll drop by your common room and set up a time."

The sheer magnitude of untruthfulness encompassed by Davis' statement left Hermione momentarily speechless.

"Excellent!" said Vector serenely, filling the silence. "Thank you for dropping by," she said, turning to Hermione. "Come again any time."

As Hermione shut the door behind her, she stole a last glance at Tracey Davis. Unsuccessfully, she attempted to suppress a sudden twinge of envy: Hermione realised that she wanted someone to save Professor Snape, she just wanted to do it herself.

Since it wasn't yet ten o'clock, Hermione headed towards the Great Hall: the chances were high that the boys would be eating their breakfast. When Harry and Ron proved more difficult to locate than anticipated, however, she snaffled another piece of fruit and ditched the library in favour of the lake.

How did my life get so complicated? she wondered. First Snape, then Vector, then the Order. Add to that the prophecy, with Harry marked as The Chosen One. Each element was connected, each so complicated that it was hard to fit them all together and have the whole make sense. Hermione crunched her apple absently between her teeth. Gone was the day when a colour-coded homework schedule sufficed to keep everything in its proper place.

When she reached the old beech tree, she sat down, propping her back against the trunk and stretching out her legs. *I should use this time to sort some things out,* she decided. *Take Professor Snape: does he like me, or not?* She knew it was a stupid question. As an Order member, the important thing shouldn't be whether he liked her, but whether they could beat Voldemort. Still, the question preoccupied her. He'd spent five years being so unrelentingly nasty that his new-found willingness to answer questions was intoxicating. *Not that he's exactly nice to me now.* Though she'd definitely noted a sense of humour. And there was that one glorious moment when he'd called her "Granger." It made her feel . . . noticed.

Hermione finished up the last bites of her apple and tossed the core into the lake for the giant squid. Pulling her knees up to her chest, she wrapped her arms tightly around her shins. Though there was no-one to see her, she pulled a wry face. The thought of being noticed by Snape had brought to mind the scene in Dumbledore's office. Hermione Granger was no stranger to ethical grey areas...think Cormac McLaggen, Polyjuice potion, Dolores Umbridge, illegal underage magic over the holidays just so that she could go running, etc....but Dumbledore's calculated blind eye had left her oddly perturbed. Snape, on the other hand, he'd *wanted* her to stew. *Why, though? Perhaps he thought I deserved it? Maybe he wanted to make me think about what I'd done?* The man was an enigma, that much was certain. *And an enigma I spend far too much time thinking about!* Hermione gave herself a mental shake and resolved to think about something else. Vector, for example.

Lost in thought, Hermione was oblivious to the two boys who had crept up on her reverie and now hid behind the tree on which she rested. When they leapt out at her from opposite directions, she shrieked. Desperately scrabbling to find her feet and pull out her wand, her heart was racing with genuine fear. Seconds later, she recognised her would-be attackers and sighed with relief, half sliding, half collapsing back onto the ground, one hand pressed against her chest.

"Oh, my God! Don't ever do that again!" she remonstrated weakly, wagging an indignant finger at the laughing faces of Harry and Ron. "I'm serious!" she added, gathering steam, "don't you have any idea..."

Her increasingly loud protestations were abruptly silenced when Ron muffled her mouth with one hand.

"Merlin's pants, Harry! I thought we'd surprised Hermione, but I think it might be Professor McGonagall in disguise!"

Harry replaced his grin with a mock-serious expression and shook his head gravely. "I think there's only one thing to do, Ron."

"Ngmnh!" said Hermione through Ron's hand, beginning to struggle again in earnest.

"Tickle her!" cried Ron, with evident glee, as her two friends threw themselves on her.

Ten minutes later, Harry, Ron and Hermione lay on the ground together, having tickled, giggled, shrieked and laughed themselves into momentary exhaustion. Turning her head, Hermione looked from one boy to the other and felt her heart swell with an almost painful sensation of well-being. Her friends were idiots, but she loved them all the same. *Love...* she thought, suddenly struck by the memory of her conversation with Vector...*love and politics is a fierce combination.*

"Come on, you jokers," she remarked, pushing herself up into a seated position. "Help me up, and let's go pay Hagrid a visit."

Hermione survived the Slug Club despite the absence of Harry and Ginny. Her guilty conscience obliged her to speak briefly with McLaggen...at the previous supper she'd dissuaded him by the simple expedient of crossing her arms and glaring at him every time he looked her way...but she only managed to tolerate his obnoxious version of conversation for a few minutes before excusing herself and beating a tactical retreat to the girls' toilets. Blaise Zabini turned up for the supper, too, and Hermione took the opportunity to indulge her new-found curiosity in the work of her Slytherin classmates, asking him about his independent Arithmancy project. She was disappointed, however, with his response. After staring down his nose at her for a few seconds, he droned on about property markets, financial systems, international exchange rates and capitalising on compound interest. *Jerk,* she thought later, *I bet the only interest he has in the Muggle world is how to make money out of it!* Hermione made desultory small talk with several other people whom she vaguely knew, finally managing to excuse herself by claiming pressing homework commitments for her Ancient Runes class. Slughorn didn't need to know that she'd finished her translations the previous week...served him right for lavishing such undeserved praise on Harry's Potions work.

Come Thursday, Hermione set off for her Occlumency lessons with the customary mix of anticipation and apprehension that her snarky professor inspired. All week she had been watching him at every given opportunity, carefully parsing each of his interactions. He was rude to everyone, with the occasional exception of Slytherin students. For the most part his behaviour met with mild exasperation or strained politeness, though many of the other teachers didn't seem to mind at all, and several people...Harry included...were reduced to a barely coherent rage. *How much of this persona is generated to provide the kind of memories Voldemort is expecting to see?* she wondered, though the idea that Snape might suddenly prove courteous and cheerful were the Dark Lord to fall tomorrow set her giggling uncontrollably.

"Don't bother to sit," he instructed the moment she arrived. "We'll start immediately."

Hermione was able to repel his first few Legilimency attacks without trouble. "Professor," she asked, "will you teach me to hide specific memories?"

She was surprised when he agreed.

"The key," he informed her, "is that Occlumentic projections are themselves products of your mind, much as memories are. For that reason, the shields themselves take on an appearance...the trunk you envisioned in the Hospital Wing, for example. To hide a specific memory, you need to put it inside an object within another memory."

"Within another memory? You mean, following the trunk analogy, that I would take a memory that includes my Hogwarts' trunk, such as one of me sitting in my dormitory, and shut the other memories in there?"

"Precisely. Be aware that the holding image will accrue some extra weight, therefore it's best to choose a memory that could already be assumed to hold some significance."

Hermione chewed on her lip as she processed that information. *Hmm . . . a memory that already holds significance, within which I can hide other thoughts . . .*

"I suggest we try it before you mangle your lower lip beyond repair," remarked Snape dryly.

Hermione flushed. "Certainly, sir. What should I do?"

"Go out into the corridor, shut the door behind you. While you're there, say something out loud. Imagine yourself placing the memory of that comment inside the receptacle of your choice. Then come back and we'll see how long it takes to find it."

Hermione stood obediently and moved out into the corridor. She stood there for a long moment, her mind a blank. As inspiration struck, she smirked and crossed her arms.

"Severus Tobias Snape," she said, "you shouldn't be watching this."

In her mind's eye, she entered the library. Taking down a book from the shelf, she folded her memory flat and tucked it inside. She closed the book and returned it to the shelf. In reality, she walked back into Snape's office.

"I'm ready," she said.

Snape stood fluidly and moved around his desk, his wand in hand. *"Legilimens."*

Hermione resisted an impulse to slam up her Occlumency shields and staggered slightly under the stream of memories. Struggling to make sense of the rush of images, she realised suddenly that each one took place in a Hogwarts corridor...she saw the basilisk again, watched her teeth grow huge as she was hexed by Malfoy and ran away from Snape in shame, and recognised herself sandwiched between Harrys and Rons of various ages. Eventually, the library began to appear as well, flickering into sight intermittently between various moments in the corridors. Over the next few minutes, her visions involved the library more and more frequently, until, for a long period she watched nothing but her own head bent over her books with the shelves as an immobile backdrop. She felt the mental pressure increase, and she willed herself to stay calm. *I'm not going to think about what I said in the corridor*, she chanted to herself, I'm not going to think about . . . The pressure burst outward, and the image of the library crumbled. "Severus Tobias Snape," she saw herself say, "you shouldn't be watching this."

Snape's office came back into focus as Hermione blinked. Her legs trembled, and she lowered herself carefully into her chair.

Snape leant back on the edge of his desk and ran one finger along his bottom lip. "After some practice," he drawled, "you might manage a serviceable attempt."

Hermione glanced up at him and noticed the tiny upward slant at one corner of his mouth. From Snape, those were exuberant words of encouragement, and she smiled with sudden pleasure.

"Sir," she asked, "how come you saw so many images of the corridor?"

"Memories are stitched together by common emotional threads: fear, longing, hunger, etc., or stored contiguously by common content: an individual, a colour, or a specific object. A skilled Legilimens or Occlumens can identify and exploit such threads. I knew I was looking for an image that took place in such a space."

Hermione opened her mouth to ask another question, but Snape cut her off.

"That's enough for tonight," he concluded, pushing himself off his desk and stepping away to sit down on his chair.

"About next week," began Hermione, "Harry wants to schedule Quidditch practice so he can avoid the Slug Club meetings, so I'm not sure yet..."

"Granger," he interrupted, "what are you doing tomorrow after classes?" He was watching her oddly.

"Nothing specific. I frequently go and work on the equations with Professor Vector."

"Hmm." Snape ran his index finger gently along his lower lip. "If you can ditch the gruesome twosome, tell them that you're going there, but come here instead."

Hermione's heart brightened. *He wants to see me more than once a week?* "Certainly, sir."

"Read Cvetkovich's chapter on 'Self-Defensive Occlumency' before you come. For now, you're dismissed."

Hermione had no real need to re-read the Cvetkovich chapter...the book was one of those he'd loaned her over the holidays...but she did so anyway *The instinctive mental response really is fascinating*, she thought. *Maybe Professor Snape wants to talk more about my injury at the Department of Mysteries* She did some extra reading on the Silencio curse and its peculiar secondary effects just to be on the safe side.

Slipping away from Ron and Harry was ridiculously simple. They were used to her visits to Vector's office by now and so uninterested in Arithmancy that it never occurred to them to question her. Fifteen minutes after classes ended, therefore, she was knocking on Professor Snape's door.

"Come in," he called.

When she opened the door, she was taken aback to find he wasn't alone.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said quickly. "I can come back later."

"That won't be necessary, Granger," he replied. "Just sit down."

She sat, looking sideways at the other occupant of the room. Recognising the young Slytherin who had delivered the message about her birthday "detention" with Snape, Hermione pushed away a small pang of jealousy. *How ironic*, she thought, the scene between her, Tracey Davis and Vector superimposing itself over this one in her mind's eye.

"Granger, this is Jocelyn Smith." Snape performed a perfunctory introduction. "Jocelyn, this is Hermione Granger."

The previous pang of jealousy returned with redoubled energy. *He calls her by her first name?* She smiled at the young girl as sweetly as she could. "Hello, Jocelyn, we spoke once before."

Jocelyn looked at her briefly, but said nothing, quickly returning her gaze to Snape. Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes *What am I doing here?* she wondered, *Or better, what is she doing here?*

Snape sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb. "Granger," he said abruptly, then paused. "I had hoped . . ." Snape trailed off, then paused again.

Curiosity won out over annoyance as Hermione stared at her professor. She'd never seen him so inarticulate. One hand was fisted on the desk so tightly that his knuckles gleamed white. *Severus Snape doesn't like to ask for help*, she noted, adopting a smug tone in the safety of her own head.

On the third attempt, he managed a full sentence: "I had hoped you would be willing to describe the mental sensations of your recent experience of blocking using Muggle metaphors."

Hermione looked at the girl beside her in surprise. "Muggle metaphors?" she queried. "But..."

"But what, Granger?" Snape's tone sounded a warning that Hermione chose to ignore.

"But I thought Slytherins..."

"You thought wrong." He'd migrated from warning to savage and slapped one palm down on the desk for emphasis.

Hermione crossed her arms and her legs simultaneously and stared at a spot about three feet left of his ear, a mulish expression on her face. "Someone ought to inform Draco Malfoy," she muttered.

Snape leaned forward menacingly, one hand still pressed flat against the surface of his desk. He hissed at her, threateningly, "But it won't be you, will it, Granger?"

Rather than looking at him, Hermione turned to the young girl seated beside her. Throughout the aggressive exchange, Jocelyn had said nothing, following each turn of the conversation with wide, frightened eyes. Faced with her apprehensive expression, Hermione's anger leached away. *As if I'd willingly fuel Malfoy's hatred of anyone* Typically, her anger was quickly replaced by a keen appreciation for the ridiculous, and Hermione was sorely tempted to let fly with a sarcastic retort... *Then perhaps once the Dark Lord falls, you could inform Malfoy on my behalf?* Instead, she counted silently to ten before replying with as much calm as she could muster. "No, Professor, I wouldn't dream of it."

She was about to question Snape as to the purpose of his request, when her brain caught up with her mouth *If Jocelyn is Muggle-born and needs to know Muggle metaphors for how to unblock, then it stands to reason...* "Are you blocking?" she inquired, addressing the question to Jocelyn.

The young girl threw a panicked glance at Snape before turning back towards Hermione. Even then, she didn't meet her eye, staring instead at her knee. Rather than speaking, she nodded.

Cripes. Hermione ran a hand through her hair. *Was Jocelyn cursed?* she wondered briefly before the reading she did the previous evening answered the question for her. *No: abused.*

For the first time in several minutes, she risked a glance at Snape. He had retreated slightly from the antagonistic pose he'd assumed the last time he spoke, but had barely moved otherwise. His body was rigid and his eyes wide. "I'll do my very best," she promised reassuringly.

The response to her words was immediate. Snape relaxed back into his chair and ran one hand down his face. "I'll leave you to it, then," he commented. Rising to his feet, he stepped out into the Potions lab, leaving Hermione and Jocelyn to their conversation in private.

A/N : Ann Cvetkovich is a brilliant academic who has published a brilliant book: *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). I admit that I had some thought of her take on the potential power of traumatic experiences in mind when I borrowed her name as that of the author with a chapter on "Self-Defensive Occlumency."

I also should note that I took inspiration for the concept of "blocking" from the sad life of Arianna Dumbledore in DH; I figured that in the 100+ years since her death the medi-wizarding world would have come up with a name for the phenomenon, and perhaps also the beginnings of a cure.

Severus Saves

Chapter 12 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Twelve : Severus Saves

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute.

I'd like to thank both my betas: LAXo and WriterMerrin, without whom this chapter would be incorrectly commaed and, in some places, incomprehensible. They have, as always, my very great thanks.

Severus did not know what Granger had said to Jocelyn, but he knew that it had helped. When he and Jocelyn met next, after breakfast on Saturday, he managed...for one brief moment...to move beyond her shields.

The session started as each of their previous attempts had: they sat down facing each other away from the desk, made skin contact...one palm against another...and Jocelyn closed her eyes to focus on a happy or neutral memory, a memory that she could imagine sharing. When she was ready, she opened her eyes and looked into his. Yet this time, her shields were down, and he passed through into her memories. The instant he crossed the border of her mind, however, her instincts kicked in and summarily ejected him.

Severus regarded the girl in front of him: she looked astonished. He allowed one corner of his mouth to curl upwards. "Not bad," he remarked.

Jocelyn sat slightly straighter in her seat. Though she didn't smile, her eyes widened momentarily.

"Shall we try again?" he inquired. Jocelyn nodded vigorously in reply.

Yet twenty minutes later, despite several attempts, they were unable to re-create the experience. Severus felt his own frustration building, and Jocelyn looked increasingly distressed. They were a week into their allotted time. If their treatment failed and an official report of her condition was made to St. Mungo's, Jocelyn would be certified as dangerous and almost certainly admitted to the Spell Damage Ward.

"Enough," he said eventually, running one hand down his face. "Did you notice any difference between how you felt the first time and our other attempts?"

Jocelyn creased her brow in the effort of accurately categorising the sensations. "I was more . . . relaxed on the first try."

Relaxed . . . Hmm All the literature Severus had read on the cure for blocking had stressed the importance of soothing voices, friendly gestures and safe environments. Thankfully, his perceptive little Slytherin wasn't put off by his abrasive personality, and he'd jettisoned the accepted wisdom without a second thought. Relaxed, however, he would have to think about.

"The second time, I nearly did it; but then after that, I..." her voice faltered for a second before she continued, "I got scared."

"What were you scared of?"

Jocelyn ran the nail of one thumb along the arm of her chair, watching its careful progress rather than meeting his eye. It was several minutes before she spoke.

"Scared that once you see the things that happened, you won't like me any more."

The brief pause before Severus spoke was thick and heavy with the young girl's anxiety. "Jocelyn," he said, urgently, "let's try this another way. Get out your wand."

Jocelyn pulled out her wand with some reluctance. "Why bother? It doesn't work."

"Give me your hand. Put the tip of your wand here, on my temple."

Her small hand slid to rest on his much larger palm, and her wand bumped lightly against his eyebrow before skidding across to the spot he'd indicated. "What are we doing?" she asked.

"I want to show you one of my memories," he explained. "Technically, it's magic, but Legilimency is so close to the Occlumency you're already doing that it just might work. Besides," he added, noting the interested gleam in her eye, "your inherent curiosity might serve to propel you out of your safety zone."

"What do I have to do?" Her voice was more excited than he'd ever heard it.

"The spell is *Legilimens*, but more importantly, you want to look deeply enough into my eyes to focus on the inside of my head. You have to think your way into my mind. Do you understand?"

She nodded, muttering the sounds of the spell to herself a few times.

"Are you ready?"

There was a determined look on her face and a fierce quality to her gaze. She breathed in sharply through her nose, and for a few seconds she held her breath, her body poised. Then, in her clear, high voice, she cast the spell, "*Legilimens!*"

Power surged through her wand, and her consciousness tumbled forward into Severus' mind. He'd chosen the memory almost at random; there were so many that would have sufficed. The room that met their minds' eyes was a dingy kitchen. Beige surfaces that might have looked merely conservative in the '50s spoke of outright poverty a decade later. A boy of eight or nine sat at a battered laminate table, eating a bowl of cereal in a desultory fashion. The spoon was held rather awkwardly in one hand, and his elbows were propped on the table. Both his clothing and his hair were in need of a wash. Behind the counter, a woman was frying bacon; her dressing gown was liberally spotted with greasy marks. The resemblance between the two was too strong to be co-incidental: they had the same dark, lank hair, the same too-pale skin. The screen door creaked open, then slammed shut with a bang that caused mother and son to flinch. The contents of the boy's spoon splashed out onto the tabletop. He froze.

"Jesus H. Christ," swore the man who had just entered. He reached out and grabbed roughly at the boy's collar, half pulling him from the chair and pressing his prominent nose into the small puddle of milk on the table's surface. "The little freak can't even eat his breakfast without making a mess."

In the background the woman scrambled to serve up the bacon and eggs. She scurried around the bench and clumsily clattered the plate into place. "Toby," she gasped. "Breakfast!" Her voice was high-pitched with anxiety as she sought to distract her husband. "How was the night shift? Did you speak to..."

Her babbling was abruptly silenced when Toby, without letting go of the boy's collar, reached out one long arm and smacked her sharply on the back of the head.

"Woman," he snarled, "don't interrupt me when I'm disciplining the boy." With his free hand, he undid his buckle and pulled his belt from his trousers. They slipped an inch or so lower on his hips, and he widened his stance in order to keep them up. He kicked the boy's chair out from under him, holding his face pressed to the table the entire time.

The boy was trembling, his eyes squeezed closed. As the man, Toby, began to lay into his back and upper thighs with the leather of his belt, the boy began to cry.

"Enough," said Severus a few moments later, not ungently, as he severed the connection between Jocelyn and his memories. His office came back into focus, and he regarded the girl before him with interest. She'd done magic...a serious breach of the blocking...but he wasn't sure what might happen next. Indeed, her body swayed, teetering on the edge of her chair.

"Oh," she sighed. "You . . ." She broke off and stared at her wand. "I . . ." With a choked noise she launched herself towards him, wrapping her skinny arms tightly around his neck. Automatically, Severus' arms closed around her and he twisted her tiny frame just enough that he could lift her onto his lap. Over fifteen years as Head of Slytherin house had exposed him to more than his fair share of crying children, and he waited patiently for her to finish. It took several minutes for her sobs to quieten, long enough for several tears to trickle uncomfortably down the collar of his robes. Once she was done, he placed her back on her own chair and wordlessly passed her a handkerchief. She took it with a small sniff, blowing her nose loudly and thoroughly before offering back the scrunched and dirty piece of cloth.

Severus eyed the girl and the handkerchief with a look of distaste. Before accepting the return of his property, he extended his wand and performed a thorough cleaning charm. Jocelyn watched the performance carefully, her eyes flickering back and forth from his wand to her own. The excitement emanating from her body was palpable, and with a frisson of shock, Severus realised that he could feel her mental excitement as well: her shields were down. Shooting him a quick glance from under her eyelashes, Jocelyn pointed her wand at the newly-clean handkerchief, a look of determination on her pale face.

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," she exclaimed, levitating the handkerchief into the air. With a cry of delight, she sent it fluttering around the room.

Severus rose and moved towards his desk. A thread of relief unravelled up through his body, loosening some of the hard knots clenched in his belly. Jocelyn was up out of her own seat, capering around the furniture as she navigated the handkerchief in a second victory lap of his office. The smile on her face transformed her appearance: the sharpness of her features softened and her pale cheeks glowed. As the handkerchief tumbled past his head, Severus plucked it nimbly from the air, tucking it back into his pocket where he felt it wriggle once before falling still.

"Sit down," he commanded, pointing at the chair.

Jocelyn sat immediately, smothering a giggle.

"When you leave here, you are to report to Madam Pomfrey. Have her do a full examination."

"Yes, sir." After speaking, she pressed her lips tightly closed, but Severus could see the unasked question tugging at the corners of her mouth and vibrating in the set of her shoulders. *What an extraordinary change*. The silent, abnormally still child he had learned to recognise as Jocelyn Smith was gone. The girl in her place was brimming with energy.

"While there is no longer a need for us to meet every day, I suggest we meet once a week to continue working on your Occlumency skills. Ideally, you need to have them firmly under your conscious control. Do I make myself clear?"

She nodded her assent.

"You may go," he said with a dismissive flick of his fingers. Jocelyn slid obediently from her chair and moved towards the door. "Miss Smith," he called at the last minute, and she looked back over her shoulder, one hand on the doorknob. "If I find you doing magic in the halls, I will deduct house points."

Her answering smile stayed with him, even once she'd left.

Alone in his office Severus allowed himself an unapologetic smirk of satisfaction at his unorthodox, yet highly satisfactory, solution to Jocelyn's problem. He would have to write to the mediwizards at Harvard who had developed the original treatment; no doubt they'd be interested in hearing of her success.

How long, he wondered, will her first flush of happiness last? Not permanently. That much he knew from his reading. But for a while, the rush of magic and the pleasure of having entered into a new world far removed from the misery of her previous existence would allow Jocelyn to live happily...perhaps for the first time. At some stage, of course, she would have to deal with the memories of her previous life and find some way to incorporate them into her sense of self. The best, perhaps only, thing he could do for her was to continue the Occlumency lessons.

The thought of lessons brought his wandering mind back to the present with an unwelcome jolt. Finding the time to meet daily with Jocelyn had thrown his grading schedule out completely, leaving him with essays to mark for five year-levels of students. With a sigh, he pulled the closest two piles towards him and deliberated over his choice: start with the simpler, shorter and infinitely more boring first-year papers, or wade his way through the longer, more complex NEWT papers. *NEWT*, he decided, *leaving the easier papers for later when concentration will be more difficult.*

By the time he had written a large "P" on the fourth consecutive paper, Severus dropped the pretence of not caring about Granger's essay and fished around among the scrolls beside him until he found it. Unfurling the parchment, he noted the eleven extra inches she'd added with a vicious sneer of anticipation. *This*, he noted, *deserves a new pot of red ink.* An hour and fifteen minutes later, he punctuated a final scathing comment with an authoritative full stop and regarded his handiwork with a smug expression. "E," he wrote clearly at the bottom of the scroll. Scattered around his desk were half a dozen books he'd pulled out to check her references or point to something she'd missed. He'd taken a particular pleasure in informing her that one of the future avenues of research she had hypothesised had, in fact, been solved over a decade ago...referencing an unpublished paper that he held in his private collection.

Severus leant back in his chair and tapped one finger against Granger's essay, smirking like the cat with the proverbial cream. The margins were thick with his scrawl, the red of the ink framing her neat script like a decorative border. He'd savagely dismantled each of her assumptions, berated her for several structural decisions, and a single misplaced apostrophe had triggered an entire paragraph on the topic of her grammatical inadequacies.

Over the last five and a bit years, the back-and-forth of their academic engagement had escalated to its current...epic...proportions. He knew the kind of effort she put into her work, acknowledging it, in his own fashion, in the depth and quantity of his critical response. Unlike her classmates, Granger alone took his comments to heart, subtly changing her writing style and chasing down the obscure references he mentioned. For a long time, her precocity had merely irritated him...an irritation that grew larger each year. In the classroom she was nigh on impossible: the alacrity with which she answered each and every question ensured that none of the other students bothered to think anything through for themselves, and the questions she asked invariably required a response so far ahead of the learning curve that the other students would switch off entirely. Initially, the pitched battleground of her essay margins had been an attempt at discipline, an effort aimed at humiliating her into an awareness of her own ignorance and thus ensure her silence during classes. As such, it hadn't been particularly successful. Granger took each criticism on board, redoubling her efforts and rising to each challenge.

Last year, it had infuriated him. He had imagined her hoping to catch him out, or revelling in the knowledge that she was wasting his time. But this year, their interaction had changed entirely. Not that the change could be measured by a noticeable difference in the tone of his comments...they were as acerbic as ever. But his sojourn inside her memories had forced a reconsideration of her motivations, and that, in turn, had necessitated a re-evaluation of his own.

Thus Severus admitted, if only to himself, that marking Granger's papers was one of the singular joys of his week. As were their private lessons. Liberated from the intellectual inertia of the classroom environment, Granger skipped through material and ideas at an exhilarating pace. Removed from the contextual framework of a syllabus she'd long ago committed to heart, Granger was less of a know-it-all and more of the inquisitive, intuitive scholar she was destined to become. *Shutting her thoughts up in the library books*, he mused, *was an ingenious move. This week I'll start her on Legilimency* Severus had no desire to let anyone root around inside his memories, but since he could...to a degree...control the access of both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord, he was relatively unconcerned about a sixth-year Hogwarts student, no matter how advanced she might be. *Perhaps once she catches on, I can set her practising with Jocelyn*

The thought of both students in the same breath caught on a jagged edge somewhere between his sternum and his navel *What did Granger say to Jocelyn yesterday?* Until the last minute, he hadn't realised that his presence might make things more difficult for Granger; indeed, he hadn't realised that he himself couldn't bear to listen to Granger's account of events. What if her version had differed substantially from his? What if their interaction had meant nothing to her?

In vain he'd attempted to justify to himself the strength of his reaction to the events in the Hospital Wing last year. True: it was gratifying to be treated with such respect. True: the willingness with which Albus had contemplated sacrificing Granger's life had ejected her sharply from the neat box marked "Favoured Gryffindor, needs taking down a peg" into which he'd previously filed her. True: her delusional identification of him as a phoenix...*a phoenix*...hit unerringly on the craven desire of his darkest nights. He'd right royally fucked up this life; what wouldn't he give to burn up into a crisp and start anew? Yet still, *still*, Granger...*Still Granger takes up far too much of my attention* he interrupted himself with a sigh, pulling Draco Malfoy's paper before him. *Attention that would be better placed elsewhere*

Saturday afternoon, one week later, found Severus in a very similar position: grading papers, although in this instance it was the third-year DADA student earning the fruits of his invective. "Ensure you actually have a point before bothering to belabour one," he wrote into the margin. Pausing for a moment to consider the monstrosity before him, he stroked the feathered end of his quill across his pursed lips. "T," he decided at last, dipping his pen deeply into the red ink. When his fire flared a brilliant green, he paused, and a single drop of ink dripped onto the surface of the paper.

"Snake!" The voice was Hagrid's. He'd managed to fit only the top of his head into the fireplace; it made for a rather muffled line of communication but the panic in his voice came through clearly nonetheless. "Come quick!" he added before disappearing abruptly.

Severus let out a hiss of irritation. *As if being summoned by a grammatically incorrect idiot was insufficient, the fool forgot to tell me where to go* Luckily, in less time than it took for Snape to rise, vanish the ink spot, and move towards the hearth, the fire flared green once again and Minerva's head appeared.

"Ah, Minerva," he drawled, "what a pleasant surprise."

"Severus, this is no time for flippant comments...a student has been badly cursed. You're needed in the Hospital Wing immediately." Not waiting for his reply, she too disappeared.

Within seconds, Severus had summoned his medicinal bag and stepped through the fireplace, unfolding his long body into Poppy's office with a nonchalance that belied the speed with which he'd moved. Hagrid was there waiting for him and grabbed hold of his shoulder.

"Wha' kept you?" he asked, stepping towards the doorway into the ward with such speed that Severus had to take several hurried steps to avoid falling.

"Hagrid," he hissed, "unhand me!" Hagrid paused momentarily and looked down at the furious face of Severus Snape with a slightly bemused expression.

"Right you are, Professor," he offered, in the voice of one who doesn't quite know what they've done wrong, patting good naturedly the shoulder he'd just been gripping. Severus sighed and stepped away with an awkward jerk of his head. Being rude to Hagrid was like kicking a dog.

Freed from the grip of his overenthusiastic colleague, Severus stepped through into the ward. His eyes swept the empty beds, and without hesitation he walked towards the one curtained-off area close to the exit. Parting the curtains, he also breached the Silencing Charm Poppy had put in place, and the sounds of Katie Bell's screams assaulted his ears. The poor girl was writhing on the bed while Poppy tried ineffectually to calm her down.

"Thank Merlin," exclaimed Poppy at the sight of him, stepping back immediately to let him closer.

"Diagnostics?"

"Nothing I recognised. Apparently, she touched something, some kind of cursed object."

Severus had his wand out and waved it over the convulsing body of his student. Dark, smoky shapes formed above her body, twisting through several runic shapes before dissipating.

"She touched it?" he asked, in confirmation. "With her hand?"

"I don't know."

Bell was still dressed for the miserable weather, complete with hat, cloak and gloves. A scarf that presumably completed the ensemble lay on the bedside table; in her present state it would have posed a strangulation danger. Her arms were thrashing wildly, and Severus had to resort to a charm to remove her gloves. As soon as he did so, the point of contact was apparent: the skin on one finger had bubbled alarmingly. By dint of catching at her wrist and pressing it to the mattress, he was able to take a closer look, though her hand still twitched violently. Poppy stepped up beside him and bent her grey head alongside his dark one.

"Severus..." she began, her tone worried.

"Until I see the cursed object," he interrupted her, "there is nothing more that I can do."

During the next few minutes, Poppy paced, wringing her hands as she walked. Doing nothing clearly sat poorly with the mediwitch. Severus conjured a chair and sat watching Katie Bell's disturbingly contorted body. One of his narrow legs lay crossed over the other, his hands steepled together and his forefingers pressed against his lips. His stillness contrasted sharply with Bell's continuously jerky movements. Mercifully, it was only a short time before Filch arrived, a bundled Gryffindor scarf held awkwardly out from his body.

Severus gestured towards the dresser as he rose to his feet. Filch put down the package gingerly, jumping back as soon as humanly possible. Carrying something so dangerous had made him twitchy.

"Very good, Professor, sir," wheezed Filch. He tended towards the ingratiating with Snape. "I'll be off now."

Severus dismissed him without a second glance, directing his full attention towards the bundle Filch had left behind. With his wand, he banished the scarf to a nearby chair, revealing a chunky opal necklace, over which he performed a series of complicated gestures. Once again, smoky shapes formed near the tip of his wand, shifting and turning in the still air of the Hospital Ward, spelling out information in an arcane runic script. Severus muttered to himself, stringing the runes together and formulating conclusions. When he turned back towards Poppy and Katie Bell, there was a grim look on his face.

"Severus?" Poppy was apprehensive. When the necklace had shown up, her pacing had stopped, and she stood poised, ready to receive instructions.

"I can't fix it, but I might be able to stabilise her long enough to get her to St. Mungo's. We can't move her in her current state. Poppy, pay attention,"...he listed off a series of potions..."anything you don't have, you'll have to get Slughorn to make. I'm going to be busy here."

Poppy graced him with a tight smile and spun on her heel. She moved towards the medicinal supplies with much of her usual control restored. Armed with a specific task to do, she was immediately calmer. Severus turned towards the bed and took a deep preparatory breath. It was going to be a long night.

The rosy-hued streaks of dawn were colouring the sky by the time Severus made his way from the Hospital Wing. Exhaustion had deepened the lines on his face, and his voice was hoarse and sore. Katie Bell, however, had stabilised. Severus had managed to sing parts of the curse from her body entirely, though much remained and the girl herself had entered a coma. It would take the combined efforts of a professional curse-breaker and a team of mediwitches and -wizards to do more.

As he walked, the clink of Severus' boot heels rang out eerily. Enough light was coming through the windows that the torches had been extinguished, although it wasn't yet strong enough to do more than variegate the scene into complementary shades of grey. At a large corner window, Severus paused and stood for a moment, staring out into the grounds. The lake lay below him like a dark puddle, and the trees of the Forbidden Forest stood out in silhouette against the horizon. Severus rested his forehead against the cool glass and thought longingly of his bed. *At least today is a Sunday*, he reflected. With a deep breath, he turned away and pressed onwards: *Dumbledore is always the last hurdle before bed*.

When Severus reached the headmaster's office, Dumbledore was alone. Severus had more than half expected to find Minerva there, sharing the vigil and keeping Albus company with a strict alternation of tea and firewhiskey. Indeed, a quick count of the dirty glasses suggested that both she and Hooch had been and gone. He wondered idly how long he'd missed them by and how much later he would have to stay as a result. Had the others been there, he could have reported on Bell's health and beaten a speedy retreat.

"My dear boy, good morning." Albus, it seemed, had been poring over some of Vector's calculations, but he tucked them away at Severus' appearance.

"Albus." Severus lowered his long body into the chair opposite Dumbledore's desk, stretching out his legs and revelling in the sensation of sitting after so long on his feet.

"How is the patient?"

Severus shrugged. "At this point, it's out of my hands."

"I hear from Poppy that this is the second student's life you've saved this week." Dumbledore leaned forward slightly, delivering the phrase as both commendation and interrogation.

Wariness cut through the tired cocoon of Severus' thoughts. "Poppy exaggerates. I dealt with the matter as Head of Slytherin House; there is little more to be said."

Dumbledore sighed. "A Slytherin?" he echoed. Severus knew it for a rhetorical question and said nothing. Dumbledore made something of a show of shaking out his sleeve over the blackened mess of his arm. "What happened, Severus?" he asked at last, grandfatherly concern radiating from his face.

With his elbows on the arms of his chair, Severus rested the tips of his fingers together lightly. In reply, he quirked one eyebrow and let his face fall into an expression of polite incomprehension.

"Severus, if one of our students is in danger, I expect to hear about it. Regardless of which house they belong to."

"I suggest you speak with Poppy Pomfrey, Albus. She is far more qualified to give you the information you desire."

Severus noted the twitch of Dumbledore's mouth as the headmaster fought to keep his irritation submerged below the surface of congeniality. "Right now, however, I'm asking you. Keeping secrets from me is not part of your job description."

Has it come to this? "Am I to understand, Albus, that my loyalty to you is in doubt?"

"No! Severus, of course not. I trust you...with my life." It was a poor joke and it fell flat. "On the contrary, I'm concerned that you don't trust me."

Severus examined the nails of his right hand before replying. "I have said it before, Albus: some of the students mean more to you than others."

Dumbledore reached for his whiskey glass, his blackened hand trembling slightly. As a performance of injured pride, his comportment was masterful. Severus restrained an urge to roll his eyes. Closing his eyes briefly, he felt his exhaustion wash over him. *Better to end this quickly.*

"Her name," sighed Severus, noting the attentive look in Dumbledore's eyes and bracing himself for a subsequent lecture on endangering the larger student population, "is Jocelyn Smith. She is in the first year. She was blocking, and I fixed it."

The consequences of his words were much more dramatic and far less confrontational than he'd expected. Dumbledore's face crumbled in on itself, and his uninjured hand flew to his lips in an almost comical expression of surprise. "Blocking?" His voice was little louder than a whisper.

Severus drew his brows together with concern. "Albus?" he queried. When Dumbledore made no response except to wave one hand vaguely in the air, Severus repeated his name, more sharply.

"I . . . oh . . . you fixed it?" Dumbledore's voice was uncertain and incredulous.

Surreptitiously, Severus eased his wand out of his sleeve and into his hand, keeping his wrist below the desk and out of Dumbledore's line of vision. "Yes," he replied. "New research from Harvard showed promise using Occlumency skills." Dumbledore's reaction worried him.

"How very interesting." Visibly, Dumbledore shook himself, and Severus watched the old man's defences rebuild hurriedly...he sat straighter, adjusted his glasses and switched on the grandfatherly charm once more. Unexpectedly, he changed topic. "No luck with the Malfoy boy, then?"

"No." Severus narrowed his eyes at the headmaster. *Something isn't right* "Despite my best efforts, Draco continues to avoid me: I cannot force his confidences."

"Oh well," replied Dumbledore, his manner slightly too offhand. "Hopefully you'll have some success before he makes another such clumsy attempt."

Severus tilted his head deferentially, but kept his eyes on the man before him.

"You must get some rest, Severus, We'll talk more later." Unmistakably, the conversation was at an end.

Despite the late hour, Severus waved away the offer of Floo powder. The headmaster's strange behaviour had left him with a lot to think about, and he set off through the now-luminous corridors, turning the sequence of events over in his mind.

A/N : I know I'm not the first fanfiction author to compare being rude to Hagrid to kicking a dog...it remains terribly appropriate, if a little clichéd.

Canary Yellow

Chapter 13 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Thirteen : Canary Yellow

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute. Where dialogue from the original Harry Potter books is quoted by me, the relevant text is marked with an asterisk.

I'd like to thank my betas, LAXo, who can point out weak plot points in the dark, and WriterMerrin, who can spot a comma splice at 40 paces. Without them, this story would be far less coherent.

"It wasn't a very slick attack, really, when you stop and think about it," remarked Ron, encouraging a first year to give up his comfy chair with a gentle smack on the back of the head. "The curse didn't even make it into the castle. Not what you'd call foolproof."

It wasn't likely to make it into the castle, either...Filch's Secrecy Sensor would have seen to that thought Hermione. "You're right," she said out loud to Ron, kicking him insistently in the knee until, with a grimace, he surrendered the chair to its original occupant. "It wasn't very well thought-out at all."

Since Ron was now left without a seat, he plonked down onto the arm of Hermione's chair. The closeness of his body left her with a curiously pleasant, tingly sensation.

Definitely not how proximity to Harry makes me feel If she moved her leg just a fraction...there...it pressed ever so slightly into Ron's thigh. The warmth of it was extraordinary.

Harry was still carrying on about Malfoy, and Hermione glanced upward at Ron. He caught her look and rolled his eyes companionably. Hermione smiled back. The warmth generated by the touch of Ron's leg spread to her face, and she looked away quickly...guiltily, hoping he wouldn't notice her blush. Professor Snape's lesson on Legilimency had left her with an uneasy conscience toward her red-headed friend.

"Are you ever aware of knowing what someone is thinking?" Professor Snape had asked.

Hermione had considered the question carefully. "Well, I frequently have to explain what girls are thinking to Harry and Ron, but I always assumed that was because they were, well . . ."

"Imbeciles?" he suggested smoothly, one eyebrow raised.

"Boys." Hermione shot him a disapproving look.

By the end of the lesson, it was clear that Hermione's insights into the thinking of others relied less on women's intuition and more on low-level Legilimency. Thus she knew that, in his own confused way, Ron liked her. And she knew herself well enough to acknowledge that she certainly wasn't opposed to the idea. But knowing what he felt without him having told her was a bit like cheating. Like she'd spied on something personal. She pressed her thigh a little more firmly against his and looked up at him under her eyelashes. He was leaning forward, urging Harry to play a game of chess. His sleeves were rolled up, and the vein of his forearm stood out against the muscle

below. At the pressure on his leg, he glanced back at her and winked. Hermione smiled to herself and pulled out her Ancient Runes homework. Hermione Granger was not one to wait around for some foolish boy to make his move. She was perfectly capable of taking events into her own hands, and Slughorn's upcoming Christmas party offered the perfect opportunity.

During her first lesson in Legilimency, Hermione had found herself in the awkward situation of having to enter Professor Snape's mind. The experience had overwhelmed her with a combination of terror, nervousness and intense curiosity. She needn't have worried, really, for Snape was in control the entire time. He allowed her to see nothing but a stream of memories set in the Potions classroom...most consisted of Hermione herself, at various ages, coaching Neville through an innumerable number of potions disasters.

In subsequent lessons Jocelyn Smith was present, and the two witches practiced their Occlumency and Legilimency skills in tandem. The initial anger with which Hermione had responded to the young girl had faded with the realisation of Jocelyn's medical condition and personal history, and the first conversation they'd had was sufficient to provide the basis of a very friendly relationship. Hermione had found it an enormous and surprisingly pleasurable relief to talk with someone who liked Professor Snape almost as much as she did.

At first, Snape insisted that the lessons work in one direction only, with Hermione attempting to enter Jocelyn's mind over and over again. Many of the memories she encountered in the process were grindingly depressing...overheard arguments between Jocelyn's mother and a stream of foul-mouthed and often violent men, beatings, miserable dinners and lonely intervals in a dirty flat...but as Hermione got better at navigating her way through someone else's thoughts, and as Jocelyn got better at tucking some thoughts away, she had also witnessed much of the younger girl's joy in her newfound magical talents and the friends she had made at Hogwarts. When Snape finally ordered them to switch roles, Hermione realised, with an ill-concealed flush of pleasure, that he deemed her Occlumency skills adequate to keep all mention of the Order and Harry's fight against Voldemort from the probing intelligence of her young friend.

That same evening, as Jocelyn and Hermione left Snape's office, the younger girl shifted her satchel from one shoulder to the other and asked an unexpected question.

"Are you as good at Transfiguration as everyone says?"

Hermione hesitated, surprised. After a long second, she switched her focus from the heavy stones of the corridor wall to Jocelyn's pale blue eyes. Hermione shrugged. "I'm pretty good," she acknowledged, "though I don't know how good or bad people might say I am."

"Supposedly, you're the best student the school has ever seen."

"That's patently untrue," Hermione responded automatically. The conversation was making her uncomfortable. *It can't be true*, she thought a little wistfully. *The Marauders had all managed to turn themselves into Animagi by my age, even Pettigrew. Professor McGonagall said that she wouldn't dream of letting me even try until next year.* Hermione turned as if to walk away.

"Wait!" Jocelyn's small hand closed around her elbow. The younger girl took a deep breath. "I wondered whether you might help me with my Transfiguration revision. Unlike my other classes, I never really seemed to catch up after the weeks at the start of term when I couldn't do magic."

Hermione's wounded pride was instantaneously mended. "Of course! That makes perfect sense, you know, because unlike the other first-year classes, Transfiguration skills are cumulative. We'll have to start from the very beginning!"

Jocelyn looked relieved. "Thanks, Hermione. I appreciate it."

"It would be my pleasure! How about after classes tomorrow? I'll ask Professor McGonagall if we can use her room."

"Perfect, thanks!" Jocelyn grinned and gave Hermione's elbow a quick squeeze before turning in the direction of the Slytherin common room and scampering away.

Could my schedule get any more crowded? wondered Hermione bemusedly, smiling to herself as she turned the other way and headed upstairs in order to swing by the library on her way back to Gryffindor Tower.

The more time Hermione spent with Vector's arithmancy calculations, the more convinced she was of her role in the coming events: her job was to keep Harry alive. This year, that task seemed to be fairly straightforward, but next year, the equations promised, things would be much more difficult. Hermione sighed and ran her hands through her hair, wrenching her finger through a knot of curls that was threatening to take up permanent residence. Vector looked up from her work with a sympathetic expression. The professor was writing furiously with one hand and clicking a set of worry beads back and forth with the other in a constant and slightly irregular rhythm, that truth be told, was irritating Hermione.

"Trouble in Arithmantic paradise?" she asked.

"No," sighed Hermione. "I just wish the equations were more specific about what I have to do."

Vector graced her with a wry smile. "It might help to leave the equations that deal with your future for a while and concentrate on something else. Why not recalculate some of the probability distributions for earlier events? Even a small improvement in accuracy there could affect the indeterminacy that's bothering you in the later formulae."

It was good advice. Hermione had begun to obsess a little over the details of the subset that described her interaction with Harry and Ron. The quaternions, in particular, had occupied her for several weeks, and she'd spent hours watching the graphical representations spin themselves through four-dimensional space. She found something deeply reassuring in the tight coils of their three selves, particularly during the last few days, when Ron had been unaccountably cross with her. With another sigh...this time directed at her absent and irritating friend rather than the equations...she banished the graph that hung in front of her face and rolled up the parchment she'd been writing on. Riffling through her bag, she unearthed her notes on the earlier calculations and spread them out in front of her. *Hmm*.

"Professor?" Vector looked up at once, her encouraging gaze punctuated by the clicks of her worry beads. "Have you added Katie Bell's accident to the set of current events?"

Vector's body stilled entirely, and the pendulum of the beads gave one belated click. "No. Do you think it could be part of the pattern? I admit it seemed fairly random to me."

"It can't hurt to put it in, right? We'll see soon enough if it's significant or not."

"Right. There are a lot of unknowns...the why, the who, the target . . . Do it. You're right. It might prove crucial."

Hermione felt the flush of intellectual excitement and turned to her task with a new energy. She pulled her abacus towards her and turned over a clean set of parchment.

"I wonder," muttered Vector before turning back to her own calculations, "I wonder why Albus didn't already make that suggestion?"

Hermione stormed down to the Quidditch pitch, her insides in turmoil. *How dare Harry? Felix Felicis! He should have saved that potion to help him against Voldemort, but oh no! He wastes it on a Quidditch match. He MUST know that's illegal. As if MY STUPIDITY in Confunding McLaggen was an EXCUSE!* The thought of her own brush with illegality twisted the tight, guilty knot in her stomach a turn further. *What kind of influence am I?* Hermione wanted to weep, swallowing hard in a futile attempt to rid her mouth of the metallic taste of guilt and impotent rage. *And Dumbledore...* her mind replayed Dumbledore's commentary on her own indiscretion: "*Do you want to be*

expelled? . . . Good. Because we can't afford to expel you. Statistically, it would be a disaster . . . "...Dumbledore wouldn't do anything, even if he knew.

Reaching the stands, Hermione found a seat and took refuge behind her morning's mail. She had no desire to make small talk with Neville this morning. Unfurling her most recent letter from Viktor, she stared at it unseeingly. *How could Harry be such an idiot? How could I be such an idiot?* Neville nudged her when the players emerged from the dressing room, and she folded her still-unread letter distractedly and returned it to her pocket. She fisted her hands tightly in her scarf and pulled it down fiercely as an unaccustomed scowl pulled her mouth down in an analogous line. The unwelcome pressure against the back of her neck eased her stress marginally.

"You all right, Hermione?" asked Neville solicitously.

"Fine," she growled.

He raised his eyebrows dubiously, but returned his attention to the unfolding game.

Ron saved everything. He flew brilliantly, long arms and capable hands safely shepherding the Quaffle away from the goal hoops at every opportunity. His body moved with a lean grace and explosive power that, in other circumstances, would have moved Hermione to a deep appreciation. Today, it left her feeling sick.

Hermione didn't even notice when Harry caught the snitch because she couldn't drag her eyes from Ron. Only when the onlookers around her leapt to their feet in celebration and her line of sight was broken, did she look away. As Ginny collided with the commentator's podium, Hermione came to an unpleasant decision. Harry and Ron wouldn't be happy with her, but she had to confront them about this. *Cheating is cheating, even...or especially...when it's Gryffindors trying to beat Slytherins* She tried to squelch all consideration of what this might do to the already tenuous rapport between Ron and her.

"I'll see you later, Neville," she muttered as she began to squeeze her way past the other spectators, fighting her way against the flow of people and down towards the change rooms. When she got there, only Ron and Harry were left.

Gathering her Gryffindor courage with a deep breath, she laid her metaphorical cards on the table, "I want a word with you, Harry. You shouldn't have done it. You heard Slughorn, it's illegal!"

"What are you going to do?" interjected Ron aggressively. "Turn us in?"

"What are you two talking about?" Harry sounded as if the whole thing was a huge joke. *Is he really so unconcerned about breaking the rules?*

"You know perfectly well what we're talking about!" Hermione felt her voice slide upwards and silently cursed her lack of self-control. "You spiked Ron's juice with lucky potion at breakfast! Felix Felicis!"

"No, I didn't."

Cheating was bad enough, but to lie to her about it, too? Hermione clenched her hands hard, the nails biting into her palms. "Yes you did, Harry, and that's why everything went right, there were Slytherin players missing and Ron saved everything!"

"I didn't put it in!" Harry pulled the tiny bottle of golden potion from his pocket, the seal still noticeably intact. "I wanted Ron to think I'd done it, so I faked it when I knew you were looking." He turned towards Ron and gave him a friendly slap on the upper arm. "You saved everything because you felt lucky. You did it all yourself."

Hermione stared at Harry, her eyes wide in shock. *You bastard*, she thought, letting go of her anger only minimally.

Ron looked astounded, his mouth hung open for several seconds before he could say anything. "There really wasn't anything in my pumpkin juice? But the weather's good . . . and Vaisey couldn't play. . . . I honestly haven't been given lucky potion?"

Harry grinned and patted the pocket into which he'd slipped the phial of potion. Hermione saw the exact moment that fury replaced the surprise on Ron's face. He spun towards her and imitated her voice in a cruel falsetto, "*You added Felix Felicis to Ron's juice this morning, that's why he saved everything* See! I can save goals without help, Hermione!"

You bastard, she thought again, incriminating her other best friend along with the first. The conversation was a train wreck she was unable to prevent. "I never said you couldn't...Ron,"...he was already leaving, but she called after his retreating figure in desperation..."You thought you'd been given it too!"

Alone with Harry, Hermione rubbed the heel of her hand roughly across her eyes.

"Er," Harry hesitated, his earlier confidence derailed in the face of Ron's reaction. "Shall . . . shall we go up to the party, then?"

"You go!" Hermione gave her knitted hat a sharp tug and pulled it lower over her ears. "I'm sick of Ron at the moment, I don't know what I'm supposed to have done." She shot Harry a quick smile that she hoped came across as mature and forbearing, though she feared she just looked miserable, and hurried out onto the grounds. A walk around the lake suddenly seemed like a very good idea.

Under the beech tree, she sat down and forced herself to read Viktor's letter with the attention it deserved. As asked, he'd provided further information about his advanced Transfiguration research, and the details proved remarkably soothing. He'd also reiterated an invitation for her to visit him once again in Bulgaria. She blushed at the thought: she knew exactly where things would lead if she took him up on the offer. *Well*, she remarked crossly to herself, *maybe I should. At least some people can appreciate my charms*. Folding the letter decisively, she decided that her equilibrium was now such that a return to the common room was within the realms of the manageable. Besides, it was getting chilly.

The sight in the common room, however, would have fazed Hermione even under the best of circumstances. Ron was draped over Lavender in a grotesque parody of teenage enthusiasm. Hermione turned on her heel, getting a hand to the Fat Lady's portrait before it had closed behind her, and pushed her way back out into the corridor. She had to get away.

The first couple of doors were locked, and on the third try she muttered, *Alohomora*, before slipping inside with a dry sob of relief. Walking towards the front of the empty classroom, she went over several of Snape's mental exercises inside her head. *I am calm*, she repeated. *I am calm*. She sat up on the teacher's desk, stroking the surface of the table with one hand. *I am calm*. She drew out her wand and thought about Viktor's letter. *The experiments he is doing with animal Transfigurations really are interesting*. She conjured a canary out of thin air and sent it circling above her head *I am calm*. She conjured a second canary. *Viktor is a very intelligent, internationally famous Quidditch player. He also lives in Bulgaria*, added a more cynical internal voice, but she squashed it ruthlessly *I am calm*. She conjured a third canary and set it circling with its brethren. Her parents were unlikely to send her off to Bulgaria a second time, but hey, she could always invite him to visit her instead. She determined to do so that very evening. *I am calm*. A fourth canary popped into existence and joined the fluttering circle above. *I certainly don't care about the love life of one Ronald Weasley, a mediocre Quidditch player who couldn't Transfigure his way out of a paper bag*. A fifth canary made its appearance at the same moment that Harry opened the door and slipped into the room.

"Oh, hello, Harry, I was just practicing." Hermione concentrated on keeping her voice even and the canaries circling smoothly *I am calm*.

"Yeah . . . they're...er...really good . . ."

Nice one, Harry. Lovely and coherent. Hermione was slightly mollified that her friend had come to find her. But they might as well face up to the reason they were both

here.

"Ron seems to be enjoying the celebrations," she stated. Hermione wished she had the vocal control of Professor Snape. Smooth and sarcastic was the sound ideal she was aiming for, not the high-pitched squeak that stress inevitably triggered.

"Er . . . does he?"

Harry always was a terrible liar. "Don't pretend you didn't see him. He wasn't exactly hiding it, was...?" Hermione broke off as the door was flung open yet again. At the sight of Ron, her heart leapt, only to plummet again as he dragged Lavender through the doorway, laughing a little hysterically. *Bitch.* The voice in Hermione's head was oddly dispassionate.

"Oh," said Ron, catching sight of the room's occupants and stopping in his tracks.

"Oops!" Lavender giggled, backing out with one hand pressed to her mouth.

As the awkward silence stretched interminably onwards, Hermione repeated her mantra over and over *I am calm, I am calm.* Ron didn't even look at her.

"Hi, Harry! Wondered where you'd got to!"

Bastard. Hello, Ron? I don't suppose you could spare a thought to wonder where I'd got to? Moving as carefully and deliberately as she could, Hermione slid off the desk and walked towards the door, her halo of canaries trailing in her wake. *I am calm.*

As she passed Ron, she gave him a saccharine smile. "You shouldn't leave Lavender waiting outside," she commented, mentally commending herself on the level tone of her voice. "She'll wonder where you've gone." The look of relief that crossed Ron's face at her comment was almost comical, and her smile slipped from falsely sweet to smug. At the last moment, she spun towards him, wand in hand. "*Oppugno!*" she shouted, unleashing the canaries in a golden stream of avian fury. She slammed the door behind her, abruptly cutting off his shrieks of discomfort.

In the relative safety of the hallway, Hermione broke into a run. Undoubtedly Lavender had returned to Gryffindor tower, and Hermione had no desire to cross her path again in either the common room or the dormitory. She headed, therefore, for Professor Vector's office...the only place none of her friends would follow and where she could be guaranteed entrance, no matter the time. The corridors were deserted, to Hermione's relief, for her tears were flowing freely. Though they blurred her vision, the path was so familiar that she could navigate almost by instinct. Only a couple of turns from her destination, however, she raced around a bend and cannoned into someone. She would have fallen, had strong hands not caught at her elbows, and she rocked on her feet for a second, her face pressed into the thick black wool of a set of teaching robes. Her heart thudded in her throat. A set of teaching robes that smelled distinctly familiar...an odd mixture of herbs and smoke that had followed Snape from the potions lab to the DADA classroom. A small sob escaped her, and she twisted away, determined to run once more, but the hands on her elbows held her back. Her humiliation, she realised, was now complete.

"Miss Granger, when I instructed you to take up running, I did not intend for you to train in the corridors."

Hermione took a shuddering breath without looking up. "I'm sorry, sir, it won't happen again."

Snape held her away from his body without releasing his grip. She felt the intensity of his gaze and stared determinedly at one of the buttons on his robe. It was embossed with a slightly raised serpentine "S." Breathing through her nose as deeply as she could, she struggled to regain some self-control. For extra measure, she raised her Occlumentic shields, though she hadn't made eye contact.

When Snape did let go of her arms, she swayed slightly on her feet, astounded by the keen sense of loss that swept over her. To her surprise, he withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it to her. She grasped at it gratefully, wiping her eyes and turning away to blow her nose thoroughly. She folded it afterwards and extended it towards him, looking him in the face for the first time. He was eyeing the proffered handkerchief with a look of singular disgust. She glanced back down at the soggy folds that were gripped between her fingers and the tear-swollen planes of her face twisted into a wry smile.

"I can clean it for you," she offered, hurriedly.

Snape flared his nostrils as if the very idea offended him. "Keep it," he replied, infusing his voice with disdain. "Tell me," he continued before she could thank him, "did you have a destination in mind, or were you running for the sheer joy of movement?"

"I was headed for Professor Vector's office."

"By rights I should send you back to your dormitory."

Hermione blanched visibly. "Please, sir, don't." Her voice was tinged suddenly with a hint of her previous tears.

Snape raised one eyebrow. "Alternately, you could serve detention with me."

"That," responded Hermione with conviction, "would be infinitely preferable."

Snape raised a second eyebrow to join the first and abruptly switched tack. "What would you have done on discovering that Professor Vector is not in her office?"

"She added me to the wards, sir. I can go in anytime."

Hermione didn't dare to breathe. Would he send her back to Gryffindor Tower? Would he let her go to Vector's office? He stood considering the options for a long moment, one finger rubbing against his lower lip.

"Come along, Miss Granger," he ordered, turning on his heel. She followed him quickly, relieved beyond measure that he was leading her onwards rather than back towards the common room. Outside Vector's door he paused. "Don't let me catch you in the halls after curfew, Miss Granger, or it will be detention."

Hermione knocked gently on the door to be certain it was empty, then opened it with a tap of her wand. She looked over her shoulder as she stepped through. "Thank you, Professor," she said. Snape made no reply, merely encouraging her to step through the doorway with a dismissive flick of his fingers.

Once the door was shut, Hermione lit up the room with a wave of her wand. *Professor Snape was unbelievably nice,* she noted, placing his handkerchief on her worktable and smoothing it out with her left hand. *I almost would have enjoyed a detention* She took a deep breath and stretched, her arms extended above her head, her back arching. Since she was here, she might as well get some work done. Resolutely, she pushed the calculations that involved her, Ron and Harry to one side, and pulled forward her new equations dealing with Katie Bell's accident. By the time she headed back to her bed, the excursion could have counted as "up early" rather than "out after curfew," but she was still relieved to meet no-one but The Grey Lady, who drifted past rather absentmindedly. She slipped into the dorm before anyone else was awake and shut her curtains very carefully around the bed. Thank God it was a Sunday morning, and she could safely sleep much of the day away.

Defensive Mechanisms

Chapter 14 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Fourteen : Defensive Mechanisms

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute.

My two wonderful betas are better than a woman like me deserves; thank you LAXo and WriterMerrin.

Severus was teaching Granger the elements of warding. She had grasped the theoretical principles quickly and had replicated the complex wand movements flawlessly. Indeed, she was producing very sophisticated magical barriers, but he still wasn't satisfied. Because she still wasn't casting with the entire force of her body, her wards were weak. Although they were complicated enough that dismantling them took time and skill, forcefully breaking through them was relatively simple.

Granger stood in the centre of his office, wand in hand, casting the ward once more. Severus circled the perimeter of the room, destroying each of her attempts and critiquing her performance.

"Come on, Granger," he snarled after dismantling yet another of her efforts. "This isn't charmwork."

Granger blew a stray curl from her forehead in annoyance. "What's the difference?" she asked grumpily.

He paused his pacing and examined the young woman before him. The physical signs of her increased fitness were evident. She should be doing better than she was. "Be specific, Granger."

She crossed her arms under her breasts, uncomfortable under his long stare. "The difference, sir, between warding and charmwork. What should I do differently?"

Severus propped one hip against the surface of his desk and crossed his arms. "The best and most intricate charmwork," he responded in lecture mode, "comes from the wrist: the swish, the flick. Wandwork for Defence Against the Dark Arts, however, needs the strength of your whole body behind it." Granger still looked a little sulky, but her lower lip was caught between her teeth, and Severus could see the cogs turning. "Sit," he instructed, circling behind the desk to take his own seat.

Granger sat with a soft sigh. Severus repressed an urge to give her a shake. She had been miserable and grumpy since the evening she'd run into him in the hallway, blinded by tears. The modified seating arrangements at mealtimes were evidence enough that she'd argued with Ronald Weasley; Harry Potter was running interference between the two and looking less than happy about it. Weasely, it seemed, was drowning his sorrows over the altercation in a pool of Lavender Brown's saliva...neither the most sophisticated method nor the most discerning choice of partner, he might add. *Why does she even care what that idiot boy thinks or does?* he wondered. *How can she let him affect her performance in class?* There it was, the selfish core to his concern. He missed the energetic spark she brought to her lessons. He missed their light-hearted banter. He missed her smiles.

"Granger," he barked.

She looked up, startled, from the contemplation of her left knee. "Sir?"

"Tell me about Viktor Krum."

Her body froze, wide eyed and wary. "What about him?" she asked, her voice carefully neutral.

Interesting. "Everything," Severus waved one hand in an all-encompassing gesture. "How you met, what he's like, what he's up to now."

"Why?" Her body language screamed her reluctance.

Severus raised one eyebrow at her impertinence, but her tears were too fresh in his memory to push her to her limits this evening. "Because, Miss Granger, I need to know."

She flinched a little at his use of the honorific. *Interesting.* Her lips were pressed into a thin line, and her chin was slightly raised. *What is it about Krum that she doesn't want to tell me?* Severus sighed. He might as well tell her why he wanted to know.

"During the last war, the Dark Lord received a significant amount of support from the pureblood families of Eastern Europe," he explained. "Karkaroff was particularly useful in the recruitment process, due to his contacts at Durmstrang. Karkaroff, as you know, turned traitor after the Dark Lord's fall and was recently killed." Granger shuddered. Her eyes were fixed on his face, and she was listening intently. "With Karkaroff out of the picture, the Dark Lord is hoping to re-initiate contact, and Krum has been suggested as a likely possibility. Because of my presence at Hogwarts during the Tri-Wizard tournament, the task has fallen to me."

"You!?" Granger sputtered with indignation. "You want me to give you information about my friend so that you can recruit him to the Death Eaters?!?"

"Did I say that?" Severus' voice was cold, his face impassive. Her words hurt. "Think hard before you open your mouth."

Granger hesitated, biting down on her lower lip. He saw the uncertainty in her face as she ran the conversation through again in her mind. He raised one eyebrow. "Well?"

"No, sir. You said nothing of the sort."

Severus regarded her coldly for several moments before continuing. "Hearing of the Dark Lord's plan, Dumbledore instructed me to sound Krum out very carefully indeed. It may be possible to recruit him for the Order instead." As he spoke, Granger flushed, mortified by her previous outburst.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she ventured once he paused for breath. "I was out of line."

Severus continued as if she hadn't spoken, though he drank in the signs of her evident remorse. "Your information is crucial. The Dark Lord has heard the details of Krum's stay at Hogwarts from me and from Draco Malfoy. Krum's involvement"...Severus pronounced the word as if it were dirty..."with you raises a warning flag, although at present the Dark Lord is inclined to think it a ploy designed to keep tabs on Harry Potter."

Hermione crossed her legs viciously and folded her arms tightly across her chest. The anger that had simmered for days rose momentarily to the surface. "It seems," she commented acidly, "that the Dark Lord and Ronald Weasley have something in common."

Severus smirked. "I take it that you have a different opinion."

Granger drew a deep breath and only narrowly avoided another angry outburst. Pressing her lips together, she exhaled through her nose before replying. "Yes."

He quirked an interrogative eyebrow.

"What do you want to know?" It wasn't her normal, enthusiastic tone, but she had thankfully migrated from resistant to resigned.

"Begin at the beginning."

Granger took a few moments to marshal her thoughts. "We met in the library. At first I found his constant presence annoying, or at least that of the girls who were always hanging around." She sniffed disapprovingly. "It was ridiculous! If he wasn't an international Quidditch star, they wouldn't have cared at all! It's not like he's typically handsome, you know. He has a big nose and dirty hair, and he scowls all the time." Both of Severus' eyebrows shot skyward, but Granger didn't notice. She had lost herself in the story, oblivious to the physical resemblance between the man she was describing and the man she was describing him to. "Anyway, eventually we got talking...mostly about Transfiguration. He's doing some really interesting research now, actually." Her face lit up, and Severus was surprised by the sudden pang of jealousy her words triggered. *Not for Hermione Granger*, he hurriedly reassured himself. *No, not for a student, but for the idea of a library romance in general*. The relationship she was describing sounded . . . perfect. "He's working on Animagus transformations that can encompass various animals rather than just one particular species."

Severus forced his attention back to the topic at hand. "Has he had any luck?"

"Oh, yes. I mean, you must have seen the shark transformation he produced to rescue me from the Merpeople."

"Incomplete, as I recall." For some reason, the glowing look that accompanied Granger's mention of the rescue irritated him.

"Well, yes. But that's the point. Viktor's Animagus form is an eagle...predictable really, given his talent as a seeker: flight, good eyesight, ability to spot and catch small prey. To transform into a shark...even partially...took enormous skill!"

Granger was talking animatedly now, but it gave Severus no comfort. He changed the topic abruptly, back from Krum's research to the situation in the library. "So, you talked about Transfiguration; what else?"

"It was only when he invited me to the ball that I realised he liked *melike that*. I was flattered, of course, and we had a nice time." Her voice took on a brittle edge of triumph. "It certainly surprised a lot of people. Anyway, then he had to rescue me from the lake, as I said before. And then he invited me to visit him in Bulgaria." At the word "visit," her body stiffened visibly. The conversational tone with which she'd recounted much of the story evaporated entirely, and the wariness Severus had noted at the beginning of the discussion was back in full force. "That's about it. Though we're still friendly, and we write letters fairly frequently."

There's something about the visit she doesn't want to tell me "Did you go to Bulgaria to see him?"

Granger pursed her lips. She answered the question but was far from forthcoming with details. "I did."

A powerful suggestion insinuated itself into Severus' brain. "Did you sleep with him?"

She flushed. "That is none of your business," she snapped.

"Really, Miss Granger," he sneered, "I have no prurient interest in the sexual exploits of my students." He could see from the fierce look in her eye that it wasn't enough and resorted to an underhand Dumbledorean tactic: "It is my life that will hang in the balance in the meeting with Krum; I merely ask for information."

"Fine." Granger uncrossed her legs and re-crossed them the other way, wriggling her shoulders in annoyance. "I slept with him, satisfied?"

Severus felt slightly breathless, but couldn't otherwise name his response to her confession. It certainly wasn't satisfied.

Granger was glaring at him, her expression so reminiscent of Minerva McGonagall that it made the idea of her sleeping with anyone faintly terrifying. "I haven't told anyone that before. Not a single soul. I warn you, Professor Snape," she held up an admonishing finger, "that if I *ever* hear about this from somebody else, I will know it was you. I will track you down, and Professor or not, I will make you regret it. I have absolutely no desire for my *sexual exploits*"...she spat the words..."to form the topic of Hogwarts' gossip! Do I make myself clear?"

Severus admitted himself shaken by the force of her rage. Magical energy was thrumming through her body, and he was surprised she hadn't broken any of the glass jars that lined the shelves of his office. Years of training kept his face impassive. "I assure you, Miss Granger," he sneered, "I have better things to do than indulge in scurrilous gossip."

"You'd better," she muttered and looked away.

Maintaining a firm grip on his breathing, Severus returned to the interrogation. "Are you still a couple?"

"No. Not really. We're friends."

He raised one eyebrow at the imprecision of that definition. "Who broke it off?"

"I did." Granger still wasn't looking at him, and she addressed her answers to a spot several feet to his right.

His future interactions with Viktor Krum didn't really justify the depths of his curiosity, but Severus pushed on regardless. "You slept with him, you broke it off, and yet you remained friends. A remarkable achievement, Miss Granger."

Granger sighed and rolled her eyes. "Look," she said, turning to look at him directly. "We slept together after we broke up; it was my idea, so don't go thinking I was fooled by his whole international-Quidditch-star routine. Once I got to Bulgaria, it became clear that things weren't really going to work out, not in the long term. Blood purity is a ridiculously big deal in Bulgaria, and Viktor is a public figure. We were followed by reporters everywhere we went. Plus the whole long-distance thing didn't help. We decided, well, /decided that we'd be better off as friends. Viktor was very nice and understanding about the whole thing. Once the pressure was off, though," she shrugged, "sex suddenly seemed a much more inviting prospect. I enjoyed it," she added defensively. "It was fun. I don't regret it in the slightest."

Against his better judgement, Severus asked another question: "And what did your parents think?"

Hermione blinked. "That, Severus Snape, is none of your business! But for your information," she leant forwards and tapped the tabletop with an indignant finger, "my parents were fine with it. Before I left, my mother gave me a packet of condoms and told me to be careful." She leant back in her chair and crossed her arms once more. "For God's sake, I was almost sixteen."

Severus made a mammoth effort to get the conversation back on track. "Tell me more about Bulgaria. It seems likely that the Dark Lord will send me there over Christmas."

"To meet with Viktor?" Granger clearly welcomed the shift in focus.

"Yes."

"I wouldn't bother. He's coming to England." His surprise must have registered on his face, for she elaborated. "He's taking the opportunity to meet with several Quidditch managers. And," she hesitated for only a second, "he's going to spend a couple of days at my parents' house."

Any response Severus might have made was forestalled by a knock at the door. He shot Granger a warning glance as he called for the visitor to enter. The door swung open to reveal Hooch, who crossed her arms and leant one shoulder casually against the door frame.

"Severus," she remarked by way of greeting.

"What do you want, Hooch?" he snapped back.

"To see if you're up for a drink," she replied, unperturbed by his rudeness.

"As you have no-doubt noticed," he smirked, "I'm far too busy supervising Miss Granger's"...his eyes flicked to her dismissively..."detention."

Her back safely towards the visitor, Granger rolled her eyes. Hooch, however, refused the none too subtle hint that she should leave.

"You know, Severus," she drawled, "I'd heard your detentions were bad, but I had no idea you actually made the students converse with you."

Touché. Severus felt one corner of his mouth twitch upwards, and he looked up into Hooch's laughing eyes. "Hooch," he growled, acknowledging defeat. "Get out!"

She laughed. "I'll see you at ours later, then? Minerva's coming, too. Which means, I warn you, that you'd better be ready to discuss the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match in loving detail!" She waved as she pulled the door shut behind her, visibly enjoying his discomfort. As the heavy oak thumped closed, the sound of her laughter was abruptly silenced.

He glanced at Granger. She'd soaked up the interaction between him and Hooch like a sponge and was regarding him curiously. To be honest, his regular inclusion in Hooch and Poppy's monthly lesbian poker nights baffled him as much as the idea seemed to surprise Granger, but he had no intention of telling her that. *Let her think what she likes.*

Severus scowled and returned to the all-important topic of Viktor Krum. "Krum is coming to stay with you? In London?"

She nodded. "Yes," she acknowledged.

This could work to my advantage. "Perhaps you could organise a meeting. Coffee one afternoon, somewhere in Muggle London?"

She nodded again. "I'll write to him and find out exactly what his plans are."

"Very good." For a long moment he considered the woman in front of him, eyes narrowed in thought. "Next week, we will meet in the Room of Requirement. If you get there before I do, wait outside. Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothes. Sports clothes." That caught at her interest, and he could see the questions forming. "You are dismissed," he said, cutting off any comment she might have made.

"Good evening, sir," she replied. Gathering her things, she walked to the door. As it closed behind her, he caught the speculative look she gave him, then she was gone.

Severus made his way up to Poppy and Hooch's quarters not long after Granger left. At his knock, Poppy opened the door by hand.

"Severus," she exclaimed with a smile, "come on in!"

Minerva and Hooch were seated around the coffee table, Firewhiskeys in hand.

"Severus!" Minerva was positively cackling with joy. She held her alcohol well, but had clearly consumed just enough to regard boasting over the recent Quidditch match as appropriate behaviour. "I have two words for you: Ronald Weasley!"

Severus rolled his eyes as he strode towards the fireplace, conjuring himself an armchair before he replied. "Nonsense, Minerva," he drawled, settling his long limbs into the chair, "Weasley looked good only because Vaisey was absent. If your team needs our top goal scorer incapacitated before you have a hope of winning, it's not much to crow about."

"Really, Severus!" expostulated Minerva. "Had Slytherin won, you would be sitting here bragging...even if the reason were that Gryffindor had fielded the first-years on school brooms rather than our first seven!"

Poppy pressed a tumbler of Firewhiskey into his hand and gave him a companionable smile.

"To be honest, Minerva, I'm not certain I would have noticed any difference in their Quidditch abilities." Severus punctuated his sarcasm with an elegantly arched eyebrow and let his shoulders relax back into the upholstery.

As he spoke, Poppy made her way around the back of Hooch's chair, trailing one hand through the soft, spiky hair across the nape of the other woman's neck, before seating herself on the other end of the couch.

"Poker?" asked Hooch, speaking over Minerva's spluttering indignation and summoning the cards from the mantelpiece so that they flew through the air in a stream. She caught them neatly in her left hand and began to shuffle, moving the cards through the air in an impossibly complex pattern; any Muggle card shark worth his salt would have had a fit at the sight.

As Poppy conjured poker chips, Minerva regained some of her composure, smugly commenting that Severus already owed her ten Galleons from their bet on the House Quidditch match. With a sneer and a languid wave of one hand, he sent the equivalent number of poker chips skittering across the table to join her pile.

"You'll need more than my ten Galleons if you hope to win this evening," he remarked.

McGonagall would bet on anything, and she and Severus kept a running tab that neither party ever sought to cash in for real money. At various times in their long, competitive friendship, each of them had been astronomically in debt to the other.

"We'll see about that, young man!" she replied, picking up the cards Hooch had dealt her and fanning them expertly.

At that point, Poppy dimmed the light in the sitting room, with the exception of a luminous, faintly green sphere that hung over the table, and the game began in earnest. The four friends were evenly matched, though perhaps Severus could claim the "poker face" edge, and they bickered and gossiped amicably as they played. Severus could feel some of the tension unspooling from his body, chased out by the warmth of the alcohol and the company.

By the time Albus arrived, Severus had won back a fair percentage of the ten Galleons he had surrendered to Minerva. The headmaster grinned merrily as he stepped out of the Floo.

"My, my," he remarked, "if this isn't a beautiful display of inter-house unity!"

Severus rolled his eyes at the repetition of one of Albus' favourite jokes, as he discarded two cards from his hand and summoned two others from the deck with a flick of his fingers. "If by 'unity,' Albus," he drawled, "you mean united in the desire to beat each other, you need look no further than the Great Hall."

Hooch grinned at the comment. "Or the Quidditch pitch," she added.

Minerva scooted her chair sideways so that Albus could fit another into the increasingly crowded space around the low table.

"Always so cheerful, Severus," teased Albus as he took his seat.

"If you don't like this particular model of Slytherin geniality, you could always invite Slughorn instead," replied Severus without heat. He'd been ridiculously relieved that none of his friends had wanted much to do with the returned Potions professor. While all three women were perfectly polite to Slughorn's face, they hadn't once invited him to their regular evening gatherings. Since, with the exception of Hooch, who'd been playing professional Quidditch at the time, the others had been colleagues of Slughorn's while Severus himself had been but a student, the omission was one he hadn't taken for granted.

"Speaking of Horace," remarked Dumbledore, leaning forward slightly in his chair and addressing himself directly to Severus, "I must insist that you attend his Christmas party. Don't look at me like that, young man! While you may not think much of his particular brand of inter-house interaction, it may yet have positive consequences. Most of your Slytherins follow your lead implicitly, and I will not have them snub the possibility of making connections just because you do. In public, at least, I expect you to behave towards Horace with grace and propriety."

Irrationally, the good sense of Dumbledore's proposal irritated Severus even more than the sentiment. It frustrated him that Dumbledore, who had done little to incorporate Slytherin house into the larger school body, would criticise him on such a level. Luckily, Minerva began to speak, removing the necessity for him to respond.

"I'm afraid that I won't be there, Albus," she commented smoothly, "I'm assigned to patrol the corridors that night, and since Horace has invited several outside guests, security has to be much tighter than usual."

"I'll be there," interpolated Hooch. "Gwenog is coming and I haven't seen her in ages. I wonder if she's still seeing Patty Parkin?"

"No!" exclaimed Minerva excitedly. "Not that incredibly tall brunette?"

And the gossip mill was off and running. Severus sat back and cradled his Firewhiskey to his chest, safe in the knowledge that Albus had lost his opportunity to interrogate him for at least the next forty-five minutes.

Christmas Cheer

Chapter 15 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Fifteen : Christmas Cheer

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Three cheers for my wonderful betas, LAxo and WriterMerrin: hip, hip, hooray! Hip, hip, hooray! Hip, hip, hooray!

Once it became apparent that she and Ron were not going to reconcile before Slughorn's Christmas party, Hermione turned her impressive mental faculties to the question of who she could take that would most annoy Ron. Noting regretfully that Viktor's Quidditch schedule made his presence an impossibility, she concluded that the lucky man would have to be drawn from the local Hogwarts talent. For a day or so, she seriously considered Zacharias Smith, until at one of the Slug Club dinners, inspiration struck: Cormac McLaggen. Repeated twinges of her overactive conscience ensured that she spoke briefly with him at most meetings. Invariably, he leered at her or made some comment that triggered her ire within the first few minutes. Then she'd snap at him and storm off. McLaggen, for his part, seemed to interpret her insults as some unevolved form of flirtation and didn't find them the slightest bit off-putting.

At the Slug Club supper in question, events went pretty much according to the standard plan: "You know, Granger, if you bothered with your hair and makeup, you'd be stunning," he remarked, letting his eyes trail the length of her body.

Hermione looked around her pointedly. "Unfortunately, I can't see anyone here who'd be worth the effort."

McLaggen laughed. "Wanna go to old Sluggy's Christmas party with me, then? I'll show you I'm worth it."

Hermione blinked in surprise. She was about to cut him dead with the nastiest remark she could muster when Ron's taunt in the greenhouses came to mind*"Why don't you try hooking up with McLaggen, then Slughorn can make you King and Queen Slug?"*

Hermione let her gaze travel down McLaggen's body, making a point to pause for a moment and consider his ass*"Why not?"* she reflected. *He's built like a brick shithouse, but from a purely objective perspective, he's not unattractive...if you like your men massive and muscular, that is, which I don't.* But he would definitely piss Ron off, no question there.

"Alright," she agreed. *Arguing with McLaggen almost has to be better than deadly-dull small talk with Smith!*"I'll meet you at eight in the entrance hall. Don't be late." Giving him a tight smile, she left him grinning at his own good fortune and clapping his friends on the back with glee.

Once Jocelyn returned to first principles, it took her only a couple of sessions to get the hang of Transfiguration, and Hermione enjoyed the teaching. Jocelyn was clever, quick and fun to hang around with; plus she was visibly appreciative of Hermione's time.

"I'm surprised you weren't sorted into Ravenclaw!" teased Hermione at the end of their second and final revision meeting.

Jocelyn managed a Slytherin-worthy sneer for a couple of seconds, before she spoiled it by grinning widely.

"To be honest, the Sorting Hat considered it, though I'm certain it made the right choice: I'd be dead or locked up if I weren't in Slytherin."

Well, that certainly puts the Sorting Hat's decision into perspective. "It considered Ravenclaw for me, too," remarked Hermione, a recollection of her lonely first few weeks at Hogwarts sweeping over her. She'd been convinced that the Sorting Hat had deemed her too stupid for Ravenclaw, leaving her more determined than ever to excel in every class. That, in turn, had made it even harder to make friends.

"I figured that much, Hermione," replied Jocelyn. "I reckon the Hat does a pretty good job of putting people where they need to be."

"You think that the Sorting Hat knew that Harry would need me even then?"

Jocelyn rolled her eyes. "Or that you would need him. Haven't you ever thought about how your life would have been had you been Sorted into Ravenclaw?"

Hermione hadn't. Not seriously. Not since before she, Ron and Harry had become such firm friends.

"You'd have made friends," continued Jocelyn, "but you wouldn't have had adventures. You'd still be top of your year, of course, but no-one would be surprised by the fact. You'd be an average Ravenclaw square."

Hermione stared at her friend. It was the kind of comment Snape might make, but he would have delivered it in a voice so freighted with sarcasm that it could only be received as an insult. Jocelyn gave her appraisal in a flat, normal voice; Hermione wasn't quite sure how to take it.

Unexpectedly, Jocelyn sniggered. "I bet you would have been best friends with Marietta Edgecombe!"

Guilt twisted in Hermione's stomach. "All she has to do to get rid of that hex is feel some remorse for her actions!" she snapped, her unhappy conscience ratcheting up the pitch of her voice.

Jocelyn raised an eyebrow. "Surely that would depend on her motivations for betraying the group in the first place?" she queried.

"I take back what I said earlier," replied Hermione in the most even tone she could manage, "you make a perfect Slytherin. *If there was ever a house that took instruction in observing and then needling everyone else's weak spots*, she grumbled to herself, *it would be Slytherin*. Jocelyn's question had only intensified her guilt, but, as Hermione well knew, without the original parchment, there was nothing she could do about it...and who knew where that had ended up once the Inquisitorial Squad was done with it?

Jocelyn merely smirked, clearly delighted to be thought a perfect Slytherin.

As she made her way to the Room of Requirement later that same evening, Hermione pondered her Arithmantic project. She'd added the calculations that described Katie's accident, and they definitely related to the larger whole. There was something missing, though, something that she didn't have the data for, something that would illuminate the rationale behind the attack and demonstrate the precise connection between it and the larger probability matrix. As it was, it just seemed so random. It didn't make sense, and Hermione Granger didn't like it when things didn't make sense.

When she got to the room, it was obvious that Snape had already arrived: an unprepossessing door was visible in the wall. It was much like the standard interior doors in her parents' house and looked incongruous in the stone wall of the Hogwarts corridor. The handle turned easily, and she stepped inside, catching her breath in surprise when the small door opened into such a large room. It looked like a gymnasium. The floor was covered with coloured matting, and the walls were hung with climbing bars and ropes. At the sight of Snape, her eyes widened further still. He was kneeling down facing the door, his teaching robes nowhere to be seen. He was dressed in a pair of ancient black tracksuit bottoms and a faded grey t-shirt. The sight of him set her heart racing.

"Hurry up," he greeted her crossly. "Take off your robes and your shoes; for now, you won't need your wand. I trust you remembered to wear something appropriate."

Hermione had felt odd earlier in the evening, when she'd put on her sports clothes under her uniform, but now she felt relieved. "Yes, sir," she said obediently, turning to find somewhere to hang her things. Beside the door she'd entered through was a row of hooks. There hung Professor Snape's robes, and she hurried to add hers to the rack. She slipped off her shoes and placed them neatly beside his dragon hide boots. As she turned back towards him, she felt strangely exposed.

In the few moments it had taken for her to remove her uniform, he had risen and crossed the mat towards her. His feet were bare and drew her eyes despite her best efforts not to stare. They were long and narrow, with a sprinkling of black hairs across the knuckles of his toes. Slowly, she followed the line of his body higher. Out from under the capacious folds of his robes and his formal clothes, his body was leaner and stronger than she'd imagined. The curves of his biceps balanced elbows that would have otherwise stood out on too-thin arms, and the veins in his forearms called attention to the muscles beneath. The black ink of the Dark Mark stood out in shocking contrast to the white of his skin. He must have known she was staring at it, because he turned his inner arm out towards her so that she could look her fill, his left hand clenched in a loose fist. Hermione's heart was beating so loudly that the thudding in her ears left her slightly dizzy. Slowly, she forced herself to look him in the eye, bracing for the aggression she expected him to unleash.

When their eyes met, he said nothing. His mouth was set in a thin line, oddly pinched at the corners. One eyebrow was raised, but his face as a whole looked strangely bleak. With a sudden rush of intuition Hermione realised that he wasn't waiting to shout at her, but rather expecting to witness her revulsion...he was waiting for her to recoil in horror at the sight of the Dark Mark. Fighting a sudden urge to weep, Hermione forced her face into an approximation of her normal welcoming smile. "Good evening, Professor," she said. "I'm ready to begin."

An unreadable expression swept over his face before he turned away. He gestured towards the mats. "Show me a summersault," he instructed.

"Um, I'll try." Hermione pulled a face. She squatted down at the side of the mat and placed her hands on the ground. Awkwardly, she pushed off with her feet, remembering to tuck in her head as she went over. She almost made it back onto her feet, but rocked backwards again before she managed to regain her balance, twisting sideways in order to scramble back to a standing position.

"Not like that." Snape shook his head gently, mocking her. "Like this." From a standing position, he dove forward. His arms absorbed the weight of his body, and his legs folded effortlessly in towards his chest. In one incredibly fluid movement, he tumbled over and rose up on his feet again. Seeing her open-mouthed expression of shock, he smirked.

"I can't do that." Hermione shook her head in flat denial.

"You can't do that, yet." His smirk was even more strongly pronounced, and she suspected he was enjoying her discomfort.

"No, I can't." Hermione felt the pitch of her voice slide slightly higher in desperation and sought to control it. "I wasn't one of those girls that did ballet and gym. I'm hopeless at this kind of thing."

"Miss Granger,"...she knew she was in trouble when he added the honorific back in front of her name..."you are a witch. You can do this." He held out his hand in an imperious beckoning gesture.

"What's being a witch got to do with it?" she muttered, almost too quietly for him to hear, though she stepped forward obediently.

Snape took her by the shoulders and positioned her in front of him.

"Widen your stance," he ordered, sliding one foot between hers and tapping his arch gently against the bone of her ankle until she had her feet where he wanted. "Now,

bend your knees slightly." He pressed the toes of the same foot into the back of her knee, checking that it gave to his touch.

Everywhere he touched her, she tingled. *Who are you?* she wondered to herself. *And what have you done with Professor Snape?* Without his robes he looked foreign, and she tried in vain to remember a time that he'd voluntarily touched her...the time that she ran into him in the hall didn't exactly count.

"Your hands," he stepped around her and used his foot to point to a spot about a metre in front of her, "will land here. Tuck your head in," he emphasised his words by pushing her head down towards her chest with one hand "pull up your knees, and relax. The momentum of the dive will ensure that you roll the whole way. Try it now."

Hermione concentrated hard on the floor where he'd pointed and focussed on the slight bend in her knees. She rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. "I can't," she burst out and looked up at him with a pleading expression.

He rolled his eyes. From where he stood, perpendicular to her stance and diagonally to the front of her, he reached out and placed his near hand on the small of her back, his other hand on the nape of her neck. "Do it, Granger," he growled.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione threw herself forward but chickened out of the tuck and roll section at the last minute. She ended up on all fours, poised uncomfortably in a weird parody of downward dog. His hands were still on her, and he grabbed two handfuls of her sweater and levered her upright. "Try again."

The second time, she followed through. She felt his hands push her head in at the right moment and ensure that her back curved correctly. She was so astounded to find herself on her feet once more that she nearly fell over. "Oh!" she exclaimed, turning towards him to register his reaction.

He raised one eyebrow. "Again, Granger."

Snape was a relentless taskmaster. By the end of the class, Hermione could tumble forwards without him spotting her and even tumble sideways, laying one forearm on the floor and twisting up over one leg as she stood.

"Now," said Snape, at the point when she thought they were done. "Get your wand."

Hermione jogged over to where she'd left her robes and fished it out of her pocket, then jogged back to stand before her professor.

"Close your eyes," he instructed. "Remember carefully the feeling of your body being in control. Think about the moment at the end of the summersault, when your feet are beneath you, without you being quite aware how they got there. Focus on the feeling of pushing up from knees that are already bent in preparation." He paused for a second. "Now cast the wards."

"*Cave inimicum!*" cried Hermione, and power streamed from her wand. Never before had she cast a spell with such strength. The wards were visible in the air as they formed, shimmering like a heat haze between her and the ceiling above. "Wow," she whispered, looking at what she'd done.

"That," replied Snape smugly, his arms crossed over his t-shirted chest, "is the difference between charmwork and warding."

With the end of term approaching, Hermione's workload went from merely full to manic. For her Arithmancy research proposal, she spent hours in the library tracing examples of historical precedent in battles, counter-insurgency and guerrilla warfare. On top of the rest of her scheduled class work, she was meeting with Snape twice a week...he hadn't mentioned being too busy to see her, and she certainly wasn't going to remind him of it. Hermione and Ron still weren't talking, which made the time she spent with Harry strained and awkward (despite his best efforts), and her lessons with Snape had become the unequivocal highlights of her weeks.

One session a week was spent in the Room of Requirement, where the physical demands he placed her under became progressively more difficult. He taught her to fall, then to leap, and he forced her to repeat arduous sprint drills that he claimed would improve her fast-twitch muscle response. One class, he made her crawl commando-style back and forth across the room the entire time. During their last session before Christmas break, he set up an obstacle course, started her at one end and placed her wand at the other, then challenged her to retrieve her wand while he stood at the side of the room and fired stunning curses at her.

Even the lessons they held in his office had become more orientated towards defensive magic. They had worked through a number of different wards...constructing and dismantling them. They also worked on several techniques to improve her reflexes. Sometimes, that meant Snape might fire random curses at her while he was talking, forcing her to conjure a shield charm or otherwise deflect them; at others, he would drop the word "wand" at unexpected moments, and she had to get out her wand as fast as possible. They still worked on Legilimency and Occlumency occasionally, though only rarely and only when Jocelyn was there too.

Hermione felt that, with her reaction to Snape's Dark Mark, she had passed some kind of test. He still snarled at her and growled and sneered and made sarcastic comments, but never with the viciously nasty edge she knew him to be capable of. Outside of her lessons, Snape was the same that he'd ever been, and even during the sessions in his office, his behaviour was close to that of his old self, but in the Room of Requirement, he was positively relaxed.

Hermione had come to realise that Snape took a very real pleasure from the use and training of his body. Indeed, Hermione was sufficiently self-aware to acknowledge that she took a fair amount of pleasure from it as well. She'd had crushes on enough of her teachers to recognise the signs...hell, she'd even had a crush on Professor McGonagall for awhile, not to mention the travesty that was Professor Lockhart. Firstly, Snape was smart. She was learning more in her lessons with him than in all her other classes put together. And second, he looked good. Viktor Krum was evidence that Hermione had no problem with big noses or grumpy expressions, and Snape moved in a way that hooked itself into her field of awareness and drew her attention. If the smooth lines of his body on display in the Room of Requirement had first made this undeniably apparent, she'd also gained an appreciation for the way he walked the corridors and the classroom, the way his robes swept and billowed in response to the movements of the body below. *Pity I can't take Professor Snape to Slughorn's party*, she mused, *that would have really pissed Ron off* The very thought sent her into flights of giggles, earning her a reproving look from Madam Pince as she ineffectually tried to smother her laughter between the pages of her Arithmancy homework.

Hermione received confirmation of Viktor's travel plans on the last day of classes. He would arrive on the 28th, a Saturday, and would stay with her until the new year. Though he was going to be in England right up until the 12th of January, travelling around to meet with several Quidditch managers, he would stay at her house just the first four nights. Viktor had agreed to coffee with "an important person that I really want you to meet" on the afternoon of his arrival...Hermione hadn't told him who it was precisely...leaving her to confirm the final arrangements with Snape. She felt thankful that the letter had arrived before she left Hogwarts.

Hermione didn't get a chance to speak with Snape during the day, but with Slughorn's party scheduled for that evening, she wasn't too concerned. She certainly didn't intend to spend much of her time hanging from Cormac McLaggen's arm.

As arranged, she met up with McLaggen in the entrance hall at eight. He wasn't worth the time it would have taken to Sleekeazy her hair, so she'd merely pinned her curls up loosely on the top of her head. She wore a very plain, very simple halter-neck dress in a dark rich blue. It was long enough that no-one would realise it was a Muggle purchase rather than genuine dress robes, and the cut covered all but a brief section of her scar. The inch or so that remained visible across her collarbone didn't bother her too much. McLaggen had made a noticeable effort: he was wearing expensive-looking dress robes in a deep red, and he'd brought her a small bouquet. He insisted on drawing her hand into the crook of his arm on the short walk from the entrance hall to Slughorn's office and held it there with a firm grip that suggested slipping away from him might not prove as easy as she'd anticipated.

"I told you that you would look stunning, and I was right," remarked McLaggen with the air of one offering a fulsome compliment.

Goodness, it's going to be a long night "There has to be a first time for everything," she responded, with a tight smile. McLaggen switched to the topic of Quidditch then, clearly reckoning the niceties dealt with. Hermione sighed inwardly. It was boring, but at least she had had a great deal of practice tuning out conversations about Quidditch.

They were greeted at the door by their host, Professor Slughorn, who had matched his velvet smoking jacket with a tasselled hat. He was clearly aiming for a relaxed look

but managed to look more like an overstuffed footrest. "Cormac! Hermione! What a lovely couple you make!" He pinched Hermione's cheek in an unforgivable gesture of avuncular friendliness. "Don't forget, it was right here at the Slug Club that you first got to know each other! Always such a pleasure to smooth the path of young love."

This conversation is even worse than McLaggen's thought Hermione as she graced Slughorn with a grimace that she hoped would pass for a smile. "Come on, Cormac," she muttered, pulling him away into the room and desperately scanning the crowd for some sign of Ginny or Harry.

"I see what you're playing at, minx!" McLaggen grabbed her suddenly around the waist, crushing her to his chest.

"What...?" Hermione struggled to catch her breath and extricate herself from McLaggen's embrace without making a scene. He wasn't just huge, he was solid. Pushing at his chest was ineffectual.

"Mistletoe," he smirked at her, lowering his mouth towards his.

The kiss was terrible. To be fair, she really only had Viktor as a point of reference, but the comparison did McLaggen no favours. His lips were disturbingly warm, disgustingly wet and slightly too floppy. The experience was highly unpleasant and went on far too long. To add insult to injury, McLaggen ran one hand up her neck and into her hair, knocking several hairpins out of place and destroying any hope that she could keep her mess of curls under control.

It was several minutes before he released her. Stepping back with a smug grin, he wiped at the corner of his mouth with the pad of his thumb. "Well," he began, sounding inordinately proud of himself.

"Er, I've just got to powder my nose," gasped Hermione, beating a speedy retreat.

On the far side of the room, she ran into Harry and sank into conversation with him and Luna with a sigh of relief. It wasn't long, however, before McLaggen came looking for her, and she hurried off again. Taking refuge behind a fold of the wall hangings, Hermione took stock of the situation. She spotted Snape, eventually, only to note with irritation that he was talking to Harry...of all people! She'd have to wait and speak to him later. McLaggen was over by the drinks table chatting to some wizard she'd never seen before, probably one of Slughorn's special guests. Ginny, on the other hand, wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Checking up on Snape, Hermione saw that he was escorting Malfoy outside. Damn. Hopefully, he'd come back soon...she wasn't prepared to hang around all night and risk another encounter with McLaggen and the mistletoe.

"What are you lurking about for?" Ginny materialised out of the crowd.

Hermione gave the redhead a conspiratorial grin. "Avoiding my date."

"I don't blame you! I'd avoid him, too. Since Ron's not here to enjoy the show, you can just sit back and let the mere idea sink in."

Hermione smirked. "Exactly."

"I've half a mind to avoid my own date," sighed Ginny, leaning her shoulders up against the wall beside Hermione. "Don't raise your eyebrows like that, young lady! You know as well as I do that we're effectively following the same strategy. Though I do think that Dean is an easier choice to deal with than McLaggen. Ugh." She gave a dramatic shudder and Hermione laughed. "I don't envy you."

"No," agreed Hermione. "But it's just for one evening."

"Yeah, just avoid the mistletoe in future, all right?"

"Thanks, Ginny." Hermione gave the other girl a friendly nudge with her shoulder, and Ginny pushed off the wall.

"I'm going to find Dean." She pulled a wry face. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Ginny's red head disappeared into the crowded room as Hermione made another scan for the figure of Professor Snape. He'd returned, she noted, and was speaking with Slughorn not far from the door. In fact, she narrowed her eyes in consideration, it looked like he was saying his goodbyes. If she made her way around the periphery of the room, she might just be able to exit at the same time. Checking quickly that McLaggen was still safely ensconced at the other end of the office, Hermione began to move. She hurried, she squeezed, she apologised, she definitely stepped hard on someone's foot, and she was just seconds too late. Snape stepped through the doorway while she was still a good few metres from the door. Still, she needed to talk to him. Hermione edged past a couple of Ravenclaws and gave an absent smile to a fourth-year Gryffindor. *At last!* She stepped into the corridor, the cool air a welcome relief after the stuffy atmosphere of the overcrowded office.

Professor Snape was nowhere in sight, but guessing he was headed for the dungeons, she took a right turn and ran lightly down a hidden staircase. From the bottom of the stairs, she saw him in the distance, quite a way ahead.

"Professor Snape," she called, but he didn't seem to notice. Gathering her skirt up in one hand and grateful that she hadn't worn ridiculous shoes, Hermione ran after him.

"Professor Snape," she called again, once she had gained a bit of ground. *Surely he must have heard me?* When she had nearly caught up with him, she called out once more, "Professor!" He whirled towards her then, whether at her words or because of the sound of her feet she wasn't sure. She had to catch herself short to avoid running right into him.

"Miss Granger," he snarled. From the look on his face, he was furious.

Hermione stumbled back a step. "Professor Snape," she gasped.

He covered the short distance between them in two strides and loomed over her. When he spoke again, his voice was heavy with threat, each word quite separate and distinct. "What do you want?"

But Hermione wasn't looking at him. Her eyes had slid past his face and she was staring, wide eyed, at something just above his head. For several long seconds, neither one moved, until...almost reluctantly...Snape turned his head the merest fraction and looked up out of the corner of his eye to see what had caught her attention.

"Mistletoe," she whispered in a strangled voice.

His eyes swivelled back towards her, but otherwise stood frozen. Hermione couldn't breathe, she couldn't think. Then, she moved: with infinite slowness, she leaned up and forwards. One hand came to rest lightly on his chest. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and her heart was pounding. She could smell him, a clean, warm scent overlaid with the smoky smells of the dungeon. His lips were so close. *Any second now . . .*

Abruptly, Snape turned his head. Hermione's lips skidded across his cheek, the hint of stubble rough against them.

Her eyes flew open, and she flinched. Snatching back her hand, she pressed it against her beating heart. *Shit.* Hermione felt panic press out all other thought and tried to prepare herself for the explosion of anger she felt to be imminent. *Shit. Snape...SNAPE!...is going to kill me. What the hell was I thinking?*

"Miss Granger," his voice was frighteningly calm, his face expressionless, "I suggest you return to your dormitory, immediately."

Hermione needed no further encouragement. She turned at once, stumbling slightly in her hurry to walk as fast as she could. At the corner she looked back over her shoulder, but Snape was gone.

Viktor Victorious

Chapter 16 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Sixteen : Viktor Victorious

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I owe the coherence and comprehensibility of this story to the tireless efforts of my two betas, LAxo and WriterMerrin. Thank you!

Severus regarded his reflection with a grim expression. Any hope that he might not look as bad as he felt was immediately dashed. Letting the warm water run, he scrubbed roughly at his face with a wet flannel, willing away the gritty feel of his eye sockets and the dark circles that showed below them; sleep had proved an evasive bedfellow. Every time he had closed his eyes, he had relived...in agonising detail...his encounter under the mistletoe with Hermione Granger. With his eyes open, his brain had churned over Draco's idiotic behaviour, Dumbledore's inexplicable actions, and the probable consequences of the promises he himself had made on both of their behalves. His life was falling apart.

Why had Draco chosen this year of all years to finally strike out at some form of independence? Why did he no longer trust his Head of House? Why hadn't Draco noticed that the Dark Lord's treatment of the Malfoys senior didn't precisely bode well for his own safety?

Severus turned off the tap and buried his face in a towel.

The collateral damage from Draco's last plan had only barely been contained; Katie Bell had had a lucky escape. Merlin alone knew how many others would be endangered by Draco's continued attempts to murder Albus Dumbledore.

Dumbledore.

Severus sighed and threaded the towel back over the rail.

Dumbledore was losing it. There was no other explanation for his reaction to the news about Jocelyn Smith. While the old man irritated Severus beyond measure, there was a real affection in their relationship. Severus couldn't bear to watch him falter. He couldn't bear the idea that Dumbledore was dying. And Severus absolutely positively didn't want to be the one to kill him. It wasn't fair. Certainly the choice before him wasn't fair: kill Dumbledore, help Draco kill Dumbledore, or die.

Ye gods, given the probable consequences of carrying through on the double promise he had made, dying looked like a pretty good option.

Except.

Except here he was. And he didn't want to die.

Since when? he wondered, examining his reflection curiously. *When had that changed?* His life had been in danger for years...from the Dark Lord, from the Aurors, from suspicious Order members, from the sharp fragments of Longbottom's cauldrons...he hadn't cared. Perhaps it was the difference between having a chance of survival and certain death. *Perhaps*, he thought suddenly, leaning towards his reflection and scowling with intense self-loathing *it's Hermione Granger?*

He didn't know what was worse: the thoughts engendered by the abortive kiss, or those triggered by the way she flinched afterwards.

Severus groaned.

Merlin, but he'd been tempted to let her kiss him. The details came rushing back...the deep blue of her dress, the inch of scar along her collar bone, the way her curls hung dishevelled around her neck. The curve of her bare shoulder, the soft protrusion of her lower lip, the smudge of her eyelashes against her cheek. Her smell.

Severus swallowed and gripped the edges of the wash basin tightly. The warm flush of arousal made him slightly nauseous. He'd never imagined himself to be the kind of man who lusted after his students. He didn't want to be. Gods, if Minerva knew, she'd have his balls. Albus...Albus would smile understandingly and suggest that to have known such desire and resisted it made him a better man. But for Minerva, the thought itself would be a crime. And Severus was inclined to side with Minerva on this one.

Hermione hadn't looked like a student, but that didn't help. Quite the contrary. Her outfit had forced Severus to recognise the important qualitative difference between inspiring fear in the student body at large and watching a beautiful woman cringe from him with physical fear. It awoke an old nightmare.

His father, Tobias Snape, had been a boor and a bully. He feared book learning and things that he couldn't immediately understand, magic first and foremost. His son, Severus, had inherited his temper along with his nose. Yet while Severus was by no means a kind man, he had quickly realised that inflicting physical pain on those smaller and weaker than him brought him no pleasure. Severus had channelled his cruel streak, his unhappy childhood, his acerbic sense of humour and a cutting intelligence into a path fundamentally opposed to that of his father. His chosen weapon was his sharp-edged tongue; he despised those who resorted to brute force, and he flaunted his intellectual superiority. He also took a vindictive pleasure in secretly being a better man than the so-called nice, friendly people around him.

Severus' reverie was broken by the distinct sound of someone clearing their throat. He lifted his head to glare at the mirror.

"Excuse me, sir," remarked the mirror apologetically, "but Lady Florinda has arrived in the sitting room and would like a word."

Severus growled in response, a low animalistic noise, but spun on his heel and left the bathroom. He strode into his sitting room and approached a portrait that hung on the wall beside the fireplace.

"Lady Florinda," he said, in a passable imitation of politeness and giving a slight bow of his head.

"Buongiorno, Signore," the Lady curtsied. "Alcuni studenti sono già partiti dalla stanza comunale, stanno per arrivare nel Suo ufficio."

Severus glanced at the clock. He was late. The vast majority of students were returning home for Christmas, and the Slytherins were to Floo from his office. Within seconds, he had donned his teaching robes. Pausing only to thank Lady Florinda and Accio his coffee from the breakfast spread laid out on the table, he left the room. As a consequence, it was not until the afternoon that he found Hermione's letter.

When he saw it, he froze; the familiar loops of her handwriting were immediately recognisable. He sat down, rolling the scroll between thumb and forefinger for several minutes before breaking the seal and rolling it flat.

Dear Professor Snape,

I have arranged to meet Viktor at 5p.m. on Saturday the 28th of December, in a coffee shop in Covent Garden (see address below). He is expecting to meet someone important to me. Please let me know if this arrangement doesn't suit.

I want to apologise for the misunderstanding last night, and look forward to meeting up with you in London. Wishing you a very happy Christmas,

Hermione Granger.

The Drury Tea & Coffee Co.

3 New Row

London, WC2N 4LH

Severus re-read the message several times. He had the impression that Hermione had chosen her words carefully. Absentmindedly, he brushed the tip of one finger over the words "important to me." What was she trying to do, offer him absolution?

"You're a fool, Severus Snape," he said aloud before folding the paper neatly in half and tucking it into his breast pocket. "A fool," he added, pushing himself to his feet, "with work to do."

Though Severus had most of the end-of-term exams left to grade, he decided to spend several hours restocking the infirmary shelves instead. Sometimes, the contemplative abstractions and physical pleasures of brewing were the only sane solution.

Severus detoured via Spinner's End to pick up some appropriate Muggle clothing, but still made it to Covent Garden with plenty of time to spare. Hermione was early, too, and from where he stood, Disillusioned, outside the window, he watched her choose a table with an unobstructed view of the room and divest herself of coat, hat, scarf and gloves. London wasn't as cold as Hogwarts, but the weather was unpleasant nonetheless. Hermione looked nervous. She was fidgeting with the sugar packets that lay on the table, and her eyes flickered between the passing pedestrians and the occupants of the cafe. When her face lit up with recognition, Severus turned. A cab had just pulled up, and the distinctive profile of Viktor Krum was clearly visible through the rear window. Hermione slipped out of the cafe to greet him. Dressed only in her jeans and a sweater, she bounced from one foot to the other and tucked her hands under her armpits to keep warm as Krum paid the driver. Two sports bags emerged from the cab before he did, closely followed, however, by the man himself.

"Herm-own-ninny!" he cried, throwing out both arms in an exuberant welcome.

"Viktor!" she laughed back, eagerly tumbling into his embrace.

To Severus' disgust, Krum lifted her into the air and spun her around. It was, he decided, going to be a long evening. Hermione grabbed the smaller of Krum's bags, and the two of them hurried into the warm and inviting interior of the cafe. Severus stepped back into the shadow of a nearby doorway and removed his Disillusionment charm before he followed them in.

Hermione and Krum had managed to stash his bags behind one of the seats and mostly out of the way.

"You look wunnerful," said Krum to Hermione as Severus approached.

Hermione flushed slightly and looked pleased. Severus scowled.

"Professor Snape!" Hermione leapt up from the seat she had only just occupied, her blush...if anything...deepened. Krum turned in the middle of removing his coat, the faintest hint of surprise registering on his face. "Viktor, you remember Professor Snape, don't you?"

"Of course," Krum replied smoothly, holding out his hand. "It is a pleasure to be seeing you again, Professor."

Snape shook the extended hand and inclined his head politely. "Granger," he remarked coolly, by way of returning her greeting. She gave him a tight, awkward smile.

"You two sit down," she suggested, speaking a little too quickly as a consequence of her anxiety. "I'll get some coffee. What do you want?"

"I will haff a cappuccino, let me give you some money," replied Krum.

"No need, um, Professor?"

"A double espresso, thank you."

That earned him a hint of a more genuine smile. "For real?" she asked. He raised one eyebrow imperiously and tucked his hair back behind one ear. "I should have guessed," she commented over her shoulder, as she threaded her way to the counter.

Severus turned his attention to Krum. He was wearing expensive-looking Muggle clothes with designer labels. He had removed his coat to reveal a cashmere sweater that he wore over an open-collared shirt. Severus, in contrast, kept his duffle coat on despite the warmth of the coffee shop. The protective layers of the dark wool functioned similarly to his teaching robes and conferred a comforting illusion of authority.

"I voz surprised to see you, Professor. I hadn't realised you were the person Hermione"...he mangled the pronunciation slightly..."vanted me to meet."

Severus had no desire to make small talk, and he shot a glance at Hermione, who was placing their order, before responding. "Indeed," he replied noncommittally, squelching several rude responses that came to mind and casting around for something polite to say. "What brings you to England at this time of year?"

An anticipatory smirk curled the corner of Krum's mouth. "Vell," he replied in a conspiratorial tone, "primarily it voz the opportunity to see Hermione. I voz also lucky enough to arrange some Quidditch meetings, and therefore my travel expenses will be paid."

No sign of the jealous surge Severus felt registered on his face. "Indeed," he replied once again, his tone as even as ever. It made sense. Hermione and Krum might officially have broken up, but according to her accounting of events, the sex itself had only begun after that point. It should have been no surprise that Krum viewed an

invitation to stay at her house as a resumption of such activities.

For the next minute or so, no-one said anything.

"Hermione must have a high opinion of you," Krum remarked, breaking the silence. "She was very insistent that we meet."

Severus couldn't help wondering if her opinion remained as high as it had prior to Slughorn's party. "This meeting was my idea." The emphasis he gave implied that Hermione's opinion was irrelevant. Krum looked taken aback, but any response was interrupted by Hermione's return.

"Espresso, cappuccino, hot chocolate," she recited, transferring each drink from the tray she was holding to the table. She slid the tray onto a nearby ledge and sat down, watching Severus curiously.

He paused, the tiny cup halfway to his lips, and shot her an interrogative look.

"No sugar?" she asked, the mischievous glint in her eye belying the bland innocence of her tone.

He waited until she lifted her drink to her mouth before deigning to reply. "I think, Granger, you will find that I'm sweet enough already." The splutter of laughter was sufficient response, and Severus felt a little wriggle of happiness in the depth of his stomach. Yet his sense of duty reasserted itself immediately. Making Hermione laugh is not the point of this meeting, he reminded himself sharply. Swallowing his coffee in one mouthful, he replaced the cup on his saucer and turned towards Krum. Utilising the table for cover, Severus slipped his wand surreptitiously into his hand and cast a non-verbal Muffliato. Only then did he speak.

"What do you know about the current political situation?" he asked.

Before replying, Krum glanced at Hermione, who had turned immediately serious. "More than you might imagine." He shrugged. "Karkaroff told me quite a bit about the previous war, and I was at Hogwarts when the Headmaster announced the return of He-Who-You-Do-Not-Name. Since then, I have kept up with general events, and Hermione has told me quite a bit. I have heard of the Order of the Phoenix." He paused for a second, his heavy brows creased together. "Why do you ask?"

Severus gave the young man before him a long look before responding. "You are aware that Karkaroff was a member of the Death Eaters during the first war?"

"Yes."

"As I was, too."

Krum looked wary at the turn the conversation had taken, but not surprised by the information. "Yes," he said again.

"I still am," continued Severus. This knowledge did shock Krum. His eyes widened slightly and flickered across to Hermione. "I am also a member of the Order of the Phoenix. I work as a double agent." He raised one finger to forestall the question Krum had opened his mouth to ask. "I have told you this because recently, both of my masters have expressed an interest in you."...Krum's mouth shut with an audible snap..."I do not believe you to be in any immediate danger. The Dark Lord is seeking contacts in Eastern Europe, and your name was mentioned. During the Triwizard Tournament, you made a very favourable impression on several children from Death Eater families. The only stigma against you is the very public dalliance you pursued with a Muggle-born witch. As far as the Dark Lord knows, however, the affair was short lived."

As Severus spoke, Krum's colour deepened alarmingly and he clenched both hands into fists. "I will never become a Death Eater!" he burst out, his accent thickened by his anger. "You can tell your Dark Lord that I find his methods horrible and the anti-Muggle propaganda of his followers repulsive!"

Hermione reached out and slipped one hand onto Krum's lap, squeezing his thigh gently. She shot him a reassuring smile, calming him slightly. The admiration with which she responded to his comments twisted Severus' stomach.

"I shall do no such thing," he snarled. "I shall tell the Dark Lord that you were flattered to have attracted his attention, that you admire his politics, and that although you are contractually bound to Quidditch engagements in Bulgaria and don't have the freedom of movement that you would like, you hope to be kept informed of events. I will tell him that you will be happy to offer any help that you can. Furthermore, Krum, I will expect you to make a sizeable donation to the anti-Muggle cause."

The muscles in Krum's jaw twitched, and he leant forward with anger. "You are not listening to me, Professor. My grandfather was killed by Grindelwald...do you want to know why? Because he married a Muggle-born witch! That's why! Her life was saved by the resistance, and she was smuggled away. Those people are heroes to me. I would never, never join a group like the Death Eaters!"

"You idiot boy," Severus hissed. "I'm not asking you to join the Death Eaters."

Hermione's eyes darted from one man to the other. The conversation was not going well, and her concern was evident in the sharp angle at which she held her upper body. "Viktor," she murmured, her hand still resting on his thigh. "Hear him out."

"What are you asking, then, Professor?" His tone and expression were belligerent. He placed his large hand over Hermione's smaller one, trapping it against his leg and threading his fingers through hers.

Severus took a deep breath and exhaled through his nose. "The Ministry of Magic is almost certain to fall under the control of the Dark Lord sometime during the next twelve months. If and when that happens, we can expect the enactment of vicious anti-Muggle legislation." He paused. Krum regarded him mulishly, his black brows gathered into a scowl. The penny hadn't yet dropped. "Some British Muggle-borns may need an escape route," continued Severus in the tone of one explaining things to an idiot. "Ideally, they would contact a well-connected foreign wizard who could travel throughout Europe without attracting suspicion."

Finally, comprehension dawned. As the expression on Krum's face lightened, Hermione beamed at him, reaching out with her free hand to sandwich his hand between the two of hers. Severus stood abruptly, pushing out his chair as he rose. "I'm going to get another coffee," he remarked to the narrow gap that separated his two companions. Standing in the queue while waiting to order, he glanced back towards the table and watched Hermione tuck a lock of Krum's hair behind his ear. While he had moved beyond the limits of the Silencing Charm and couldn't hear what they were saying, Severus was more than close enough to comprehend their body language. The sexual tension that had been evident from the start ratcheted up a notch as Hermione leaned forward and pressed her lips to his cheek.

Severus registered the impact of that kiss as a physical blow. For a moment, the world around him swam out of focus. Severus Snape was not by nature a superstitious man, but in that moment he experienced an inescapable premonition of his own death. His life was unwinding before his eyes...in reverse. Why hadn't he noticed their resemblance before? Two Muggle-born witches, Gryffindor house, top of their year. Both, dammit, too friendly by half with Potter. Both burned with an eagerness to do the right thing, both leapt too readily to the defence of others. Both women had chosen someone other than him. But, yes, this time it was backwards: Hermione had started by thinking him a Death Eater, at first she'd been afraid of him. Next, there was a period where his use to her was solely utilitarian...he taught her things she couldn't learn elsewhere. Then, he'd learnt that her relationship with another was sexual, and had been for a while. The kiss that wasn't really a kiss followed, and now he was watching her interaction with her lover wracked with jealousy. What did that leave? Severus revisited the events of his school days, reinterpreting them through his present: an argument, a friendship, a murder, a longing from afar. In that order. It all made a horrific kind of sense.

"Oy, mister, are you all right?" The barista's interruption brought Severus back to his surroundings with a jolt. From the look on his face, it wasn't the first question he'd asked. "Hello, then, now you're back in the land of the living, can I get you a drink?"

"A double espresso, drawn short." Severus pulled a handful of Muggle coins from the pocket of his jeans and sorted out the exact price. He risked another glance back at Hermione and Krum. They were wrapped up in each other. Hermione had her mouth close to Krum's ear and was telling him something in very rapid phrases. Krum was slightly flushed and managing to look simultaneously noble and modest. Severus felt a rush of anger towards the young man.

"One short double, sir, enjoy." Once again, the barista pulled Severus back into the present. Severus had a job to do, and his emotions had little if nothing to do with it. He lifted the coffee from the counter, noting with some pride that his hand was completely steady, and walked back towards the table.

As he stepped through the boundary of the Silencing Charm, Hermione welcomed him back with a warm smile. Severus stared back dispassionately. The short walk had been more than sufficient to activate the mental habits of a lifetime, and his emotions were back under his tight control.

"Professor," began Krum, his tone a little pompous. "I vant to apologise for my vords earlier. I voz out of line."

"One can only struggle towards intelligence at one's own pace," Severus sneered at the young man.

Hermione spoke then, smoothly interrupting Krum's prickly response. "We started to work out some of the details..."

"I don't want to know any of the details." Severus raised an admonishing eyebrow. "I only want to know how to contact you"...this was directed to Krum..."if the need arises."

"But, vy don't you vant to know?"

"Because," supplied Hermione, light-years quicker than her companion, "the less he knows, the safer the plan."

"Oh." Krum creased his brows and looked slowly from Severus to Hermione and back again. "You said that you are a double agent." It was more statement than question, but Severus acknowledged the truth with a nod. "How are ve to know where your true loyalties lie?"

Hermione opened her mouth at once to leap to Severus' defence, but he cut her off with one raised hand.

"That, Krum, is none of your business." Krum looked mutinous, the muscle at his jaw working once more. "But I will tell you this: regardless of my ultimate allegiance, I have no sympathy for blood prejudice."

Severus could tell that Krum was less than mollified by his response, but Hermione had returned her hand reassuringly to his thigh, and he visibly bit back whatever response he had intended to make.

"How can Professor Snape contact you?" she prompted gently.

"All mail sent to Viktor Krum is sorted by the team secretaries." Krum sounded reluctant to move on from the question of Snape's loyalties. "They read all my fan mail and check it for hexes. If you send an owl to Torvik Murk, however, it will reach me directly."

"Good." Severus held out his hand, palm up. "A couple of your hairs, Krum," he demanded.

Krum bristled at once, but Hermione moved to comply, reaching up and pulling three hairs from the younger man's head with a sharp tug.

"Here you are, Professor," she remarked as she laid them in Severus' palm.

"Good," Severus said again. He picked up his espresso and drank it down in one smooth mouthful. Pulling a pair of leather gloves from his pocket, he rose to his feet. "Granger, Krum," he nodded to each of them in turn. "Good night."

"Good night, Professor." He walked away without looking back.

Once outside the cafe, however, he ducked into the adjacent doorway and Disillusioned himself. Then he stepped back to the cafe window and examined the couple he had just left. *Standard espionage practice*, he reassured himself as he tucked Krum's hair safely into a small glass specimen bottle and placed that safely in an inner pocket. Hermione had both hands on Krum's forearm and was speaking animatedly. At one point, she gestured over her shoulder, and only minutes later the two began to put on their outside clothes.

As they stepped through the door, their conversation became audible.

"But vot about my bags?"

"Oh, they won't be a problem. Once we get to the theatre, I'll put a mild notice-me-not charm on them, and we can leave them in the Cloak Room."

"I can't believe we are going to the opera!"

"Do you mind?"

"Not at all, I'm delighted."

Hermione tucked her hand into the crook of Krum's arm, smiling up at him. "This way, then. There's a great little pasta place just down here, and we can grab a quick bite before the show."

Against his better judgement, Severus followed them. The pasta place was only just around the corner. The restaurant was tiny and very crowded, but the maître d' assured them that there would be a table ready very shortly, leaving them outside to wait under the pool of warmth cast by a gas brazier. Severus had been ready to leave once he saw the size of the restaurant, but seeing them step close to the brazier, rubbing their hands together, he edged closer.

"Herm-own-ninny," said Krum, playing up his name for her, "I haff something for you." As he spoke, he withdrew a tiny box from his pocket.

Hermione's eyes widened at the sight, and Severus felt slightly sick. *Surely not?*

"What is it?" Hermione sounded a little hesitant.

"It is a little something that I haff been vorking on. I wanted to give it to you because it was you who originally gave me the idea." Hermione looked intrigued. "Do you remember ven you came to visit my country?"

"Of course!"

"Vell, as I remember, your parents vere a little vorried. Mostly because you vere still too young to use magic outside of school. It got me thinking. I wanted to make something that could be used completely without magic...by children, or even by someone without a vand." He held the box towards her. "Go on, open it."

Hermione lifted the box from his hand. It opened with a slight snap. She looked a little bemusedly at the contents, glancing up at Krum curiously. He smiled encouragingly, and she reached in and withdrew a flat silver button, about an inch across.

"What is it?"

"It's a personal, voice-activated Portkey."

"It's activated by my voice?"

"Not yet, you haff to set it first. Once it's set, the designated phrase will take you home, no matter how far away you are or any anti-Apparation wards that there might be." He took the Portkey from her hand and rotated it sideways. "Put it inside your mouth with the flat side against the inside of your cheek and this protruding part..."

"The shank."

"...the shank, between your teeth." He helped to slide it into her mouth, his thumb grazing softly along the line of her jaw, two fingers dipping into her mouth. "Now, say something...but be careful! Choose a phrase you are not likely to say by accident."

Hermione creased her mind in thought for a second, then grinned around her mouthful of metal. "There's no place like home," she recited. Krum nodded seriously. He clearly wasn't familiar with *The Wizard of Oz* Hermione spat the Portkey out into the palm of her hand and looked at it curiously.

"It's designed to be sewn into the inside of your clothes, next to the skin. That way you don't need to find it or remember to haff it with you, or worry about touching against it. All you need to do is say the phrase to be safely transported home."

"Viktor! It's brilliant! This must have taken ages!"

Krum shrugged modestly. "A vile, yes. It's reusable, too. It can be reset any number of times, entirely without magic; that way any child can use it. This one is designed to always take the person home, but I haff made others that transport people to other places."

"Wow! I wish we'd had something similar last year when we were attacked at the Ministry . . . You know, Viktor, this could turn out to be really crucial in our plans...how many people know about this project?"

Krum's response was interrupted by the departure of several people from the restaurant and the reappearance of the maître d'. "Come on in, your table is ready."

Hermione thanked the man profusely as she stepped inside, the Portkey held tightly in one hand. Severus was left alone outside, his heart heavy and his head whirling with the realisations of the evening. Turning on the spot, he Disapparated away.

Family and Friends

Chapter 17 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Seventeen : Family and Friends

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute.

My betas, LAXo and WriterMerrin, are a fangirl's dream come true.

WARNING : In the words of my brilliant beta WriterMerrin, "I don't think I've ever seen that much Viktor action in a SSHG piece, but I think it works well in establishing the Hermione you seem to be going for." Consider yourselves warned.

Viktor Krum made Hermione feel wonderful. While objectively, he looked at her much the same way that McLaggen did, one man's gaze made her feel sexy and powerful, the other dirty and shameful. She loved the way his brows creased together when he was thinking. She loved the difference between his awkward shuffling walk and the liquid power and grace of his movements on a broom. She loved the way his speech quickened when he was excited about an idea; she loved the way he mangled her name. After the rejection she'd experienced from Ron during this last term, some time spent in the company of an intelligent, admiring, sports star was exactly what she needed; at the same time, his presence also made it much easier to squash her crush on Snape back into submission. Not that Hermione was too stupid to notice the resemblance between the two men, but Snape was her teacher. No matter how intelligent, muscular or darkly funny he was, she would behave appropriately from now on. Her lessons with him were far too important to let a silly crush interfere in any way. And if she occasionally let her eyes flutter closed and her lips brush against the stubble just to the side of Viktor's mouth, that was her own concern.

Hermione had been terribly worried about seeing Snape for the first time since their awkward scene under the mistletoe, but to her inordinate relief he had acted just the same as ever. *In fact*, she pondered, *several times recently I've assumed he would get angry and yell, and each time I've been proved wrong*

She sat through the opera in a delicious haze of contented anticipation. Viktor held her hand in his, and his thigh was warm against hers. The music swelled and pulsed through the air around her. Flowing over and through her, the sound triggered thoughts and responses that were better keyed to the events of the last few days than the story as it unfolded onstage.

At the end of the performance, Hermione and Viktor slipped out into the night and ducked into a dark alley. Behind a decidedly unromantic dumpster, Viktor put his arms tightly around her, his bags slung up onto one shoulder. Hermione pulled the Portkey from her pocket and held it up against his cheek with two fingers.

"Are you ready?" she asked. When Viktor smiled, she took a deep breath and channelled Judy Garland as best she could. "There's no place like home."

There was a sharp pulling sensation behind her navel, and the smelly alleyway spun away. She felt the warmth of Viktor's arms tighten around her and pressed her face against the firm support of his chest. Moments later, they landed in her bedroom, staggering slightly to keep their balance. The lights were off, and the room was lit only dimly by the streetlights outside the window.

"Hold on a minute," she instructed, fumbling her way towards the light switch. These days she spent so little time at her parents' house that she had to navigate mostly by guess. "There." The sudden light revealed a single bed, a generous number of bookshelves stuffed with everything from old picture story books to her textbooks from school, a white desk recessed into the gap between two built-in wardrobes, and a girly-pink colour scheme indicative of an earlier phase in her life. Viktor Krum and his sports bags looked almost comically out of place. Hermione stifled a giggle as she opened her door briefly and peered out into the hall. The lights were all out, and her parents surely asleep: they were not the kind to stay up late worrying. Viktor could greet them in the morning. She shut the door again and leant against it, her hands pressed to the wood behind her back. The full import of Viktor's presence in her bedroom was pressing insistently to the forefront of her mind and sending small tendrils of desire creeping outwards from her belly. Hermione felt suddenly very warm and stripped off her hat and gloves, unwinding her scarf and tossing it onto the bedside table.

"My parents made up the spare bed for you, but, er, you're welcome to sleep here if you'd like." Hermione felt suddenly nervous.

Viktor had put down his bags and sat gingerly on the side of her bed. "From one of your letters, I got the impression...forgive me if I'm wrong...that perhaps there was something between you and your friend Ron."

Hermione didn't bother to conceal the bitterness of her reply. "He has a girlfriend."

"Ah. His loss." Viktor looked at her with an almost-sympathetic smirk.

"Um, do you have a girlfriend?" Since they were asking and answering the appropriate questions, Hermione thought it best to be thorough, although, from the way he had held her hand at the opera, she was betting on a "no."

Viktor shrugged. "No. Where there's Quidditch, however, there are always girls . . ." Although he trailed off, Hermione had no trouble interpreting his meaning.

"I'm not looking for a relationship, as such . . ." Hermione had no intention of luring him into her bed under false pretences.

At that, he grinned, transforming his serious face entirely. There was an intensity to his gaze that pooled deep in her gut, and she pushed herself off the door and stepped over towards the bed. "If we only have five days, Herm-own-ninny, we'd best make the most of them." He reached out and brushed the back of his hand lightly down her cheek before winding one of her curls around his finger. "It would be my very great pleasure to sleep here tonight."

"Good," smiled Hermione, elated by the prospect. She placed her hands firmly on his chest and pushed him backwards onto the bed, climbing on top to straddle him. "Although I should warn you, sleeping wasn't exactly at the top of my agenda."

As anticipated, Hermione's parents were unperturbed by the discovery of her sleeping arrangements. They were both ex-hippies, and her mother took a kind of perverse enjoyment in permissive parenting methods, delighting in the moments when she managed to shock her comparatively straight-laced daughter. Indeed, on the third day of Viktor's stay, her mother waylaid Hermione in the kitchen while Viktor and her father were engaged in a rather tedious discussion about the nutrition requirements of professional athletes.

"What's the story with you and your Bulgarian boyfriend?" she asked with interest, the gleam in her eye revealing a thirst for details.

"Mum, he's not my boyfriend."

"Fine. Your fuckbuddy, then."

"Mum!" Hermione's exclamation was half exasperation, half helpless laughter. "Where did you even learn that word?"

"From Liza, actually, which reminds me. She and Carla and little Thom are coming over tomorrow. Is your Bulgarian going to be fine with the whole happy-family-two-mothers concept?"

"I'm sure he will be." Hermione chewed on her bottom lip for a second. "I'll bring it up with him tonight. As long as he's prepared, it'll be fine."

"You haven't answered my question, young lady, don't think I've forgotten."

Hermione rolled her eyes at her mother, who had propped her hips against the kitchen bench and was clearly ready for an in-depth mother-daughter chat. "We're just friends."

"Friends who fuck."

"Yes. Friends who fuck." Hermione glanced nervously over her shoulder towards the living room, where Viktor and her dad were still talking. Pulling out her wand, she cast a Silencing Charm. At her mother's inquisitive look, she explained the spell. Her mum took it as an indication that Hermione was about to spill the proverbial beans and sidled closer. "Viktor's a great guy," Hermione explained. "He's smart, he's sexy, he's great in bed." Her mother smirked. "He really likes me for who I am. He likes the way that I look, he loves how smart I am, he's absolutely, not at all, not even the tiniest bit intimidated by me, but at the same time, he respects me."

Her mum was listening avidly. "But?" she asked. "I feel like there's a huge 'but' looming."

Hermione sighed. "You're right. But, he takes everything too seriously. In the long term I need someone who is going to make me laugh and gets my jokes. I mean, maybe it's just a language thing, but I don't think so. Plus, he never argues with me. I need someone who's not going to agree to everything so readily. Don't get me wrong, I really like him, and I'm having fun. I asked him to come and visit, and I'm enjoying him being here."

Hermione's mother reached out an arm and laid it around Hermione's shoulders, pulling her close. "I understand. I do. And I agree with your assessment of the situation. I just wanted to make sure I was reading things right, and to be sure that you were okay. You're being safe, right?"

Hermione was touched, even if she rolled her eyes and huffed her breath out loudly. "Mum! I use *all* the charms, *and* we use condoms. There's no way I could catch something or get pregnant. That is one thing you really don't have to worry about."

Dr. Granger patted her daughter's shoulder reassuringly. "I'm just checking, Hermione. I do trust you, you know."

Hermione laughed. She knew. She threaded her arms around her mother's waist and gave her a squeeze. She didn't spend that much time with her parents, but they were unbearably dear to her. And the older she got, the more she recognised bits of her parents in her own personality. "Come on, Mum, let's go rescue poor Viktor from Dad's indefatigable interest."

Hermione was delighted to see her cousin Liza and her small family. Forewarned, Viktor coped admirably with lesbian parenthood, although it was clear that out homosexuality was not a commonplace occurrence within his social circles. Still, while Liza was out to Hermione, Hermione wasn't out to Liza, and the visit occasioned the only really tense moment of Viktor's visit. Speaking with Carla and dandling the thirteen-month-old Thom on her lap, Hermione overheard Liza's conversation with Viktor with growing trepidation.

"So, Viktor, what do you do?" Liza asked.

"I play football." Hermione felt her stomach drop. Liza played herself, for an amateur women's team, and was almost certain to push this lie past the point where it cohered.

"Professionally?"

"That is the goal." Krum seemed blissfully unaware of either the bad joke that he had made, or the danger into which he was sinking.

"Wow! I've a ball in the back of the car; we could have a kick around after lunch! What do you say?"

"I would like that."

To Hermione's intense relief, it turned out that Viktor was almost as good with a ball at his feet as he was with a broom between his legs. He danced around the Granger's small back yard as if the ball were tied to his foot with a short piece of elastic. Liza managed to get Carla and both of Hermione's parents to play for the first ten minutes or

so...Hermione excused herself by promising to watch Thom...but once it was clear that Liza and Viktor were the only ones likely to do anything much with the ball, the others retreated quickly to their glasses of wine, leaving Viktor and Liza to juggle the ball between them. Hermione surrendered the small boy to her mother and entertained herself watching Viktor display an entirely unexpected, yet visually pleasing, physical skill.

Less than a week later, Hermione Flooed back to school via the fireplace in her parents' bedroom. Stepping out into Professor McGonagall's office, she was surprised to see the headmaster sitting in the corner.

"Afternoon, Hermione. I'm sure I don't need to remind you of the charm to clean up your own ash?"

Hermione could take a hint and had her wand out to perform the charm even before McGonagall finished her greeting.

"Good afternoon, Professor McGonagall, Headmaster."

"By the way, Hermione, there's a new password: Abstinence." McGonagall pursed her lips slightly. "The reason for the change should be apparent once you see the Fat Lady."

"Thanks, Professor." Hermione levitated her bags and started for the door.

"Ah, Miss Granger, a word, if you don't mind." Dumbledore stood smoothly, opening the door for her with his good hand and gesturing her out into the corridor. Hermione followed obediently, her raised eyebrows the only index of her curiosity. Once they were several metres away from McGonagall's door, Dumbledore spoke. "I hear that Professor Snape and Viktor Krum were eventually able to come to an understanding."

A gurgle of laughter escaped Hermione. "Yes. They did rub each other the wrong way."

"You, my dear, are to be congratulated. Few people would regard either man as easily handled, yet you managed to bring the business to a head very smoothly."

Hermione flushed slightly with pleasure. She might think that the headmaster's ethics left something to be desired, yet his praise was rare and welcome.

"Ah, Miss Granger, before you leave, I must ask you to deliver a message for me." Dumbledore held out a small scroll addressed to Harry.

"Certainly, sir." Hermione took the letter and tucked it into her pocket.

"My next lesson with Harry is scheduled for tomorrow evening. I understand that Professor Snape will also be available at that time should you wish to have a lesson."

"Thank you, that would be wonderful." Hermione beamed at the prospect of class with Snape.

"I will let him know." The headmaster made a formal bow and turned as if to leave.

"Um, Professor?" she ventured suddenly, surprising even herself with the question. Dumbledore turned back at once. "You, er, wouldn't happen to know the whereabouts of the list of members of Dumbledore's Army, would you?" She knew she'd phrased the question awkwardly, and she inwardly winced.

"I would indeed." Dumbledore beamed at her. "I have been keeping it safe on the assumption that you would eventually wish to relieve poor Miss Edgecombe of the visible reminder of her actions." He twirled his wand with his blackened hand, conjuring the parchment, which drifted gently down towards Hermione until she caught hold of it.

Staring at the list of signatures, she felt oddly melancholy. "Thank you, sir," she replied politely. "I do."

Dumbledore twinkled at her over his glasses. "Will that be all, Miss Granger?" he asked.

"Do you know why she betrayed us to Umbridge?" she responded, unable to hold back the question.

"Her mother works at the Ministry," explained Dumbledore, not unkindly, "I understand that it came down to a question of friends or family."

Hermione swallowed heavily, disgusted with herself for not having removed the curse earlier. "Thank you, sir," she replied mechanically, before turning and heading for the Gryffindor common room, her luggage floating behind her. It was only once she'd reached the Tower that it occurred to her to wonder why Dumbledore hadn't removed the jinx himself; he was more than capable after all.

Harry, Ron and Ginny arrived from the Burrow a couple of hours later, and Hermione ran into them on her way back from the library. Buoyed up by the memory of Viktor Krum, who floated just behind her breastbone, she ignored Ron entirely, and not even his enthusiastic reunion with Lavender punctured her equanimity.

Harry was bursting with news and wasted no time in pulling her aside to fill her in: Rufus Scrimgeour's surprise Christmas visit, Lupin's time undercover with Fenrir Greyback's werewolf pack, and most importantly, the overheard conversation between Draco Malfoy and Professor Snape.

Hermione turned the new information over in her brain, trying to make sense of it. Malfoy was definitely up to something; she couldn't deny that any longer, although she was still disturbed by the vindictive anger he triggered in Harry and she did her best to point out the leaps of logic in Harry's assessment of the situation. Doing so, however, inevitably reminded her of the particular summer afternoon when she and Ron had decided on the plan to downplay Malfoy's role. A sharp pang of misery threatened her good mood. *Why does Harry have it in so badly for Malfoy and Professor Snape?* she wondered, insistent on distracting herself. At least this time, Snape was easier to defend. *Professor Snape was obviously trying to work out what Malfoy is up to...and a good thing, too. Assuming that Malfoy was behind Katie's injury . . . but, an Unbreakable Vow? They're so dangerous.* She wondered vaguely whether there was any way she could ask Snape about it without revealing Harry's eavesdropping.

This really was suspicious behaviour on Malfoy's part, even if his "master" didn't turn out to be Voldemort. Hermione's fingers itched to add these events to the Arithmantic matrix. It might just be enough information to make sense of Katie Bell's relationship to the whole. *Hmm.* She'd have to do it without Vector's help though, because otherwise Harry's less-than-justifiable activities would be implicated for sure. With extra equations to run, and tomorrow's lesson with Snape on the horizon, this term was promising to be every bit as busy as the last.

A / N : I know it's short! But to compensate, I'll try to have the next chapter posted within a few days. And a very, very particular thanks to everyone who has left a review!

Reversal of Fortune

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Eighteen : Reversal of Fortune

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute. Where dialogue from the original Harry Potter books is quoted by me, the relevant text is marked with an asterisk.

This is the point where I thank my thoroughly brilliant betas: LAxo and WriterMerrin, without them, this story would bear witness to far too many errors.

WARNING OF SORTS : I've posted a couple of chapters in quick succession, so if you haven't read about Snape's meeting with Krum and Granger, or of Granger's Christmas at home, then you should go back before you read any further!!

Severus had nothing in his personal library at Spinner's End that would illuminate his premonition, so he returned to Hogwarts the very next day. Jocelyn, for one, was delighted. She was perfectly content to share his table in the library, unperturbed by the imperative to hold her tongue or by his scowling face. And scowl he did. Even with the resources of the Hogwarts' library at his disposal, the research wasn't going well. Divination was such a vague and imprecise science that Severus found much of what he read intensely frustrating. There were numerous studies of the pre- or near-death experience of one's life flashing before one's eyes and countless explorations of *déjà vu*, but nothing that specifically applied to his experience of re-living the foundational moments of his late adolescence in reverse.

Albus Dumbledore was also pleased at the early return of his Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. He insisted on several late-night planning sessions, fuelled by a steady stream of firewhiskey, seemingly oblivious to Severus' distraction. The night of the thirtieth turned out to be the worst of the lot. Dumbledore had consumed a significant quantity of alcohol, although he remained in complete control of his speech and demeanour. He was wandering around the perimeter of the office talking while Severus sat in his regular chair absently staring at the swirling amber liquid in his glass.

"Harry must not know, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary, otherwise how could he have the strength to do what must be done?"* Dumbledore's final words pierced the self-pitying fog that occupied Severus' mind.

Potter? Up until a moment ago Dumbledore had been fully occupied with the need for Severus to protect the students once he himself was dead. "But what must he do?"* Severus coughed and cleared his throat. It must have been at least thirty minutes since he'd last spoken.

"That is between Harry and me. Now listen closely, Severus. There will come a time...after my death...do not argue, do not interrupt! There will come a time when Lord Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake."*

"For Nagini?"* Was this further evidence of Dumbledore's impending senility? He really did seem to be losing it. Severus felt a pang of pity for the man before him.

"Precisely. If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding, but keeps it safe beside him under magical protection, then, I think, it will be safe to tell Harry."*

"Tell him what?"* Severus knew his irritation was showing in his voice. Dumbledore still wasn't making much sense, and the way he was standing now, with one hand covering his eyes, he looked more forlorn and vulnerable than ever.

"Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield,"...Severus felt his stomach clench at the casual invocation of her sacrifice..."the Killing Curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsing building. Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that he has never understood. And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die."*

Severus felt as if he'd been plunged into ice water. *The boy is a Horcrux*. Dumbledore had finally started to make sense, and Severus belatedly wished that he had in fact been rambling, for all-too-readily he grasped the implications of this information. "So the boy . . . the boy must die?"* he asked, his voice entirely devoid of the conflicting waves of emotion roiling within.

"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential."*

Severus felt a surge of anger at his mentor and struggled to get his voice back under his control. The past and his present tumbled over themselves in his mind. "I thought . . . all these years . . . that we were protecting him for her. For Lily."* *For Lily . . . and for Hermione. It's her job, too, to keep him alive.*

"We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength. Meanwhile, the connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth."* Severus stared at Dumbledore with disbelief, willing the old man to open his eyes; the horror of the situation was somehow intensified by his inability to look at Severus while he spoke. "Sometimes I have thought he suspects it himself. If I know him, he will have arranged matters so that when he does set out to meet his death, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort."*

Severus attempted to order the facts coherently. *Potter is a Horcrux, and once the Dark Lord protects Nagini, I have to tell him...this isn't a plan, it's a complete travesty! Once Albus is dead, I'm unlikely to get close enough to the Boy Wonder to say hello, let alone convince him that he needs to sacrifice his own life . . . What reason would Potter have to believe me?* Another thought followed: *Hermione might*. The "might" was a sharp blow: if he told her now, she would believe him without hesitation, but once he murdered Albus, she would fear him along with everybody else...and that was an idea he couldn't bear. *And Hermione would care about Potter's death, a lot* Her probable reaction hit him like a slap in the face: she would be devastated. Lily would be devastated. Would have been devastated. When he spoke to Albus, his own voice seemed to come from a long way off. "You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?"*

Abruptly, Dumbledore uncovered his face and looked Severus in the eye. "Don't be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?"*

Ah, Albus. You always did have a special way with guilt"Lately, only those whom I could not save." Severus rose to his feet. "You have used me."**And Hermione.*

"Meaning?"*

"I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to be to keep Lily Potter's son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter..."* *Odd*, he mused after the words had left his mouth, *have I ever thought of her as Lily Potter before? She was always Lily Evans to me*

"But this is touching, Severus," interpolated Dumbledore, curiosity quirked the corners of his eyes. "Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?"*

"For him?"* *No. For her. For Lily, for Hermione* Despite his best efforts, the two were becoming progressively more confused in his mind. *'Expecto Patronum!'** he cried.

Severus watched his Patronus leap from his wand in a blaze of silver light. Heartbreakingly graceful, she sprung across the office before leaping though the window and off into the Forbidden Forrest. He lowered his arm, his anger evaporating into sorrow. He turned towards Dumbledore, who was staring at him, his eyes brimming with tears.

"After all this time?"* Albus asked gently, his voice cracking slightly.

"Always,"* replied Severus, though his eyes skidded sideways towards Fawkes as he spoke. He was no longer sure which of the two Gryffindor women he intended to reference in his response, nor even if the two could ever be separated.

Predictably, the Dark Lord summoned Severus on New Year's Eve. It was an odd gathering. With almost half of the Death Eaters still held in Azkaban, including the nominal "host" of the party, Lucius Malfoy, the festivities were rather subdued. Narcissa still seemed miserable, no surprises there, and Draco looked awkward in his attempt to play man of the house to a dozen older Death Eaters and the Dark Lord himself. The only good thing about the evening, from Severus' perspective, was the public nature of his arrival: he was able to give his report on Viktor Krum to the group as a whole and was spared the indignity of the Dark Lord's Legilimency. Utilising Krum's hair and some Polyjuice potion, he and Dumbledore had constructed some psuedo-memories in case of such an eventuality, but Severus was relieved not to have to put them to the test. In his current state of mind he didn't want to push his luck.

Thorfinn Rowle had found two drunken Muggle women somewhere and convinced them to come along to a "fancy dress" party. One of them looked as if she were having the time of her life; the other was eyeing Nagini apprehensively. Severus swallowed the pity she inspired and turned his attention elsewhere. Draco was lurking near Bellatrix looking grumpy. When Severus caught his eye, Draco gave him a particularly sulky glare. *So, he thinks he needs Bellatrix to protect him...from me* The irony was not lost on Severus.

He was contemplating the tricky question of who would be the least irritating to talk with when Pettigrew sidled up and informed him that the Dark Lord desired to speak with him. Severus turned at once. Voldemort occupied a winged arm chair that sat alone by the fire, positioned to give him an unimpeded view of the entire room. Nagini was draped up one arm and over his shoulders, her head tucked under his chin in a disturbingly intimate gesture of animal affection. Severus crossed the room quickly and dropped to one knee, bowing his head.

"Severuss, my dear boy."

"My Lord."

Voldemort twirled his wand and conjured a small cushion that he lowered beside his feet. He gestured towards it magnanimously. "Have a sssseat, Severuss."

Without a word of complaint, Severus turned and folded his lanky form obligingly, his long legs crossed at the ankles, his forearms resting on his knees. It was an awkward and infantilising position; simultaneously an indication of Voldemort's current regard and a warning to Severus of the need to behave. From where he sat, facing the room, he could see the reaction of his fellow Death Eaters. Bellatrix looked apoplectic.

"You know, Severus, there are whispers among my Death Eaters."

"It is my role to listen to the whispers of the members of the Order of Phoenix, my Lord. Those of my fellow Death Eaters I am at liberty to ignore."

The Dark Lord chuckled. "I've missed you, Severus." Reaching out with one finger, he tucked Severus' hair behind his ear. The finger was cold where it brushed against his flesh. The gesture was a possessive one, but also calculated to expose Severus' face to Voldemort's gaze. "These whispers"...Voldemort was back on topic..."concern Harry Potter and the prophecy." Severus kept his mind blank. "It seems that some of my Death Eaters, some of my dearest friends, believe that Potter is destined to defeat me. I find myself curious to hear your opinion on the topic, Severus."

An honest answer was always the best policy, and this one was bolstered by the intensity of the previous evening's conversation with Dumbledore. "I truly believe that once Dumbledore is removed you shall find it surprisingly easy to kill the brat, my Lord. Indeed, I can only hope that no-one else kills him by accident. Only by your hand will he meet a fitting end."

"Ah, yes, Dumbledore. So you approve of my current plan?"

"The plan has merit, my Lord, but Draco seems unlikely to carry it through. His last attempt was deplorable."

"I agree, it was clumsy." The Dark Lord sighed. "I had given him a year; perhaps I should reconsider?"

Severus let his gaze dwell on Draco before responding, the wrong words now might condemn the boy. "He claims to have a plan." Severus shrugged. "It would be . . . sporting to let him make the attempt."

"Such a stickler for the rules, Severus." Severus wasn't sure whether the tone in Voldemort's voice conveyed approval or not. "And since you have Vowed to help . . ." The Dark Lord trailed off as he laid his hand on the back of Severus' neck. His thumb and middle finger gripped a little too tightly for comfort and Severus knew that if he chose, Voldemort could strangle him there and then. "Since you, Severus, have Vowed to help," he reiterated, "I have nothing to lose by waiting for Draco a little longer."

In his more rational moments, Severus had no difficulty parsing the current situation: he had developed inappropriate feelings for Miss Granger, and the stress of his double life was taking its toll. It was entirely possible that the first issue was merely symptomatic of the second. He also managed to develop several strategies in order to contain the problem. Firstly, he returned to Spinner's End after reporting on his New Year's Eve party to Dumbledore and spent several days doing as little as possible...no long talks with Dumbledore nor with Voldemort; no grading papers, no lesson plans, no interaction with students or with the other teachers; no private research, nothing. Secondly, he resolved to call Miss Granger by nothing but her more formal appellation. No more casual usage of "Granger," and certainly no more "Hermione," not even within the safety of his own head. Thirdly, he would discourage her from further friendly advances: he would enforce a policy of meeting but once a week, and he would take every opportunity to belittle her. Severus Snape had a talent for cutting remarks and he would exercise it to the full.

His time at Spinner's End gave him ample opportunity to reflect on his "premonition." While late at night, tired, drunk or both...the evening in Dumbledore's office standing as a prime example of the latter...it assumed a distressingly convincing sense of the inevitable, the logical light of day permitted a welcome critical distance. The similarity between Hermione and Lily held true, but was, for the most part, predicated on a fairly superficial analogy. Their personalities, for example, were almost diametrically opposed. Where Lily was amenable and easygoing, effortlessly popular, Hermione was bossy and prickly. Aside from Potter and Weasley, she had few real friends. Physically, too, they were vastly different. Lily, if anything, bore a far stronger resemblance to Ginevra Weasley than to Hermione Granger. And the fact that both Lily and Hermione happened to be extraordinarily intelligent was but a small observation about Severus Snape's taste in women, not an indication that the two women were one and the same person.

Furthermore, he rationalised, he'd believed for a long time in his imminent death. Sooner or later, one side of this war was going to believe him a traitor. He never expected to witness the fall of Voldemort. So what if his life was winding towards his end? It wasn't a surprise to him. The important thing was to keep it together...and thus to stay alive as long as possible.

During those few days of solitude, he faced up to the realisation that Miss Granger's regard and respect meant more to him than it should. And the brief interlude under the mistletoe had prompted hours of ruminating on what exactly she might have meant by it. All the more reason to dispel any positive notions she might have on the subject of him and his personality immediately on his return to school. That way, his ridiculous feelings would have no opportunity to intervene between him and his duty. Killing Albus was going to be difficult enough without having to worry about the effect it might have on his relationship to a certain Gryffindor prefect. The success of Dumbledore's plan hinged on no-one knowing where his true loyalties lay, and since he was going to have to live the awful, lonely existence necessary to that charade, he'd better harden his heart and begin his preparations. Miss Granger would be but a practice run for the future.

Severus returned to Hogwarts with a clear sense of purpose, Apparating to the school gates in just enough time to drop his luggage in his rooms and make his way to the beginning-of-term staff meeting. He was one of the last to arrive, with the exception of Dumbledore and Flitwick. Keen to avoid inconsequential conversation, Severus

slipped into his favourite chair and plastered an intimidating scowl on his face. It wouldn't keep Minerva or Hooch away if they decided to talk to him, but most of the others could be relied on to keep their distance. Unfortunately, a scowl was not enough to drown out the inane chattering of those around him. Slughorn was the worst. Apparently he'd left England for the entire two-week vacation and was regaling Pomona with details of a beach holiday in Barbados. The mental image of Slughorn lounging around in a bathing suit was far from pleasant.

". . . and such delightful drinks, served in a coconut! You would have loved it! Why," his tone changed slightly, "hello Minerva! How was Christmas? I was sorry not to have seen you at my little party!" Severus began reciting the ingredients in a common calming drought in an attempt to ignore the conversation behind him, but Slughorn's voice was singularly grating. "Your Hermione was there, of course...she's a regular member of my Slug Club gatherings!" Severus gritted his teeth at the mention of Miss Granger. That other teachers might make liberal use of her first name, and even throw around personal pronouns, was no concern of his. "She and the McLaggen boy make quite a handsome couple!"

"McLaggen?" asked Poppy. "Not that idiot who ate a pound of doxy eggs for a bet?"

"Nonsense, Horace," Minerva replied complacently, "Hermione Granger has far more important things on her mind than taking a boyfriend!" Minerva persisted in the ridiculous belief that all of the smartest girls were lesbians, and Severus resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"Oh ho, I can assure you it's true! They indulged in the most enthusiastic display under the mistletoe that I've seen in a good few years!"

Jealousy and rage flared in an instant. Only the kind of control honed by years of spying prevented Severus from leaping from his chair and hexing Slughorn into oblivion. Of course, it wasn't exactly Slughorn's fault, but Severus had never liked him anyway.

Dumbledore's arrival prevented Minerva from any reply beyond an indignant huff, and the other staff members began to settle into their seats. Severus was left with the very clear realisation that his emotions regarding Miss Granger were not as controlled as he had hoped.

Severus had some moderate success ignoring Miss Granger in her DADA classes...there she was but one face among a sea of students...but when she came down to his office on Monday night for her first lesson of the term, it was a completely different matter.

"Enter," he called when she knocked on his door precisely at eight. He didn't look up from the paper he was marking.

"Good evening, Professor," Miss Granger greeted him cheerfully and walked to her customary seat in front of his desk. There was a spring in her step that hadn't been there at the end of the previous term. "I hope that you enjoyed your holidays."

"You certainly seemed poised to enjoy yours." He pronounced the word "enjoy" such that the sexual implications of the comment were evident.

Her brows shot together in surprise, but she kept her face open and the tone of her reply remained light, "I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I wonder," he pondered, affecting an air of deep contemplation, "did you lurk under the mistletoe and molest every male of your acquaintance?" Severus felt the surge of his anger like an old friend. After the emotional and psychological turmoil of the last week, the normality of vicious anger was a relief. Part jealous rage, part sorrow at Dumbledore's manipulations, part sheer terror inspired both by the prospect of his impending death and that of a continuing life as Dumbledore's murderer, the whole mess of his feelings coalesced in the figure of the young woman before him. How dare she smile when he was so miserable? How dare she kiss McLaggen and then try to kiss him? He sneered at her.

Her face shuttered immediately. The smiling welcome of her greeting evaporated, to be replaced by a blank expression. "Professor, I find this line of questioning inappropriate. Assuming that you do have a lesson planned for this evening, now would be a good time to begin."

"Miss Granger," he snarled, noting the slight twitch it invoked, "this is my office, and you trespass on my time. There are a number of lessons that you"...he gave individual emphasis to each of the next few words, sweeping a disparaging gaze up and down her body as he did so..."need to learn, I will decide when and where. Do I make myself clear?"

Miss Granger had clenched her hands into fists; her face was very pale and her mouth pressed into a thin line. "I am not here as your student, Professor Snape, but as a member of the Order of the Phoenix. And I deserve to be treated with respect." The pitch of her voice was notably higher than normal.

"Indeed," he sneered, "I have never noticed much respect at Order meetings."

"I have always treated..."

"Silence!" Severus rose out of his chair and leant forward, both hands pressed flat against the wooden surface of his desk. "If it's respect you're after, I wouldn't advise sleeping your way to the top."

"How dare you?" Miss Granger leant forward in her own chair, her chin raised at an aggressive angle.

"Did you feel more respected? Or less?" he pressed onward nastily, "after a pity fuck from Viktor Krum?"

Miss Granger gasped. Her right hand trembled where she held it over her wand pocket. For a moment she stared at him, speechless, then she swept up her satchel and rose to her feet. "I don't have to listen to this," she commented, only a slight shake in her voice. Her chin was held high, and she struggled to keep her face impassive. Severus caught a glimpse of the precarious balance of her tears across her lower eyelids. Without another word, without looking back, she exited the room.

The door closed behind her with a decisive thud. With a snarl worthy of a wounded animal, Severus swept the contents of his desk onto the floor. He strode from his office into his sitting room and wordlessly summoned the firewhiskey bottle. Getting angry at Miss Granger hadn't improved his mood in the slightest.

One is the Loneliest Number

Chapter 19 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

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This story would be the lesser without the help of my marvellous betas, LAxo and WriterMerrin...as always, they have my thanks.

Hermione broke into a run the instant that Snape's door closed behind her. She needed to put as much distance as possible between herself and his nasty words. Once she emerged out of the dungeons, however, she slowed to a frantic walk. It was not yet nine o'clock, and there were still a number of people about; she had no desire to cap her horrific evening with detention for running in the corridors. She also had no desire to be seen in tears and she determinedly blinked away those that threatened to fall as she began the climb up to the seventh floor and the safety of Professor Vector's office. For once, the staircases swung her way, and after only one brief detour to avoid a confrontation with McLaggen, she greeted the familiar sight of Vector's door with a sigh of relief. She knocked, then entered, not waiting for permission.

"Hermione," Vector's welcoming smile slid immediately into concern, and her worry beads clicked into silence as she dropped them on the desk. Picking up her wand, Vector conjured a comfy chair. "Sit down, right away. I'll make you a cup of coffee."

Hermione sniffed loudly and felt the first of many hot tears trickle down her throat. "I don't..." sniff, "...suppose you have tea?" she asked, her voice catching.

"A vastly inferior beverage," remarked Vector, "but under the circumstances . . ." She tapped her wand on her brikki, transfiguring it into a kettle, and put it on the conjured flame to boil. Rummaging in her desk drawer, she emerged with some tea things and a large colourful biscuit tin decorated with a sappy scene of Hogsmeade at Christmas time.

Hermione was crying in earnest now. She put her elbows on the desk and covered her head with her hands. "I'm sorry," she sobbed.

"Don't be ridiculous, Hermione. I don't want to hear your apologies. You'll feel better if you just let it out."

Vector let the kettle boil at a natural pace and took the time to warm the teapot before steeping the leaves. By the time she had two cups of tea ready, the worst of Hermione's tears had passed. Hermione took the proffered cup and sank back in her chair, cradling the warmth of her drink to her chest and willingly accepting a chocolate biscuit.

"You must think I'm an idiot," she remarked, smiling rather wanly at her professor.

Vector gave her a mock unimpressed look. "Nobody thinks Hermione Granger is an idiot," she replied.

Hermione exhaled through her nose in a gesture that was half laugh, half sigh. She swallowed the last of her biscuit and reached for another. The chocolate was definitely therapeutic.

"Why are people so difficult?" she asked, not really expecting an answer.

"I imagine you're referring to a particular person, not people in general." Vector dunked a biscuit in her tea and bit into the soggy part.

"Well, two particular people, if the truth be told." Hermione sighed.

"Boys?"

Hermione assented with something very close to a gurgle of laughter. It was true, in its own way, but thinking of Snape as a "boy" was a stretch. "Not Harry," she added, not wanting to implicate him...alongside Ron, he was one of the two obvious "boys" in her life.

"May I?" Vector asked permission as if she didn't want to pry.

Hermione nodded, her teeth worrying her lower lip.

"Your argument with Ronald Weasley has been evident for weeks." Hermione gave Vector a wry smile of confirmation. "And the other, I would imagine, is Severus Snape."

Hermione's eyes widened. "How did you know?"

Vector tapped a complicated pattern on a nearby scrap of parchment with the tip of her wand, and the full matrix appeared in its convoluted graphical representation. Moving her wand like that of an orchestral conductor, Vector rotated, manipulated and enlarged the particular section that Hermione recognised as that of current events. Then Vector flipped it across the third temporal axis and eliminated most of the visible lines. The two that remained were twisted into a complex relationship, arcing around and over each other, pulled and bent out of shape by the force of their interaction.

"Oh." Hermione stared. She added, rather lamely, "We had an argument."

"I'm not surprised," Vector sounded amused. "Severus is a very argumentative man."

"Are you . . . and Professor Snape . . . friends?" Asking the question, Hermione realised that she'd grown up a lot in the past year. To think of her teachers as humans with outside lives and friendships and faces that they didn't usually show to their students was an odd sensation.

Vector considered the question carefully before responding. "Severus is a very private man. I could count on the fingers of one hand those he considers his friends: Albus, Minerva, Hooch, Poppy." She paused for a second, staring at the large blackboard full of calculations with a pensive expression and her head tilted to one side. "And Lucius Malfoy," she concluded. "Once a month Minerva or Hooch arranges a friendly get-together, people play poker, drink a little, chat about things other than school work. Severus is a pretty regular participant. I go only occasionally, I'm not a very social person these days." She sighed, her normally happy face serious, and gestured at the equations on the wall behind her. "Under normal circumstances, Hermione, it would be unethical to perform such detailed Arithmantic calculations on one's colleagues." Hermione drew a sharp breath of realisation and looked at her professor with a new sympathy. "It's hard, knowing so much about them all. That, for the most part, they don't know I know does nothing to ease my conscience." She pulled a wry face. "It's dangerous, too. They mustn't know that I know, or what I know. My knowledge of Dumbledore's plans is a calculated risk." She grinned at her own joke. "I have to know more of what most people are up to than the Headmaster is really comfortable with. I don't know everything, of course, but keeping to myself makes it easier for him, and ultimately easier for me."

It must be lonely, thought Hermione, like being a spy. Her stomach clenched at the tangential reminder of Snape. *Dumbledore wants to limit the possibilities of betrayal* Hermione stared up at the universal matrix, lost in thought. *But that leaves the Arithmancer as the weak link...no*, she corrected herself sharply with a glance towards Vector, *the Arithmancer is the link, not necessarily a weak link*. There was nothing weak about Vector. *Dumbledore, Vector, possibly Snape . . . and me* Hermione wasn't just a member of the Order of the Phoenix, but one with the knowledge to betray them all. It was a vast and terrible responsibility.

"If it's any consolation," remarked Vector, interrupting her reverie, "I think it very likely that you will repair your friendship with both men, perhaps even having strengthened your bonds by this temporary misunderstanding."

"Hmph." *With Ron, perhaps, but I don't even know what I did wrong with Professor Snape* "How likely, exactly?"

Vector smiled enigmatically. "We can't necessarily change the events in our lives, Hermione, but we can change our responses to them."

Hermione wondered, not for the first time, whether Vector was perceptive because she was such a good Arithmancer, or vice versa. *Both, probably*, she decided, pleased

by the Arithmantic elegance of the response: *one solution does not necessarily invalidate other solutions*

"You know, Hermione," Vector continued, "I am particularly sorry to see you so upset this evening because today in class it seemed you were somewhat happier than you had been in awhile."

Hermione blinked and reached unsuccessfully for the feelings of well-being and self-confidence that she'd felt on her arrival back at school. Though her conversation and cup of tea with Vector had calmed her down, the bubble of self-content had well and truly burst. "You're right, Professor. I had a nice holiday." Hermione gave herself a mental shake. "I met up with an old friend. I was going to add him to the matrix, actually. We came up with a plan whereby if the Ministry falls he will work to smuggle Muggle-borns out of the country."

From the sudden stillness of Vector's body, Hermione realised that she had said something important. Her professor looked at her with an odd expression. "That, Hermione, is a calculation that I'd be very interested in hearing more about." Somewhat relieved to have moved away from the topic of Severus Snape or the lonely life of the Arithmantic strategist, Hermione shared the salient details of her and Viktor's plan. Within minutes, she and Vector had started to sketch out the beginnings of the relevant equations, a task that would keep them occupied for the next few hours.

During break the next morning, Harry pulled Hermione out into the chilly air of the courtyard and regaled her with the details of his lesson with Dumbledore and his assigned task to get the complete memory of Voldemort's question from Slughorn.

"He must be determined to hide what really happened if Dumbledore couldn't get it out of him," she mused. *After all, he could have used Legilimency quite easily*
"Horcruxes . . . Horcruxes . . . I've never even heard of them . . ."*Another thing to add to the to-do list, then* At least she had more than enough work to keep her busy.

"You haven't?" The blind faith Harry maintained in her ability to explain everything for him was a little touching.

"They must be really advanced Dark Magic, or why would Voldemort have wanted to know about them? I think it's going to be difficult to get the information, Harry, you'll have to be very careful about how you approach Slughorn, think out a strategy . . ."

"Ron reckons I should just hang back after Potions this afternoon . . ."

Hermione felt anger tighten her throat, affecting the pitch of her voice. "Oh, well, if *Won-Won* thinks that, you'd better do it. After all, when has *Won-Won's* judgment ever been faulty?"

"Hermione, can't you...?"

"No!" She turned on her heel and walked inside, taking her bluebell flames with her. If Harry thought she was the one that needed to apologise, he could bloody well stand out in the cold by himself.

There was still a good fifteen minutes of break left, and Hermione ducked into one of the study alcoves that lined the courtyard to catch her breath and compose herself before class. That way she might also avoid having to talk to anyone else. Had the alcove been empty, it would have been a good plan, but unfortunately Hermione found herself face-to-face with Tracey Davis, Arithmantic calculations spread around her in some disarray. Davis didn't look very happy, and Hermione's sudden intrusion did nothing to improve her mood.

"What do you want, Granger?" she snarled.

Already upset by her near-altercation with Harry and by thoughts of Ron, the sight of Davis and her Arithmancy work was an unwelcome reminder of the situation with Snape. The sight of the Slytherin girl triggered a sharp pang of jealousy, followed quickly by anger at herself for having such a visceral response, then anger at Snape for his horrible behaviour.

"Any luck with your project?" Hermione asked in reply, her voice as falsely sweet as she could manage.

Davis pulled her work towards herself protectively. "Fuck off, Granger," she retorted rudely. "You'll be as happy as all the other little Gryffindors if the curse holds...don't bother trying to deny it."

"I'll take that as a no," Hermione sniped back, turning on her heel and making a break for it.

If Hermione had found Hogwarts lonely before Christmas, second term was far worse. She now had to avoid McLaggen along with Ron and Lavender, which put the Gryffindor common room out of bounds at all times except very early mornings, and it was still impossible to hang around in her dormitory. She saw Harry only at alternate meals and in the library where, despite her best efforts, she'd been unable to discover anything at all about Horcruxes. She missed her private lessons with Professor Snape more than was reasonable, especially given that during DADA he'd managed to escalate his level of general nastiness to previously unimaginable heights.

A couple of hours of intense work had lifted the jinx from Marietta Edgecombe, though it would take a couple of weeks for the spots to fade completely. Hermione kept track of their progress via surreptitious glances during meals, but though the spots were fading, Marietta's malicious glances were as angry as ever. The entire chain of events left Hermione feeling even more miserable. The only place that she felt genuinely happy was the sanctuary of Vector's office, and as a consequence, Hermione spent as much time there as possible.

The calculations were coming along well. With the benefit of Vector's expert help, adding Viktor had been fairly straightforward. Factoring in the assumption that the Ministry would fall, his presence in the matrix had demonstrated a significant reduction in the number of potential fatalities.

Adding Malfoy had been harder, and not only because she couldn't reveal his participation to Vector, but eventually Hermione had resolved the equations to her satisfaction. His formula was definitely connected to that of Katie Bell, and the probabilities were looking extraordinarily high that he was in fact a Death Eater.

She hadn't told Harry, yet...or anyone else for that matter. Ethically, she was hamstrung. Her calculations made the question of what Malfoy would do next rather pressing, but at the same time the evidence was strong that Dumbledore, or at least Snape, already had a fair idea of who was responsible for the original incident. And if she told anyone about her results, she would have to reveal Harry's eavesdropping. Similarly, she wasn't at liberty to tell Harry anything about the Arithmancy calculations, though in this instance her enforced secrecy came as something of a relief. To be completely honest, the mammoth "I told you so" moment was an indulgence she didn't have the emotional fortitude to sit through right now.

With Malfoy's equation stabilised, her next step was to recalculate the probability variables for everything this academic year. Hopefully, his addition to the matrix would prove sufficient to quantify some of the existing imprecision.

Still turning the mathematical structures over in her mind, Hermione wove her way across the castle from Vector's office towards Gryffindor tower. There was still an hour or so before curfew, and she'd timed it with the hope that she might beat the Quidditch players back from practice. That way Lavender would be down in the common room waiting for Ron, and Hermione could get ready for bed unimpeded and without having to witness the spectacle of their reunion.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," Dumbledore's sudden appearance surprised Hermione somewhat; it wasn't usual to run into the headmaster in the corridors.

"Good evening, Professor."

"How timely that we should meet like this. Why don't you come up to my office for a cup of tea?"

It wasn't the kind of invitation that could be easily refused, and Hermione found herself following along in Dumbledore's wake. An initial tendril of curiosity was followed by a thumping panic that something terrible had happened...perhaps to her parents?

Dumbledore made no mention of the purpose of the visit until they were both settled in chairs, cups of steaming tea in hand. He smiled kindly at her over his glasses, fussing with milk and sugar and offering her a variety of biscuits.

"Well, my dear, how are your studies going?"

Some of Hermione's tension dissipated: her parents were okay. What was left solidified into a cold solid lump somewhere below her navel. This was about Professor Snape.

"My work on the Arithmantic equations is going very well." *There, that was the truth.*

"Wonderful! And how goes the Occlumency?"

"Occlumency is no longer giving me any trouble, sir." Hermione raised her chin slightly and stared Dumbledore directly in the eye, challenging him, almost, to take her at her word. She noted a flicker of something like annoyance in the twitch of his mouth. Did he think that tea, biscuits, and the kindly-old-man routine would have her pouring out the story into his sympathetic ear? She wasn't so certain that she wanted Dumbledore as a confidant.

Dumbledore sat back in his chair and regarded her appraisingly. With his tea cradled against his chest, he reached out his blackened hand and used one finger to twist the saucer in its place. The gesture threw his injury into sharp focus. If anything, it looked worse than it had months earlier; the black had definitely crept further up his arm and now disappeared under his sleeve. Hermione caught herself watching his movements with a horrified fascination and wrenched her eyes back up to his. He sighed and changed tack dramatically.

"It has come to my attention that you and Professor Snape had a falling out."

Hermione raised one eyebrow. There was absolutely no way she was going to discuss the details with Dumbledore. "Indeed? I think that's a matter you should take up with Professor Snape, sir."

The corners of Dumbledore's eyes crinkled into his first genuine smile of the evening. "I did," he replied. "It wasn't the most . . . ah, convivial conversation." Placing his teacup back on its saucer, he held up both hands palm outwards in a gesture of denial. "Listen, Miss Granger, I have no intention of prying into the specifics of the altercation." He paused. "I have known Severus a long time. Long enough to consider him a good friend." Dumbledore shrugged self-deprecatingly. "I would trust him with my life. Yet Severus is, at best, prickly. I don't know what went on between the two of you, but I do know that it upset him."

Hermione said nothing, her face impassive. *God, he's a manipulative old bastard. I guess Dumbledore thinks the resumption of our lessons important to "the cause."*

"I am an old man, Miss Granger, and I have asked Severus to perform a difficult task. I hope that you won't be too hard on him."

Hermione felt an icy anger. She would like nothing better than to forgive Professor Snape, but if Dumbledore thought it her place to make amends, he was wrong. Oh, she knew that Snape was not the type to apologise...hell, she didn't even think that Ron would ever say sorry directly...but she needed some indication, some gesture that was less acerbic than usual, that for Snape would count. "Is there anything else, Professor?" Hermione was aware that her behaviour bordered on disrespect, but she didn't care.

Dumbledore sighed once more. "No, Miss Granger, you may go."

As she stood to leave, Hermione gave Fawkes a long look. He stared back, his head tilted to one side in a manner reminiscent of Professor Vector. "Goodnight, Professor, thank you for the tea."

Dumbledore accepted her thanks with a nod and waved goodbye with his damaged hand. The long sleeve of his robe slipped down with the movement, exposing his skin to the elbow. Hermione felt a little sick at the knowledge that it was black all the way down.

Hermione glanced at her watch as she descended the moving spiral staircase. She would have to hurry if she wanted to make curfew *Is Dumbledore right?* she wondered, turning her feet towards Gryffindor tower without paying attention to the route. *Is Professor Snape as upset as I am?*

The hands that grabbed her were rough and strong, and they pulled her into a dark alcove before she could react. She was spun into the wall with a thud; the books she was carrying clattered to the floor. A hand covered her mouth while another held the wrist of her wand hand tightly, crushing it. Her struggles were ineffectual. The hand on her face pushed her head back hard, and as she twisted, the stones scraped her cheek and bruised the back of her skull. She tried to kick out at her attacker, but with a low laugh, a large body pressed against hers, effectively trapping her.

"You and me, Granger," said a man's voice, panting slightly. "We've got unfinished business."

Shit. She recognised that voice. *Shit.*

Misery Loves Company

Chapter 20 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Twenty : Misery Loves Company

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute. Where dialogue from the original Harry Potter books is quoted by me, the relevant text is marked with an asterisk.

I want to thank my betas, LAxo and WriterMerrin, who never tire of pointing out the errors I make over, and over, and over again.

After a certain point, Severus couldn't bear to remain in his office. Gryffindor had booked the Quidditch pitch, yet she still hadn't come. Instead, he chose to stalk the hallways, silencing groups of chattering students as he swept past and deducting points for the most minor of infractions. With curfew fast approaching, Severus turned his feet towards Gryffindor tower. There were always a couple of students who thought five minutes late was soon enough.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, he ducked behind a handy suit of armour and Disillusioned himself with a nonverbal spell. In his extensive experience terrifying students, stepping out and surprising them from behind had proved the most satisfactory method. He checked his watch just as his wrist disappeared from sight. Whoever it was, they were thirty seconds late.

Yet when Hermione Granger wandered past his hiding place, he froze. She looked pensive. Her gaze was unfocussed, and she was chewing at the side of one thumb, several Arithmancy books held lightly to her chest with her other hand. Without entirely meaning to, Severus began to follow her, staying well back so that his footsteps would not be heard. When she turned the corner in front of him, he quickened his pace, unwilling to lose sight of her for any longer than strictly necessary. But from the corner, she was nowhere to be seen. His eyes narrowed in consternation. Keeping his footsteps light, he continued forward, his eyes raking the walls to either side, his senses on high alert for any sound or scent that might suggest the presence of Potter and his damned invisibility cloak. That's when he overheard the sounds of someone struggling and a man's voice, low and threatening:

"You and me, Granger, we've got unfinished business."

Without pausing to think through a plan of attack, Severus stepped into the adjacent alcove, simultaneously dropping his Disillusionment charm and filling the space with light. He assessed the scene before him in an instant: McLaggen held Hermione captive against the wall. At the sudden bright flare, McLaggen turned slightly, giving Hermione just enough purchase to knee him sharply in the upper torso and wrench her wand hand free. Jerking her head back and then quickly forwards, she rammed her forehead into the bridge of his nose; the impact made a sickening crunch. Seconds later, McLaggen was hit by a powerful Revulsion Jinx, unleashed by Severus. There was a flash of crimson, and the heavy-set young man was thrown bodily across the alcove, fetching up against the far wall. Hermione lost no time drawing her own wand, and McLaggen opened his eyes to the sight of two wandpoints, each pointing unwaveringly at his heart.

Severus took in Miss Granger's appearance. There was blood on the side of her face; she was obviously shaken and bruised in several places. He wanted to wrap her in his arms; he wanted to kill McLaggen. *McLaggen*. "Lovers' tiff?" he asked, dripping sarcasm.

"No, sir." Miss Granger's voice was as hard as steel, her attention focussed on the young man sprawled before her.

He turned his own attention towards her attacker, and the bile rose in his throat. "One hundred points from Gryffindor, McLaggen," he snapped. "I will leave Professor McGonagall to devise a suitable punishment; I warn you, she has little sympathy for abusive men."

McLaggen stared up at him groggily. His nose was clearly broken, and blood dripped from one nostril, running in rivulets down his chin.

Severus leant forward and grasped a handful of his robes. With a sharp tug he pulled McLaggen to his feet. "See you report to her office tomorrow morning before breakfast. Do I make myself clear?"

McLaggen nodded desperately, fear having penetrated his shocked state. When Severus threw him bodily from the alcove, his sense of self preservation asserted itself immediately, and even before Severus encouraged him, "Hospital Wing, now!" he was moving away. Severus turned back towards Miss Granger. She had sheathed her wand and was busy gathering up the books she had dropped.

"Come here." His voice was unnecessarily harsh. She faltered for a second with her fingers around the last book before turning towards him, her books held like a shield before her. "Hold still." With his wand outstretched, Severus cast a simple diagnostic charm. *Bruising and the cut on her face* Without a salve, he could do nothing about the bruises, but he stepped closer and pressed his wand to the cut, holding his entire body stiff. Hermione flinched only barely at the touch of his wand, her face impassive. Once it healed, he stepped back immediately and gestured towards the exit. She preceded him out.

In the corridor he swept past her, heading for the entrance to Gryffindor tower. Neither one of them spoke, but he heard her footsteps behind him. At the Fat Lady's portrait, he stopped.

"If I catch you out after curfew again, Miss Granger, you will lose house points." He gestured rather gracelessly at the portrait.

Hermione took a deep breath. "Professor," she began.

"Silence!"

"I just..."

"Ten points from Gryffindor," he snarled, clicking his fingers imperiously at the Fat Lady, who graced him with a rebellious look before swinging open. "Inside, now!"

Hermione pursed her lips in annoyance. Without another glance, she stepped through the portrait hole, leaving only the Fat Lady to note the desolate expression on Snape's face and his fiercely clenched fists.

"You're welcome, Professor!" the Fat Lady called sarcastically to his retreating back, but the professor made no reply.

His first destination was McGonagall's office, where he threw open the door as if it were that of the Potions classroom. Minerva glanced up in surprise at his sudden arrival.

"Severus! What is the meaning of this?"

"Spare me the histrionics, Minerva. Tomorrow morning before breakfast, Cormac McLaggen is to report to you for punishment. You really should keep your students under better control, you know?"

"McLaggen? What has he done now?"

Severus sneered. "Apparently he's graduated from self-destructive behaviour to domestic abuse."

"For goodness sake, Severus! Stop looming, sit down, and tell me what happened."

Severus chose to ignore her instructions. Instead of sitting, he leant over her desk towards her, his hands pressed to the wooden surface. "I caught him in an alcove close to Gryffindor tower engaged in the act of bashing Miss Granger's head against the wall." Minerva gasped and pressed one hand against her heart. "While you are obviously incapable of policing his behaviour, Minerva, I do hope you can be trusted to punish him." With that, Severus turned and left, leaving Minerva spluttering to herself.

Once he arrived in his own office, it took only moments to locate a bruise salve. Calling a house elf, he gave instructions for it to be delivered to Miss Granger immediately. That done, he returned to the corridors, where he traced a lonely and peripatetic path to while away the hours in which sleep was unlikely to come.

The next few days saw little improvement in Severus' mood. He slept little and quarrelled with anyone who came close enough to engage in conversation. He refused to go flying with Hooch though she asked several times and was even rude to Minerva in her Animagus form, chasing her from his presence with a shower of green sparks.

On Saturday evening, having pushed his meal around his plate for just long enough to count as present during dinner, Severus rose to leave. He was held back by Dumbledore's hand on his arm.

"My dear boy, I had hoped we might take an evening constitutional together."

Severus re-seated himself reluctantly. The headmaster had a talent for issuing invitations that were impossible to wriggle out of. "Very well, Albus, though I can't imagine the health benefit to be gained from the February air in Scotland."

Dumbledore smiled benignly and patted his arm in a distracted way. "Have some chocolate pudding before we go," he suggested. Severus crossed his arms and scowled.

Once they began their walk, Dumbledore seemed oddly reluctant to begin the conversation, and they were well away from the castle walls before he spoke.

"I was grateful, Severus, for your prompt action with regard to Miss Granger this week."

Severus stiffened, his hands clenching reflexively. "I have no desire to speak of Miss Granger, Albus."

"Ah, I understand that you haven't yet recommenced your lessons."

Severus chose to lurch off on a tangent rather than answer the implied question. "What are you doing with Potter, all these evenings you are closeted together?"

Dumbledore sighed. "Why? You aren't trying to give him more detentions, Severus? That boy will soon have spent more time in detention than out."

"He is his father over again..."

"In looks, perhaps, but his deepest nature is much more like his mother's. I spend time with Harry because I have things to discuss with him, information I must give him before it is too late."

Severus heard the implied criticism. There were things he should be teaching Hermione Granger, but for that it was already too late. A wave of despair threatened to undo him. *No*. Taking a leaf from Granger's own book, he folded flat every memory he had of her from the last three years and tucked them within the library books of his mind. He was a spy. He had a job to do. He turned over Dumbledore's comments carefully, calling up those of the other night as well. *"Information I must give him," . . . "If I know him, he will have arranged matters so that when he does set out to meet his death, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort."*

"Information. You trust him . . . you do not trust me."

"It is not a question of trust. I have, as we both know, limited time. It is essential that I give the boy enough information for him to do what he needs to do."

"And why may I not have the same information?" *"I am supposed to tell Potter when to die, without knowing any details of the essential secret plan he must complete first. Am I really supposed to determine the correct moment from the Dark Lord's behaviour towards Nagini?"* The plan was riddled with holes large enough to admit the Hogwarts' Express.

"I prefer not to put all of my secrets in one basket, particularly not a basket that spends so much time dangling on the arm of Lord Voldemort."

"Which I do on your orders!"

"And you do it extremely well. Do not think that I underestimate the constant danger in which you place yourself, Severus. To give Voldemort what appears to be valuable information while withholding the essentials is a job I would entrust to nobody but you."

"Yet you confide much more in a boy who is incapable of Occlumency, whose magic is mediocre, and who has a direct connection into the Dark Lord's mind!"

"Voldemort fears that connection. Not so long ago he had one small taste of what truly sharing Harry's mind means to him. It was pain such as he has never experienced. He will not try to possess Harry again, I am sure of it. Not in that way."

"I don't understand." Severus knew he sounded petulant and it only made him feel grumpier.

"Lord Voldemort's soul, maimed as it is, cannot bear close contact with a soul like Harry's. Like a tongue on frozen steel, like flesh in flame..."

"Souls?" Severus spat the word at the older man. "We were talking of minds!"

"In the case of Harry and Lord Voldemort, to speak of one is to speak of the other." Dumbledore scanned the grounds around them carefully, then continued in a whisper. "After you have killed me, Severus..."

"You refuse to tell me everything, yet you expect that small service of me!" *"With Dumbledore dead, no-one will know the whole story, no-one will be there to ensure everything turns out alright in the end... Gods, who will swoop down and shower Potter with enough house points to take home the metaphorical House Cup?"* "You take a great deal for granted, Dumbledore! Perhaps I have changed my mind!"

"You gave me your word, Severus. And while we are talking about services you owe me, I thought you agreed to keep a close eye on our young Slytherin friend?" Dumbledore sighed at the naked anger on the thin face before him. "Come to my office tonight, Severus, at eleven, and you shall not complain that I have no confidence in you . . ."

As far as Dumbledore was concerned, the conversation was over. Severus crossed his arms mutinously, but turned back towards the castle without another word.

Eleven p.m. turned out to be a meeting with Vector about the Arithmancy calculations. Dumbledore was particularly thrilled with the changes that Krum's addition had made to the matrix, repeatedly reviewing the probability outcomes for Muggle-born wizards and witches. Severus understood the gesture of trust implied by his presence in the room. The hopes and plans of the entire Order were spread before him in formulaic garb. Were any hint of this information to reach Voldemort's attention, the consequences would be nothing short of monstrous. Yet, he wasn't happy to be there.

Vector always made Severus uncomfortable. He didn't like the fact that the woman knew so much about him; he couldn't stand her permanent smile. He had no doubt that she had plotted out and abstracted his earlier career as a Death Eater with Arithmantic accuracy, even as he sat in her classes as a sulky teenager. He hadn't seen the equations themselves until the year before Potter started at Hogwarts, but even now, Vector's presence reminded him of the sickening sensation of seeing the stark inscription of his life and motivations in numerical form. It left him exposed and touchy, as if this smiling, inscrutable woman saw through to the raw edges of his soul.

With his memories of Hermione Granger safely packed away, the frequent mentions of her name were nothing but a minor irritation. *Although, later . . .* He pushed that thought to one side and concentrated on the conversation.

"Her work is extraordinary, as always," remarked Vector. "Severus," she continued, "I've been meaning to ask whether you've looked at Tracey Davis' Arithmancy project?"

"Being Head of Slytherin House does not entail working as Homework Help." He didn't bother to keep the sneer out of his voice, but Vector smiled at him regardless.

"If you get a chance, you should take a look. I think you would find it interesting. I don't think she will solve the problem she's set herself, but it's a commendable effort nonetheless." Vector had begun to gather up the various sheets of equation-covered parchment that were scattered over Dumbledore's desk. It looked like this interminable evening was finally coming to a close.

"Indeed. If there is no further need of my presence?" Severus turned towards Albus, one eyebrow raised.

Dumbledore waved one limp wrist in a well-intentioned gesture of dismissal. "Go ahead, Severus. Good night."

Severus nodded coldly at both Vector and Dumbledore and gratefully slipped out of the office, down the moving stairway and into the corridors. He ran into Peeves only a few moments later, but the poltergeist had the sense to flee at the sight of his drawn wand. The cat, Minerva, hissed at him from a dark corner, but given the violence of their last encounter, there was little chance that she might approach him; he returned to his quarters unimpeded. Once inside, he shut the door carefully and added several additional wards to the already-paranoid level of protection that was always in place. Then he shucked his teaching robes and his boots and sat himself in front of the fire.

From his experience shielding memories of Lily from Lord Voldemort, he knew that unpacking those that he had shut away was to relive them. It was to re-experience each memory in the oddly distended yet simultaneous temporality of recollection, a supersaturated rush of telescoped intensity; exquisitely agonising, unbearably real. It had served to keep the guilt he felt at the loss of Lily's friendship and her eventual death burning fiercely despite the passage of time. Now he had to do the same with his memories of Hermione, and the longer he left it, the worse it would be. He wasn't looking forward to the rest of his night.

Tuesday evening found Severus alone in his office once again. Hermione Granger's last two essays lay before him, and he stared at them in despair. Having measured the length of them against his wand, he knew, as he had at first glance, that both essays were precisely the assigned length and not an inch longer. Having read them through, he knew that they dealt competently and concisely with the topic at hand. The information therein was confined to that given in the text book. There were no references to recent research or interesting developments in the field, no tangential information from other disciplines, no hypotheses about future directions the work might take. There was no escaping it: these essays were bland and Severus felt robbed.

He glanced up at the wall clock: three minutes to eight. His left hand was balled into an uncomfortably tight fist, and he consciously relaxed it, shaking his lower arm gently. From the timetable posted in the staff room, he knew that the Gryffindor team had booked the Quidditch pitch. Resolutely, he returned his attention to the papers in front of him, dipping his quill into the pot of scarlet ink. With the tip of his quill poised to write though, he hesitated, unsure what to say. The seconds lengthened as a drip of red ink bulged, stretched and then fell onto the page, the blotch an unsightly wound against the cream parchment. Severus snarled with irritation and pulled out his wand, siphoning off the splash of ink. He glanced at the clock again: one minute to eight. His left hand was a fist once more, and the tension across the back of his neck was almost unbearable.

When the knock at the door came, he froze. Hope, despair and fury vied for supremacy. Who dared to interrupt him at this particular time? Only belatedly did he remember to speak: "Enter."

"Good evening, Professor," said Hermione Granger, her chin raised slightly under the force of his gaze. She crossed the room almost immediately and settled in the chair opposite his desk.

"What are you doing?" he growled the question, his stomach curdling with anxiety.

Hermione wasted several seconds arranging her satchel by her chair before she replied. "After much deliberation," she said in a clear voice, "I have decided to forgive you."

Severus blinked. *This can't be happening.* "Indeed," he managed finally, both eyebrows raised.

"Yes." Hermione paused, her lips pressed together in a thin line that reminded him inescapably of Minerva. "I would like to continue our lessons. There is still much that I need to learn."

Severus gripped the edge of his desk, hard. At her words, the room tilted under him, he felt like he was falling. He said nothing.

Noting his silence, Hermione pressed onwards. "After talking with Professor Dumbledore the other evening . . ."

Dumbledore. Sudden clarity solidified his surroundings with a clunk. He swallowed in an attempt to remove the bad taste from his mouth. "Ah, yes, the headmaster does like to interfere. Did he appeal to your good nature? Did he point out your responsibilities to Potter? Everyone has a disagreeable task in this war, and I am yours." The nasty tone of voice was a familiar and reassuring defence.

"You certainly know how to make yourself disagreeable," Hermione snapped back, anger blazing in her eyes, "but the headmaster said nothing of the sort. I chose to come here tonight because I wanted to." She faltered slightly, her anger seeping quickly away. "I came because I missed this, I missed you." She threw up her hands. "God knows why."

"Liar," he whispered.

She leaned forward, her arms crossed and her face hard. "You know I'm not lying." She pushed back into the chair again and crossed one leg over the other decisively. "As I was saying," she continued with a huff of irritation, "after talking with Professor Dumbledore the other evening, I realised that it wasn't worth waiting for an apology."

"You were waiting for an apology?" It was unlike Severus to seek clarification, and she looked at him curiously.

"Yes." She ran one hand through her curls. "I thought I deserved one." Glancing briefly at his rather dazed expression, she continued. "I would have forgiven you sooner had you only stuck to the standard Slytherin insult, 'Mudblood'..."

He found his voice at that. "Don't use that word! I would never..."

"Why not?" Hermione shrugged, a bitter expression on her face. "I am one. Although, it seems that only my enemies call me 'Mudblood.' My friends,..." her face twisted..."tend to favour 'where.'"

Severus didn't know whether to believe his ears. *She would have forgiven him "Mudblood"? She had missed him? She wanted an apology?* In one swift movement, he rose from his chair. He stepped around the table and stood before her, drawing his wand and holding it up like a dagger, point down.

"I, Severus Tobias Snape, apologise for my words and my actions..."

Hermione leapt up, her consternation visible. "No!" she exclaimed, but Severus ignored the interruption.

"For the wrong I have done thee, Hermione Jean Granger, I will make retribution, offering of myself and my talents until your honour is appeased." Though he'd never spoken them before, the formal words rolled off his tongue like poetry and his wand glowed with a bright white light that was painful to look at.

Hermione looked shaken, but she gripped hold of his wand just below his own hand and spoke with a steady voice. "I, Hermione Jean Granger, absolve you of all guilt, of the shame of your words and the mortifications of your actions. From this day forward, you shall stand as a man forgiven. Go forth in peace." As she spoke, the light emanating from his wand silvered gradually till everything in the room glistened like quicksilver. As she gave the final benediction, the light drained away, leaving Severus and Hermione staring into each others' faces, their bodies joined by the touch of their hands on his wand and the traces of magic that could still be felt in the tingle of their skin.

Hermione was panting slightly, and Severus was aware of the rapid rise and fall of his own chest.

"What was that for?" she demanded, her voice slightly shrill. "Did you think I wanted you bound to me by magical compulsion?"

He shrugged, slightly embarrassed. "You wanted an apology."

"Sorry would have been perfectly adequate." She let go of his wand, suddenly awkward at the proximity of their bodies. He tucked his wand away inside his sleeve and

stepped back behind his desk, gesturing for her to sit and doing so himself.

"Miss Granger," he said heavily. The difficulty of the situation swept over him. Had Hermione not absolved him so readily, the consequences of his impulsive apology might have been disastrous. What with Voldemort and Dumbledore, he could ill afford another taskmaster.

"Professor?" she interrupted his silence tentatively. "I, er, I'd really like it if you called me Granger." She paused and a ghost of a smile quirked the corner of her mouth. "Perhaps I should have asked before I absolved you?"

Relief washed over him at the smile in her voice. "Very well, Granger." He gave her an appraising look. "I understand you wish to continue your lessons."

"Yes, sir." She sat up a little straighter with anticipation.

"Come along, then," he said, with sudden purpose. Severus rose and opened a door concealed within the bookshelf behind his desk. He sketched a mock bow and waved her through. The look she gave him as she passed was only mildly apprehensive.

"Oh," she breathed, staring around the lab with open curiosity.

"Professor Slughorn was a little disappointed when he learnt that he wasn't to re-inherit the Potion Master's private lab, although I understand that the size of his current quarters made up for the disappointment somewhat." Severus smirked at Granger's appreciative grin. "I think it's time you started brewing some potions. We'll start with Polyjuice."

The delight on her face slipped a fraction. "But, sir, wouldn't it be best to do something that I haven't made before?"

He raised one eyebrow, mocking her impertinence. She had the grace to blush and bit down on her lower lip, though she didn't drop her gaze. "This," he said, tapping the blackboard on one wall with his wand so that silvery letters spelled out the ingredients and directions, "is a recipe that I modified myself."

"Oh." Granger's brow creased as she scanned the information on the board. "Sir?" she inquired. "How come the recipes in the Potions book are wrong?"

"They're not wrong," he replied, pulling down an appropriately sized cauldron from the rack. "They provide the minimal information to brew a particular potion. It's up to the potioneer to adapt and modify the potion according to their own taste and specifications. I like to ensure that the students learn the most effective and efficient modifications. Slughorn however," he sniffed a little derisively, "follows the book very closely."

"Huh." He could practically hear the wheels turning in Granger's head as she processed this information. "How come nobody ever told me that before?" she persisted.

"Granger!" Severus imbibed the word with six years worth of exasperation. "I've been telling you to stop parroting back the textbook and think for yourself since the day you arrived at Hogwarts!" Her mouth formed a small, silent 'oh' of surprise, and he shook his head in not-entirely-mock despair. "Through the far door, you'll find the supply cupboard. Go and get enough ingredients for a double batch."

She was stepping through to the cupboard, fingers trailing against the doorframe, when he overheard her muttered response, "I thought you were just being cruel."

Severus was glad that she wasn't there to note the way he flinched in response to her words. He had to get a grip.

By the time that the potion was at a state in which it could be left to simmer, it was well past curfew, and Severus insisted on walking Granger back to Gryffindor tower. Although neither one spoke as they wandered through the corridors, Severus marvelled at the difference between this walk and that of the previous Thursday. In sight of the Fat Lady, he stopped. "I'm sure you can find the way from here," he drawled.

Granger graced him with a broad smile. "Thank you, Professor," she said. For a moment she hovered, the tilt of her body teetering towards him as if she wanted to hug him. Then she held out her hand. Severus took it, his large hand folding around her smaller one, every nerve aware of the warmth of her palm against his and the firm grip of her fingers on his flesh. "Thank you," she said again.

"You have nothing to thank me for," he replied, his voice slightly harsher than he had intended. "Now go to bed . . . before I deduct house points."

She grinned and turned away, breaking into a jog within a few steps and hurrying to the portrait.

"No running in the halls!" he called after her, scowling to conceal the delight bubbling through his veins. She waved before disappearing behind the Fat Lady, who gave Severus a look that was clearly disapproving, even at a hundred paces.

As he retraced his steps, an aggressive hissing in the third-floor corridor alerted him to the presence of the grey tabby cat. Severus paused, then squatted with one hand extended towards the furious noises, though the cat herself was hidden in the shadows and impossible to discern by sight. "I owe you an apology," he said softly into the darkness.

It took an impossibly long moment, but eventually she stepped out, her tail held out stiffly from her body. Severus remained completely still as she regarded him warily just out of arm's reach. "Mrraaawhhh," she mewed, tilting her head to one side. He wiggled his outstretched fingers in reply. Stepping daintily, the cat stepped under his hand, lifting her back as she passed to rub up against him. She wound once around his legs, then stalked off into the distance.

"Goodnight, Minerva," he called after her retreating figure. As he continued on towards his office, a small smile quirked the corner of his mouth.

Granger's essays remained on the desk where he had left them. He smirked when he saw them, and drew his inkpot towards him without bothering to sit down. Dipping the quill firmly into the red ink, he leant over the desk. In his distinctively spiky script, he wrote firmly across the bottom of the scroll: "This essay is vastly inferior to your usual standard and barely worth the effort it would take to comment upon it. I suggest that you make more of an effort with the next one. A."

A / N : An extra special thanks to sinbad who researched Hermione's self defence moves against McLaggen. Thank you, thank you!

Knowledge = Power

Chapter 21 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute. Where dialogue from the original Harry Potter books is quoted by me, the relevant text is marked with an asterisk.

Please offer up your communal thanks for the tireless efforts of my incredible betas: LAXo and WriterMerrin!

Life was much more pleasant for Hermione once her lessons with Professor Snape began again. They were spending at least one evening a week in his private lab, brewing a variety of healing potions, and a second session was spent in his office learning basic healing spells and several extraordinarily complicated wards. As Vector had suggested it might, the argument and the apology that followed seemed to have strengthened her relationship with Professor Snape. He remained as brusque and challenging as ever, but she noticed a new attentiveness to her ideas, and the comments on her essays occasionally bordered on complimentary.

He wouldn't, however, teach her the sung spell he had used to heal her injury after the Battle at the Department of Mysteries, even though she'd directly asked him.

"Sir?" she had inquired, during their third session on healing spells. "Will you teach me the 'Phoenix song'?"

Snape fumbled uncharacteristically with the phial he was holding, yet managed to catch it nimbly before it hit the table. "What are you talking about, Granger?" he asked irritably.

"The song you used to heal me after Dolohov's curse," she explained. "Will you teach it to me?"

"No." His upper lip curled back derisively. "Besides, it is the tears of the phoenix that heal, not the song."

The flat refusal surprised Hermione, and she looked up at her professor curiously. There was something odd about the set of his face: his mouth was slightly more pinched than usual and his nostrils flared. "To hear Harry talk about Fawkes in the Chamber of Secrets," she stated neutrally, "you might think that phoenix song healed the heart while phoenix tears healed the body."

Snape turned his head away, busy labelling the potion he had been holding. His hair slid forward in front of his eyes. "As I recall, Granger, it was your body and not your heart that required attention. Your description of the counterspell is ludicrous."

Not exactly sure why she dared, Hermione pushed the conversation further. "I was delirious, of course," she shrugged, "but I still think there was something in the observation." Professor Snape hadn't moved. The muscles of his jaw, she noticed, were bunched tight under the skin. "There's a lot of the phoenix about you."

He looked up then, a bitter light in his eye. "Of course," he mocked, gesturing rather violently towards his black teaching robes, "was it my brilliant scarlet and gold plumage that gave it away? Or my ability to survive death? My talent for disappearing through anti-Apparation wards with a burst of flame, perhaps? Or merely my fondness for Gryffindors?" With each rhetorical question, Snape's anger grew larger, and by the end he was towering over her, practically spitting with rage.

"No," she interrupted his tirade calmly, raising both her eyebrows at him. Though he was shouting at her, she felt almost certain his anger was directed elsewhere. "I was thinking of your loyalty, bravery, ability to carry extraordinarily heavy burdens and your talent for healing." There was a long pause as they both attempted to stare the other down. "Although," she added, a hint of laughter creeping into her voice, "if I saw you in scarlet and gold, I might be better equipped to make the call."

The tension dropped from Snape's pose. His head rolled back, and he stared at the ceiling as if seeking celestial intervention. Then he strode to the door and held it wide.

"Out, Granger," he ordered. "You try my patience too much today. Come back next time."

That was almost, Hermione decided, a victory. She collected her things uncomplainingly and left the office. Though she wasn't sure what her "almost victory" entailed, it felt very important indeed.

In every spare moment, Hermione was working ferociously on the Arithmantic calculations. The addition of Draco Malfoy had impacted most of the equations concerning the immediate future, and she was determined to stabilise the alterations as soon as possible.

It also helped to fill the lonely gaps in her schedule that would have otherwise been spent with Harry and Ron. Harry, bless his heart, was still rigorously dividing his time between his two friends, but it was the balanced interaction between the three of them that Hermione missed the most. Without Ron, there was something missing from her friendship with Harry...a dopey, breezy companionship that was all red hair and freckles and contagious laughter. She missed him like a phantom limb: even in his absence there was pain and a sharply obvious hole.

Yet even with regard to Ron, she felt more hopeful. Though determined not to exploit her Legilimetic advantage, it was obvious from body language alone that things between Ron and Lavender were a little rocky. Every petulant scowl that crossed Lavender's face was a balm to Hermione and helped her to keep her head held high.

There were limits, however, and the morning of Ron's coming of age was one of them. Hermione had bought him a gift long before their argument and had harboured the hope that they would be friends again by now, their estrangement nothing but water under the bridge and fodder for joking references. Since that wasn't to be, she got out of bed early, determined to avoid Lavender's gushing morning gossip with Parvati, and crept off to Vector's office before anyone else was up. As she had hoped, the Arithmancy professor's office was empty, and Hermione managed a good hour and a half of uninterrupted work before the rumbling of her stomach forced her to the Great Hall for breakfast. Before entering, she braced herself and was surprised to note that neither Ron nor Harry was in attendance. Lavender and Parvati sat with their heads together, whispering over an elaborately wrapped gift. The presence of the package suggested that the girl hadn't yet had the opportunity to offer Ron her many happy returns. *Maybe if I eat quickly, I can get out without having to witness it* Hermione slipped into a seat and pulled a plate of eggs towards her.

"Where is he?"

Hermione looked up, fork poised halfway to her mouth, to see the harsh and tear-lined face of Lavender Brown. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, her own voice icy.

"Where is he, then? Why isn't he here?" Lavender sounded desperate.

Hermione raised one eyebrow in her best Snape impersonation. "I have no idea," she drawled. "The whereabouts of Ronald Weasley are no concern of mine."

All pretence aside, Hermione felt a twinge of concern as Lavender flounced back to Parvati. She glanced up at the High Table, noting the absence of McGonagall, Pomfrey, Snape and Slughorn; Vector and Trelawney weren't there either, but that was only to be expected. *Has something terrible happened?* Mechanically, Hermione chewed on another mouthful of food.

When Snape swept through the teachers' entrance and took his seat at the High Table, she looked up. He gazed out over the students breakfasting, scanning the room from one side to the other. When their eyes met, his habitual sneer deepened, though Hermione ignored it. Much more importantly, she felt the pressure of his mind push against hers. She dropped her Occlumency shields to find herself gazing into his memory.

Snape and McGonagall stood in the staff room. Her Head of House looked frazzled, and her Scottish burr was thickened by stress.

". . . ach, after a week or so in the Hospital Wing the boy will be fine...Potter did something with a bezoar...but, I ask you, who poisons someone on their birthday?"

Snape blinked and looked away, severing the connection. Hermione's eggs turned to ashes in her mouth. With some difficulty, she swallowed. The sight of her plate made her slightly nauseous. Pushing out her chair, she stood. *Ron. Poisoned.* The room around her felt unreal and insubstantial. *I have to get to the Hospital Wing* Oblivious to the people around her and to Neville's greeting as they crossed paths in the doorway, Hermione headed straight for the infirmary.

Harry was there when she arrived, pacing the hallway in front of the large double doors. As soon as he saw her, he grasped Hermione by both shoulders and started babbling almost incoherently.

"It was the mead! Thank God I remembered about the bezoar! And for Slughorn, but, of course if it wasn't for the love potion . . ."

Hermione squashed the urge to slap him and gripped hold of his robes instead, giving him a quick shake. "Calm down, Harry. Start at the beginning."

Harry took a deep breath and began over, this time starting with the birthday gifts and the love potion and finishing with the bezoar. He had only just finished when Ginny arrived and he had to relate the story all over again. Hermione said nothing, biting down on her overwhelming guilt. Her mind raced with an endless series of recriminations. *I should have talked to Dumbledore about Malfoy and the Arithmancy calculations . . . If only I had finished more of the formulae, I might have predicted this . . . If I'd asked for help from Professor Vector, she might have solved this part of the equation . . . If I'd listened to Harry earlier, I might have added Malfoy long ago.* Her head spun with awful possibilities, and despite the remembered echo of McGonagall's words that Ron would be fine, her stomach was clenched with the dread of what-ifs: *What if she was wrong? What if Ron were to die? What if I never get to speak with him ever again?*

When lunchtime came, Ginny sent Harry for sandwiches, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to eat. The younger girl tried to bully her into it, but when Hermione did nothing but stare distractedly into the distance, Ginny went back to an intensive and repetitive conversation with Harry about who poisoned Ron and why.

Only at eight o'clock in the evening did Madam Pomfrey finally allow them in to sit by Ron's bed, minutes before Fred and George turned up to join them. Ron looked pale and sickly. The sheet was tightly tucked up around his unnaturally still body, with only the faint rise and fall of his chest to show that he was alive. Seeing him like that, absent the vital spark of Ron-ness, failed to ease the anxiety in Hermione's chest. The conversation of the others washed over her, and only when the topic touched on potential targets did it cut through the fog of her distraction. Ginny was suggesting Dumbledore.

"Then the poisoner didn't know Slughorn very well," said Hermione thickly, "Anyone who knew Slughorn would have known there was a good chance he'd keep something that tasty for himself."

"Er-my-nee," mumbled Ron at the sound of her voice. Her throat went dry, a flush of relief balanced by the painful pressure on her heart. After a few incomprehensible murmurs, he began to snore, the familiar noise a welcome contrast to his previous silence.

Hagrid's sudden entrance re-ignited the conversation, and his ridiculous suggestion that someone was trying to bump off the Gryffindor Quidditch team spurred Hermione to join the conversation once more.

"Well, I don't think it's Quidditch," said Hermione grimly, "But I think there's a connection between the attacks."

"How d'you work that out?" inquired Fred.

"Well, for one thing, they both ought to have been fatal and weren't, although that was pure luck." Hermione counted against her fingers. "And for another, neither the poison nor the necklace seems to have reached the person who was supposed to be killed. Of course, that makes the person behind this even more dangerous in a way, because they don't seem to care how many people they finish off before they actually reach their victim."

The three Weasleys, Harry and Hagrid stared at her as if she were the oracle of doom, and the awkward silence was only broken by the arrival of Mr and Mrs Weasley. Hermione, Harry and Hagrid took that as the signal to leave, slipping out as quickly as possible to give the family some private time and to avoid the wrath of Madam Pomfrey, though Harry failed to avoid a teary embrace from Molly.

Hermione felt exhausted. She hadn't eaten all day, and her head throbbed. Trust Hagrid to let slip news of Snape and Dumbledore arguing in the Forbidden Forest. Sure, it was interesting information, but an evening of Harry ranting about evil-Snape was so far down Hermione's list of welcome activities that she slipped off to bed as soon as they arrived back at the tower. She fell asleep almost immediately, though her night was long and troubled by awful nightmares in which Ron died and his ghost came back to tell her it was all her fault.

The best thing about Ron's awful accident was that it put him and Hermione back on speaking terms. He looked so happy to see her when he was next conscious that her heart leapt. They both glossed over the previous estrangement without comment, too relieved at the restoration of their friendship to dredge up the reason for the original disagreement.

Hermione took to spending the couple of hours between classes and dinner by his bedside. He moaned companionably when she gave him his homework for the day and muddled through fairly random bits of his own work while she worked on the Arithmantic matrix. Since neither Ron nor Harry could fathom the simplest set of Arithmantic data, she could safely work on the Malfoy material right under their noses.

Ron's accident had redoubled Hermione's efforts with the calculations. She had already coded the incident itself and implanted it into the subset of equations related to Katie Bell and Draco Malfoy, determined to resolve the mathematics and show the results to Dumbledore as soon as possible.

Late on Wednesday night Hermione had a breakthrough. She had retired to bed fairly early, but unable to sleep, she'd pulled the curtains a little tighter around her mattress and retrieved her notes from her satchel. Armed with a pencil (quills were a nightmare in combination with bed linen) she set to work. When she realised what she was looking at, she had to struggle to breathe. Then Hermione redid the vital sections of the calculations. The results did nothing to ease the growing panic that clawed in the pit of her stomach. Fumbling for her watch, she checked the time. It was past curfew, but in such circumstances, she decided, the need was greater. She had to check this with Professor Vector.

Hermione cast a silencing spell and slipped out of bed, covering her pyjamas with her uniform and collecting up her calculations in the dark. She couldn't afford for Lavender or Parvati to notice her leaving. She snuck out into the stairwell, shoes in her hand, and moved through the common room on stockinged feet. For a long moment, the Fat Lady refused to open.

"It's important," she whispered, improvising a story. "I have to go to the Hospital Wing immediately."

"You watch yourself, young lady," the portrait grumbled as she finally swung open. "Don't expect to hear a word in your defence from me."

"Thank you," Hermione breathed as politely as she could, the darkness hiding the disrespectful face she pulled at the same time.

Once she reached the hallway, she put on her shoes. It was far too cold to walk around without them, and she would have to risk the noise they made. *Don't be silly!* she upbraided herself. *The difference is purely psychological!* She cast an extra Silencing Charm on her shoes for good measure. Putting all envious thoughts of Harry's cloak and map out of her mind, she reflected on how odd it felt to sneak around the castle at night without her two best friends. By some freak of fate she made it across to Vector's office without running into anyone but an unrecognised castle ghost, who drifted past without a sound...Hermione had never been so thankful that Vector's office and the entrance to the Gryffindor common room were both on the seventh floor.

She tapped gently on the door, sighing with relief when she heard Vector's voice from within. As she stepped inside, the older woman smiled.

"Hermione, what a pleasure!" Vector wasn't one to comment on the late hour of her visit.

"Hello, Professor." Hermione didn't pause to make small talk, she was already pulling her calculations from her satchel. "I've been adding some extra information into the present tense of the matrix and I'm pretty sure I've uncovered an improbability fold."

"Show me." Vector was immediately businesslike.

She had only to glance at Hermione's workings to realise the implications, muttering imprecations under her breath in a language Hermione could not understand. "We've got to take this to Albus," she decided, rising swiftly and stepping towards the fireplace. Throwing in a pinch of Floo powder, she knelt on the hearth and pushed her head into the fire. Hermione was unable to hear the ensuing conversation, but within seconds Vector was back, beckoning her forward.

"Dumbledore's office," said Vector clearly, pushing her firmly into the flames. After only seconds of the unsettling whirling sensation of Floo travel, Hermione stumbled out onto Dumbledore's hearth.

"Good evening, Miss Granger." Dumbledore greeted her urbanely, as if it wasn't well past midnight and she hadn't suddenly dropped into his study...in the middle of a meeting. Professors McGonagall and Snape had swivelled in their seats to view her arrival. McGonagall looked mildly taken aback, but Snape was as imperturbable as ever, one eyebrow slightly cocked.

"Good evening, Professor Dumbledore, Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall." By the time she'd finished that long mouthful, Professor Vector had stepped through the Floo behind her.

"Minerva, Severus, Albus," said Vector. "We're sorry to interrupt, but it was something of an Arithmantic emergency."

Dumbledore conjured two chairs with a wave of his wand. "Have a seat, both of you." He turned to Hermione and added pointedly, "Among this select company, you should feel free to express yourself without hesitation."

As Hermione and Vector took their seats, McGonagall spoke. "What is the meaning of this, Albus?"

He graced her with his jolly-old-man smile. "I have absolutely no idea! Perhaps our guests would be happy to enlighten us?"

Hermione looked expectantly at Professor Vector, but she merely smiled back and gestured for Hermione to speak. "Well," she began, spreading out the handful of parchments she'd been gripping up to that point. "I've been working on the current arc of the matrix, and I'm pretty sure I've uncovered an improbability fold . . ." She faltered and glanced up at the four faces of her most revered professors. "You all can follow the Arithmantic equations, right?"

"I haven't studied Arithmancy since 1944," replied McGonagall tartly. "I, for one, would appreciate the occasional clarification."

"Right, okay . . ." Hermione took a deep breath and glanced at Vector for reassurance. Vector smiled encouragingly. "Well, I assume everyone here is aware of the work Professor Vector has been doing?" A round of nods. "The basic premise is to maximise the probability that Harry will defeat Voldemort." More nods. "Well, the final calculations are accurate only to the degree of each of the preceding calculations, and to a certain degree the later calculations fold in the assumption that everything up until that point has gone as well as can be expected. That is," she clarified, attempting to give specificity to a rather abstract explanation, "the calculations for the final confrontation assume that everything this year went according to plan."

"Are we to understand that you've uncovered a problem regarding this year?" Dumbledore asked, a glint of his less doddery personality evident in the phrasing of the question.

"Yes, and no," replied Hermione grimly. "It's not the plan that's a problem, but the possible responses to it. Look," she tapped the paper in front of her with her wand, pulling up the matrix into three-dimensional graphic space, and extrapolated out the section she wanted. She wasn't as graceful or as quick as Vector, but she was better than any of her classmates would have been. "This is the matrix as it was: we were taking the plans for this year as a cohesive unit. The probability that everything will go well hovers at about 72%..."

"Isn't that good?" asked McGonagall.

"On the surface, yes," replied Hermione, "but, if we add in the reaction to the plans," she tapped the paper in a complicated pattern and the graph shifted dramatically, "we can see that the chances of the plans going well remain the same, but the chance of the reaction to them going well is terrible...close to 12%." She paused for a moment, then added, "The improbable event was folded behind the first, hence the name."

Dumbledore broke the silence. "So, what does that mean exactly, Miss Granger?" There was an oddness to his voice that caught at her attention, though she couldn't put her finger on why.

"Well, it depends. And, Headmaster, you might be the only person with enough information to know for sure." McGonagall looked a little bewildered and Hermione hurried to explain properly. "There are a couple of possibilities, but neither Professor Vector nor I know sufficient details of the Order's plans to know which is the most likely. We rely on the runic coefficients and their link to each member to predict such behaviours through *m*-space. Basically, it's most likely to be one of two things: either the Order has a plan in place that, once completed, will seem so horrible that many people will lose faith and panic; or," Hermione took a deep breath, her senses acutely aware of Professor Snape's presence and his possible reaction to what she was about to say, "one of the people coded into our matrix is a traitor and the success of their particular plan will spell devastation for ours."

McGonagall's eyes widened throughout Hermione's last explanation, and as she finished, the older woman gasped with shock, her hand pressed to her heart. Snape looked back at Hermione inscrutably while Dumbledore pursed his lips, his eyebrows creased in concentration. As Hermione glanced from one face to the next, scanning her way around the table, something clicked with the certainty of fact: Dumbledore and Snape knew what she was talking about, McGonagall didn't. *Curious.*

"How can we fix it?" Dumbledore asked, the same still quality in his voice that had caught at her attention previously.

Hermione ran her hands through her curls. She couldn't bring herself to admit that she didn't know. "I need more information," she sighed.

Snape was looking through her calculations, the tip of his finger tracing part of the formula she'd used to demonstrate the alterations to the matrix. "Do you mean," he asked, speaking for the first time since she arrived, "that you need more information in order to calculate an answer to that question, or is that the answer?"

"I wish it were th..."

"Wait!" Vector leaned over Snape's shoulder and examined the equation he had in his hand. "You might be onto something, Severus. Hermione, what happens if we redistribute the knowledge coefficient?" Vector conjured several pieces of paper and a couple of quills and pushed one towards Hermione. "You do Kreisler's and Helpmann's, I'll do Pinkerton's and Fradenburg's."

For the next little while, nobody said anything while Hermione and Vector scratched furiously on the parchment before them. Hermione tried not to feel self-conscious under the gazes of her professors but wasn't particularly successful. *Being here as an adult and not a student is hard work* she reflected. By about halfway through the Helpmann's distribution, she realised she was onto something.

"Professor?" Hermione reached out and placed her hand on Vector's arm. Vector looked up at once. "I think this might be it . . ." Vector leaned over and skimmed her work.

"Very good, Hermione." Vector scribbled some figures as she doubled checked Hermione's calculations. "Okay, so," Vector pursed her lips as she translated the formula back into real-world circumstances. "You, Albus," she pointed at him with the tip of her quill, "have to give some extra information to Severus." Her quill swung across the table in a wide arc. "And you, Severus, have to give some information to Hermione." The quill swung again, and Vector tilted her head to one side in consideration. "Not, I

think, the same information. And last but not least, there is a specific piece of information that mustn't under any circumstances be given to Harry Potter until the very last minute. Hmm. Does that make any sense?"

Hermione carefully watched the reactions to this information. Professor Snape showed no sign of his response, Dumbledore looked wary, McGonagall turned her attention every which way as she attempted to process the new facts. *McGonagall*, thought Hermione, is the only one of the three who doesn't know what's going on here. She wondered, too, what information Snape needed to give her.

"And?" queried Dumbledore, "what difference does that make to the overall probability prediction?"

"61.80339887%, rounded to the eighth decimal place," responded Vector smugly.

"But," objected McGonagall, "that's a whole 10 percentage points worse than it previously was!"

"No..." began Hermione, at the same moment that Vector said, "Actually..." before they both stopped to allow the other to continue.

"It's the Golden Mean," remarked Snape dryly.

"Correct," said Hermione. "The Golden Mean has such an important magical charge," she elaborated, "that a probability prediction as precise as eight decimal places is much more likely to occur than a higher, less magical percentage."

Dumbledore looked relieved, though he turned a curiously contemplative expression on both Snape and Hermione. "Well, Miss Granger, it seems that we owe you a great debt. Your Arithmancy skills have proved exemplary."

Hermione blushed slightly, glancing at Snape and then Vector to judge their reactions. Snape quirked a sardonic eyebrow, Vector smiled.

"All the best Arithmancers are Muggle-born," Vector remarked.

Dumbledore chuckled, "So you say, Ana, and I have to agree that the evidence is strongly in your favour."

Ana? Hermione looked at Vector with a sudden curiosity. *That must be her real name. Wow* A wave of tiredness rushed over her, and she turned her wrist infinitesimally in order to peek at her watch. It was nearly two o'clock. When all of the other occupants of the office turned to look at her, Hermione realised that the gesture hadn't been as subtle as she'd hoped.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Minerva. "This poor child has to be in class in just a few hours time! Miss Granger..."

"Is hardly a child, Minerva." Snape cut in smoothly. A small flower of gratitude blossomed in Hermione's breast.

"Quite right, Severus." Dumbledore concurred. "But so, too, is Minerva. It is time we were all in bed. Miss Granger, you need to be returned to Gryffindor tower; it wouldn't do to wander the halls alone at such an hour."

Automatically, Hermione glanced at Snape, more than half anticipating that he would walk her back to the Fat Lady, but the straight-faced blink he sent in her direction was more than enough of a reaction to inform her that she'd committed some idiotic mistake. *Oops. Professor McGonagall is my Head of House. That would be her job* She turned towards McGonagall, relieved to note that the older woman had walked behind her to the fireplace and couldn't have seen what just transpired. Vector had, she was sure of it, but that didn't matter...Vector, with her equations, saw everything.

"Come along then, Miss Granger." McGonagall sounded mildly irritated, and Hermione realised suddenly that the older woman held a handful of Floo powder ready.

"Just a moment, Professor." Hermione hurriedly stuffed her papers back into her bag, offering the quill back to Vector, who gestured for her to keep it. "Good night, Professor Dumbledore, Professor Vector, Professor Snape." She turned to the fire and stepped closer. "Good night, Professor McGonagall."

McGonagall smiled at her tiredly and threw the floo powder into the flames. "Gryffindor common room!" she exclaimed, shepherding Hermione through. Hermione held her breath as the world spun green about her before tumbling gratefully out into the familiar space of Gryffindor tower. Her bed had rarely seemed more inviting.

Information Networks

Chapter 22 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Twenty-two : Information Networks

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute.

Let me thank my amazing, incredible, brilliant betas: LAxo and WriterMerrin! Without whom this story would be little more than a tissue of egregious errors.

It took several weeks before Dumbledore called Severus to his office, plenty of time for Severus to wonder about what information the older man would relent to impart. Plenty of time, too, for Severus to wonder what he was supposed to tell Granger. The most obvious piece of information was also the most dangerous...not only because it might jeopardise his relationship with the Dark Lord, but also because he was selfishly keen to maintain the even keel of his current interaction with Granger herself. It was foolish to pretend that their tentative friendship would survive her realisation that he intended to murder the Headmaster. Thus Severus, much like Dumbledore, avoided the moment of revelation.

Granger, much to his surprise, hadn't asked. Far from peppering him with incessant questions, it seemed that the woman had finally learnt to be patient. She watched him, though, when she didn't think he would notice, a thoughtful look on her face.

As soon as she mastered the trick of Apparation, he moved one of their lessons each week out of the castle entirely. "Wear sports clothes under your robes next Thursday,"

he instructed, "and meet me here at the usual time."

Granger, as per usual, arrived punctually at eight. Her white trainers looked incongruous against the dark wool of her uniform. "Come along," he remarked, shepherding her through to his potions lab, then onwards into his sitting room. Her eyes widened at the realisation of where they were, and her attention strayed immediately to the bookshelves. "Keep moving, Granger," he chided, opening another doorway at the far end of the room. She stepped through obediently, with only one lingering glance at the sofa and comfy chairs in front of the fire, the coffee table strewn with books and journals, and his white, white walls. Severus smirked. *No doubt she'd expected black*

The door led directly outside, the opening hidden in the cliff face just around the corner from the greenhouses. From there they headed past the vegetable gardens, cutting across to the Forbidden Forest without going so far north that they might be spotted from Hagrid's cottage. Under the cover of the trees, Severus stopped.

"This will do for the moment," he remarked, slipping off his teaching robes and conjuring a coat rack on which to hang them. He shook them fussily, ensuring that they would hang without creasing, and removed a pair of running shoes from the pocket. They were black. Granger had copied his example and removed her uniform, revealing running tights and a zippered sports top. Severus gestured for her to hang her robes, then toed off his boots and sat on a nearby log to put on his trainers.

"This way," he gestured once he was ready, moving through a nearby clump of trees and emerging onto a reasonably well-cleared path. "Keep your wand out at all times." Granger looked a little apprehensive but otherwise calm. "We're going to run; I'll leave you to set the pace."

They set off at a brisk jog, settling fairly quickly into a rhythm. The dim light of their wands bobbed along the path as they went. Granger ran slower than he would normally, but she moved well, and Severus enjoyed the unaccustomed pleasure of running with a companion. The path meandered through the forest for about two miles. In truth it rarely strayed far from the edge, but it was deep enough in and the night was sufficiently dark that it seemed as if they could be anywhere. The soft thumps of their footfalls were absorbed into the surrounding forest, with the outdoor sounds of owls and small animals a backdrop to their conversation. Granger was initially taken aback when he began to quiz her on the technical aspects of brewing Polyjuice and the theories behind the wards they had been studying.

"You're as bad as my dad! Running is hard enough without having to talk at the same time!" she exclaimed.

"Not up to the task, Granger?" he queried, smirking at her huff of annoyance. He repeated the question. This time she answered without complaining.

The path finished just short of the Hogwarts gates.

"Oh!" exclaimed Granger. "I wondered where we were exactly."

"Come along," he instructed, opening the gates just wide enough for them to slip through. Stepping forward, he led the way to the Apparation point. "Do you know where we are now?" he asked.

"I assume it's the official Hogwarts Apparation point?"

He nodded. "Take a careful look around; you will want to remember the place well enough to Apparate here at any time of day. Now." Granger glanced at him briefly then returned to her perusal of the site, a fierce look of concentration on her face. The sheer intensity with which she carried out the instruction pulled at one corner of his mouth, and he was sorely tempted to give her several quite ridiculous instructions to see how many she would carry out before catching his laughter. "You seem to have finally managed the simple process of Apparation." The outraged glare she shot his way quirked the corner of his mouth higher still: she'd been one of only a handful of students to Apparate successfully, and they both knew it. "Let's see how you fare with side-along."

She blinked. "But, sir, I don't have my licence."

"I do," he replied blandly. "And unless you manage to splinch us, there will be no-one the wiser."

The look on her face reminded him irresistibly of their first visit to the Room of Requirement, when he'd asked her to do a summersault, but he forebore teasing her further. Instead, he stepped closer to where she was standing.

"Hold out your arm," he instructed, grasping her by the forearm when she did so. "And hold onto mine." He concentrated very hard so as not to pay attention to how close they were standing or of the feel of her arm under his. He raised one eyebrow and looked down his nose at her. "Apparate us ten feet to the left, and Granger," he paused for emphasis, "do try not to splinch us."

Granger swallowed, but her chin went up slightly, and he knew she was ready. Her grip tightened, and they twisted into nothingness, only to reappear seconds later on the other side of the clearing, both...to Granger's evident relief...fully intact.

"Hmm," he said, in a tone that suggested she hadn't done very well at all. "Try again. This time Apparate us back to where we were before."

Over the course of the evening, he moved them progressively further away from the clearing and had her Apparate them back. "You take too long in the preparation phase," he said eventually. "Ultimately, you want to be able to Apparate without prior warning, under any circumstances." He paused. "Do you trust me?" he asked, holding out his arm.

"Of course," she said, as if that was a silly question, grasping hold of his forearm without hesitation.

Severus blinked and Disapparated before he had a chance to question the prickly feeling at the back of his throat. They reappeared at the top of a hill, where the land fell away dramatically to their left. The wind whipped through their thin sports clothes, and Granger's hair blew across her face in a wild tangle. At some stage in their countless Apparations, she had lost her hair tie. Twisting her face into the wind, she wrestled the curls off her face, looking up at him expectantly once her hair was temporarily under control.

"You and I are going to leap off this cliff," he informed her, shouting over the wind. "Before we hit the bottom, I'll Apparate us to safety."

Her hands still buried in her hair, she looked at the cliff and then at him, apprehension writ large upon her face. She grimaced, but nodded determinedly.

"We'll take a run-up," he instructed. "Hold my hand."

They backed up about one hundred metres, and Granger took a firm hold of his left hand; her fingers were cold because of the wind and all but swallowed within the grasp of his longer ones. Her hair was billowing behind her, and one curl had blown across her eyes.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes." Her face was set into fierce lines of determination.

They both began to run towards the cliff. As they approached the edge, they accelerated, then leapt. For a second they seemed to hang, as if they were weightless, before plummeting downwards, with the wind and gravity pushing and pulling at their bodies. Severus held Granger's hand tightly and twisted into nothing.

They emerged back at the Apparation point near Hogwarts, landing so smoothly that they barely stumbled. No sooner had they arrived than Granger wrenched her hand from his, spun away from him and landed on her hands and knees. She promptly threw up. Momentarily taken aback, Severus quickly recovered his composure and bent to pull her hair back out of her face.

"Sorry," she said weakly, as soon as she was capable of speech. "I really don't like heights."

*And yet she leapt off a cliff because I told her to*He thought for a moment that he couldn't breathe.

"Next week," he promised, "I'll teach you to do that. Once you know that you can Apparate to safety, you will be able to control the fear."

Severus strode into the Slytherin common room in search of Jocelyn Smith. He spied her almost immediately. She was seated off to one side where two couches had been pushed so close together that there was barely room to squeeze between them, holding energetic court with the other three first-year girls and one of the boys. Jocelyn was clearly the centre of attention as she related some tale that the others found hilarious. He paused for a moment to contemplate the changes the year had wrought in her behaviour, then swooped down, a scowl plastered on his face.

"Miss Smith," he hissed threateningly.

Jocelyn leapt to her feet at once. She had quickly cleaved to the Slytherin code of respect towards their Head of House. All his students revelled in a punctilious politeness towards him in public, treasuring the relaxed standards that he occasionally permitted in private as exceptions to the rule. "Good evening, sir," she responded.

"Please explain to me why you have earned yourself a detention at a time when you are supposed to be meeting with me?"

She had the grace to attempt a contrite look, but a mischievous dimple spoiled the effect somewhat. "I'm sorry, sir, but I couldn't not hex Gregory..."

He cut her off with a languorous wave of his hand. "Miss Smith, I don't care how many Gryffindors you hexed or why; I care that I have to rearrange my schedule."

Her second attempt at contrite was far more convincing. Perhaps because she ducked her head slightly. "I'm sorry, sir," she said again.

"If you don't wish to continue, you need only tell me. I'd rather you didn't waste my time."

"No!" Her head snapped up, the contrition evidently genuine now.

"I beg your pardon?"

"No, sir. I don't want to stop coming to lessons."

"Very well. I shall see you on Saturday morning...before breakfast. Seven thirty and no later." Severus turned without bothering to listen to Jocelyn's effusive thanks. He was almost at the door when he noticed Tracey Davis, frowning in concentration over her Arithmancy homework.

"Miss Davis," he said on impulse. "A word in my office if you don't mind. Bring your work with you."

Davis gathered up her belongs hurriedly and followed him out of the common room and into his office, where he gestured for her to take a seat.

"Tell me, Miss Davis," he inquired, "what reason might Professor Vector have for thinking that your Arithmancy project would interest me?"

Davis looked a little scared and fumbled with the strap of her bag. She swallowed, hard. "I have my research proposal here, sir, if you'd like to look at it."

Severus held out his hand imperiously. Davis scabbled around among her papers until she found the right one. The parchment was soft from much handling and lay flat easily.

Arithmancy Independent Project (NEWTs) Tracey Davis

Aim: To identify and lift the curse on the Hogwarts Defence Against the Dark Arts position.

Severus' mouth went dry. He raised his eyes slowly and regarded the young woman in front of him. She was fidgeting with her bag strap, her apprehension palpable. "Thank you," he said at last. Davis gave him a tight smile in response, but looked no less stressed. After a short pause he added, not unkindly, "You know that it was the Dark Lord who cast the curse?"

She nodded, her face grim. Davis wasn't among those who joined the Inquisitorial Squad last year, he remembered suddenly.

"Very well then. If there is any information I can help you with, don't hesitate to ask." He glanced through the research proposal, then handed it back. She had been very thorough.

"Thank you, sir."

"You may go."

"Thank you, sir," she said again, tucking her papers back into her bag and leaving as quickly as possible.

Severus sat for a long moment. Vector had been quite right: Davis' project had interested him greatly.

At the end of Saturday's lesson, Jocelyn paused in the act of gathering up her things.

"Sir?" she enquired hesitantly.

Severus looked up from the contemplation of which set of papers he should mark first and raised one eyebrow.

"I wondered," Jocelyn hesitated again. It was clearly a question of some importance. "I wondered what happened to your father."

For several seconds, Severus remained completely still. Then he tucked his hair behind one ear. "I killed him," he replied, his face impassive.

Jocelyn regained her composure almost immediately, but not before he caught her shocked reaction. Severus felt an uncharacteristic urge to explain. "It was an accident," he informed her. "One with devastating consequences for my father, and one that proved detrimental for my own career. It is not an approach that I would advocate."

He stared at her as she nodded her silent absorption of his words and pushed the last of her belongings into her bag.

"Thank you, sir," she murmured on her way out, her horror at his answer visible in the absence of her usual enthusiasm.

There was no need to describe to her the humiliating details of his trial before the Wizengamot: Poppy Pomfrey testifying in his defence with an exhaustive litany of the injuries and beatings he'd sustained, Slughorn's refusal to do likewise; Lucius...back when he was still the acknowledged golden boy of the Ministry, before his family name had been sullied by his association with Voldemort...standing as character witness for his young housemate; his mother's tears and perversely constant love for the man who had abused her and her son.

Two things had kept him out of Azkaban: he was underage, and he hadn't used magic.

Severus still didn't know why that particular night, of all the other nights, he had decided to strike back. It was right in the middle of the holidays, that awful summer after he

fought with Lily. He'd been drunk, as he had been most nights. And he'd punched his father. Just the once, but by some crazy chance, he'd struck him in exactly the right place to break his neck. Unfortunate. Manslaughter. Self-defence. Severus had got eighteen months of probation. Eighteen months of "good behaviour." Eighteen months in which an ever-decreasing number of people found kind words for the sullen, prickly and bitter boy who had killed his own father.

The Death Eaters, in contrast, hadn't minded at all.

"Severus, my dear boy, I'm delighted that you were able to drop by this evening. A drink?" Dumbledore summoned the bottle of Firewhiskey before Severus had a chance to reply. The sharp edge of joviality to his tone lead Severus to wonder how nervous the older man was.

Severus settled himself across from the headmaster and took the proffered glass with good grace.

"How are Miss Granger's lessons progressing?"

"As well as can be expected." Severus paused to run his finger along his lower lip before relenting to answer the question hidden behind Dumbledore's query. "I haven't yet told her anything unrelated to her lessons."

Dumbledore looked relieved. "Have you decided what to tell her?" he asked.

Severus raised one eyebrow. "One fact seems the obvious choice."

"I'm not certain it's that simple," responded Dumbledore, leaning forward slightly. "It is her nature to stand up for the maligned and poorly treated...think of her ill-conceived stand on house-elf rights. Once you kill me, your name will be as mud among the members of the Order. We cannot risk the possibility that she might spring to your defence."

A swooping sensation in Severus stomach left him slightly dizzy, and he gulped down a mouthful of Firewhiskey with less grace than was his wont. Dumbledore's callous reference to a future in which Severus lost the few friends and little respect he had earned cut like a knife. Not for the first time he considered that death by Unbreakable Vow might prove a preferable end. "Albus," he managed, his voice harsh, "Granger is more likely to spring to your defence than she is to mine."

Dumbledore pursed his lips and smiled at his colleague indulgently. "I think you underestimate her respect for you, Severus."

Respect that will soon be lost Severus took another mouthful of whiskey, the burn as it slid down his throat re-grounding him only slightly against the anguish unleashed by this conversation.

"Though that, too, would be a disaster!" Dumbledore continued as if Severus' world wasn't spinning dizzily around its axis. "We certainly can't afford a situation where she attempted to stop you. Truly, I think it best not to tell anyone. Surely the calculations must refer to something else entirely?"

What would be worse, wondered Severus distractedly, to watch her respect come crumbling around my ears, or to have her think me a traitor along with everybody else? Pushing the thought away so that he didn't have to confront the tricky question of why Granger's regard meant more to him than that of Minerva or Hooch, he changed the topic abruptly.

"Surely you called me here tonight to discuss something other than Miss Granger, Albus."

"Correct, as always, Severus. I hoped to talk about wandlore."

Wandlore? "Indeed." Severus crossed one leg over the other, simultaneously irritated and relieved by the shift to such a random topic.

"You are aware, I assume, of the consequences of duelling and wand ownership."

Comprehension dawned. "Of course. I assure you, Albus, I am perfectly satisfied with my own wand and have no intention of making use of yours."

"That, my dear boy, is precisely what I hoped." Dumbledore beamed at him over his glasses, then dropped his eyes to his Firewhiskey glass. He took a deep breath, the smile gone. "What do you know about the Deathstick, or the so-called 'Wand of Destiny'?"

"As much or as little as any reasonably educated wizard . . . There are frequent rumours about the wand's existence but none have ever been proved. In recent history, Gregorovitch once boasted to have it in his possession; he claimed to use it as a model for his own creations, presumably to bolster his own reputation. Again, there's no solid evidence. Why?"

"As it happens," Dumbledore began, a nervous edge to his voice, "I have solid evidence." He withdrew his wand and placed it carefully on the desk between them.

Severus looked at it, really looked at it, for the first time.*Elder.*

"Gregorovitch did indeed have the wand in his possession," said Dumbledore. "It was stolen from him by Gellert Grindelwald, and I took it from Grindelwald in 1945."

There was a long pause until finally Severus spoke. "And thus when I kill you . . ." he tailed off. His mind reeling with possibilities and responsibilities.

"Yes." Dumbledore looked weary. "I wasn't going to tell you. In fact, I intended to take the secret to my grave. Surely," his voice faltered, "surely you understand how important it is that Voldemort not know, and that neither he, nor any of his Death Eaters take possession of the wand?"

"Were the Dark Lord ever to suspect," commented Severus, his voice completely devoid of emotion, "he would kill me."

"Yes," confirmed Dumbledore heavily. "It is a risk."

For a long moment, neither man spoke.

"Severus?"

Severus looked up from the amber liquid swirling in his glass and met Dumbledore's eye.

"There is powerful magic in the Elder wand; it cannot be broken, it cannot be burnt. If I could destroy it, I would."

Severus nodded his understanding. He'd never heard Dumbledore sound quite so miserable. He drained his glass then and placed it soundlessly on the desk. "I stand by what I said before, Albus," he remarked. "I am perfectly satisfied with my own wand; I will not make use of yours."

"Thank you, Severus," whispered Dumbledore, his eyes fixed on the Elder wand, which still lay on the desk between them.

As Severus rose and walked towards the door, Fawkes gave a low, musical cry. Severus shivered at the sound, but didn't pause. He would walk the halls for hours before he found sleep.

Occam's Razor

Chapter 23 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Twenty-Three : Occam's Razor

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Without the help of my betas, LAXo and WriterMerrin, reading this story would be a far-less-pleasant experience for everyone concerned. They have my eternal gratitude.

Hermione had been delighted that morning when Harry had agreed to use his Felix Felicis. A little bit of luck, she thought, was just what he needed to convince Slughorn to give him the memory about Horcruxes. From the moment he swallowed the golden liquid, however, Hermione had doubts. Instead of heading for Slughorn's office, Harry was suddenly determined to visit Hagrid and preside over Aragog's funeral...and nothing that she or Ron said convinced him otherwise. As Harry disappeared under his cloak and then trundled down the stairs from the boys' dormitory, Hermione glanced at Ron and pulled a comical face of despair.

"Come on," muttered Ron, grimacing back, "Let's go after him."

At the bottom of the staircase, however, any thought of catching Harry before he left the common room was lost.

"What were you doing up there with *her*?"* shrieked Lavender.

"What are you..." Ron spluttered to a halt when his brain caught up with his mouth and the realisation hit home that he couldn't well invoke Harry as his defence. "Hermione is my friend, Lav..."

His second effort at coherent speech was cut short by Lavender re-entering the fray.

"Yeah right, Ronald Weasley! *Friends* don't get jealous and not speak to you just because you've got a girlfriend who truly appreciates you! *Friends* don't disappear up into the boys' dorm with you; they hang out in the common room where everyone can see what's going on! *Friends* don't look so goddamn smug when your girlfriend is yelling at you!"

Time to leave, thought Hermione, her sense of self-preservation winning over the urge to stay and scream back at Lavender.

"Right then, Ron," she said brightly, "I'm off to the library. Come along later if you want."

As far as Lavender was concerned, Ron's desperate attempt to catch hold of Hermione's arm was quite possibly the nail in the coffin. Hermione heard her shrieks intensify still further as she slipped out into the hallway. *Well*, she thought to herself, every bit as smug as Lavender had suggested, *that's a bit of luck!*

Ron joined her after about twenty minutes, looking harassed but mostly relieved. "We broke up," he explained lamely, in response to her inquisitive eyebrow. "I don't suppose you'd look over my Transfiguration essay, would you?"

Hermione sighed melodramatically, but accepted the tentatively proffered essay with a grin. Things were looking up.

The next day, Hermione ran into Ginny on the staircase leading up to the girls' dormitories.

"Hey, Hermione," said Ginny with a glum smile.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Hermione stopped, looking up at the younger girl who stood several steps above her.

"Oh, nothing. Just Dean being a total prat about breaking up yesterday."

"Breaking up is hard to do?" joked Hermione, but the Muggle reference was wasted on Ginny.

"I guess you could say that."

"If it's any consolation," offered Hermione, thinking back to Harry's carefully nonchalant expression earlier that morning when he had heard the news, "I think your relationship with Dean might have served its purpose."

Ginny brightened immediately. "For real?" she asked, her eyes shining with a sudden (and slightly scary) intensity.

"For real."

"Hey, thanks, Hermione!" Ginny flipped her hair over her shoulder and practically danced past Hermione on her way down to the common room.

Hermione smiled to herself and continued upstairs; if only all of her problems were so easily solved. To her great relief, neither Lavender nor Parvati was in the room, and she kicked off her shoes and crawled into bed, closing the curtains carefully around her. Hermione had about an hour and a half before dinner and some serious thinking to do. Drawing her wand, she cast several of the protective wards she'd learnt from Snape: *That should deal nicely with interruptions*.

That morning during Charms, Harry had related the full story of his adventures last night: from Aragog's funeral and the process of getting the memory from Slughorn, through viewing the memory and the horrific details of what a Horcrux was, to Dumbledore's promise to take Harry along on the next Horcrux-finding mission. *Horcruxes*. Hermione shivered at the thought of splitting a soul once, let alone seven times...*No*, she correct herself, logic reasserting itself over horror, *Six times. Six splits equals seven pieces*. Two of which were already destroyed. She listed off the remaining Horcruxes: *The locket, the cup, something of Ravenclaw or Gryffindor's, and quite possibly the snake*.

And how, she wondered, do the Horcruxes relate to the seemingly devastating plan that will happen this year? And what do they have to do, if anything, with the information Professor Snape is supposed to give me? She wrapped her arms around her knees and drew them tightly towards her chest. Probably nothing, she decided. I was always going to learn about the Horcruxes from Harry; the information from Professor Snape has to be about something else.

Hermione sighed. She couldn't keep everything straight in her mind. Leaning forward, she snagged the strap of her satchel and pulled it along the coverlet towards her. Rummaging inside, she found a pencil and a piece of parchment. It was time to make a list.

Plan 1 Kill Voldemort

Method : eliminate Horcruxes (6), then Harry can fight Voldemort

Progress : Already destroyed (2) : Diary, Ring.

Remaining Horcruxes (4) : Locket (S), Cup (H), Something of G or R, Snake (?)

NB : While anyone, theoretically, can destroy the Horcruxes, secrecy is crucial (If V finds out, he'll just make more); therefore in practice, this comes down to Dumbledore, Harry, Ron or Hermione.

Hermione felt a bit silly putting her own name down as a potential Horcrux hunter, but she liked to be thorough. Plan 1 was straightforward enough. Plan 2 was far more difficult to summarize because Hermione wasn't clear on what the plan actually was. She got as far as:

Plan 2 ?

Method : ?

Progress : ?

before deciding she needed to take a different tack, perhaps writing down everything that she did know and who was involved at what stage. She started over with a new piece of parchment.

Plan with seemingly devastating consequences.

People who know the details : Dumbledore, Snape.

People who don't : McGonagall, Vector, Hermione, everybody else (inc. Harry).

By now Hermione was stretched on her front, legs kicking in the air and one curl wound around the index finger of her left hand. She left a gap and continued writing lower down the paper.

Draco Malfoy. Death Eater (?) trying to kill someone at Hogwarts, doesn't care who he hurts in the process (Katie Bell, Ron)

Potential targets :

Harry (Unlikely because KB could have just given him the necklace in Hogsmede)

Slughorn (Mead was in his office)

Dumbledore (Mead Christmas)

Someone else entirely (?)

Hermione hesitated, chewing on her bottom lip, then added:

NB : Snape promised to help and/or protect Draco (Unbreakable Vow...Narcissa Malfoy).

She paused again, before finishing the thought:

Therefore Dumbledore knows/Snape maintaining cover.

Hermione sighed and turned her eye back to the list of possible targets. It was laughable to think of Draco killing Dumbledore. *Dumbledore is practically invinci..* the memory of his blackened arm cut that thought short. *Malfoy couldn't, but . . .*

She swallowed. The words on the page before her seemed to swim in and out of focus. She was going to be ill.

Hermione slid from the bed and clumsily pushed her way through the curtains, stumbling into the bathroom in a daze. It was a close call, but she managed not to lose her lunch. In an attempt to restore her equilibrium, she forced herself to take several deep breaths and splashed her face liberally with cold water. *Okay, Granger,* she told herself. *Pull yourself together.*

As she re-opened the bathroom door, she froze, as did Parvati and Lavender. All three girls regarded each other warily.

"Hi, Hermione," they chorused, their voices falsely sweet.

"Hi." Her own response was terse.

"Um." Parvati's eyes skidded away as she spoke. "What happened to your bed?"

Hermione looked around in surprise to the place where her bed should have been, but there was nothing there. It took a couple of seconds for her brain to catch up with her gaping mouth, but eventually she realised that the wards she had cast were so strong that the bed itself had been concealed from view. She smothered an urge to giggle hysterically.

"Just practicing for my Charms extra-credit project," she lied, giving a tight smile to Parvati and Lavender in turn. Then she strode across the room without hesitation. As she crossed the wards, she felt the tingle of them on her skin, and simultaneously, her bed reappeared. She turned. From the look on Lavender and Parvati's face, she had just disappeared. She tried not to feel smug, but failed.

The feeling didn't last long. Back behind the curtains of her bed, she was obliged to confront her list once more...and the implications of the information it contained. She forced herself to think about it calmly. *Don't rule out anything, yet,* she reminded herself. *Everything is not necessarily what it seems*

She picked up her pencil firmly. *This is merely a logical exercise.* She said it out loud to make it seem more real. "This is merely a logical exercise."

Assumption : Malfoy is trying to kill Dumbledore.

Fact : Snape has promised to help.

Therefore : When Malfoy fails, Snape will kill Dumbledore.

or

Assumption : Malfoy is trying to kill Dumbledore.

Fact : Snape has promised to help, but didn't mean it.

Therefore : When Malfoy fails, Snape will die (Unbreakable Vow).

Hermione didn't bother to consider the possibility that Malfoy might succeed. Instinctively, she felt that the first of these options was best described as a "plan with seemingly devastating consequences," but she couldn't yet explain why it might be more likely.

If Snape lives, she wrote next, Dumbledore dies. If Dumbledore lives, Snape dies

Spy or Mastermind?

Hermione stared at the words before her for so long that they no longer seemed to make sense, no longer seemed anything but black scribbles on white parchment. Then she wrote three more words, punctuating them with a question mark:

Dumbledore already dying?

In the end, Hermione went down to dinner. There wasn't much else she could do. The boys greeted her late arrival with some relief.

"Wunnered where you'er," commented Ron around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"Studying," she replied distractedly, serving herself a generous pile of the nearest green vegetable (green beans, in this case).

The Great Hall was not the place for personal conversations of any kind, and with Ron and Harry already deeply engaged in a conversation about whether or not the Apparation teacher, Wilkie Twycross, was any relation to a professional Quidditch player with the same surname, Hermione was able to coast through the meal without paying much attention to her surroundings. Instead, she obsessed over the realisations and suppositions of the past few hours. *If Snape kills Dumbledore, he'll be an outcast; he'll have to go on the run; his life will be in terrible danger. On the other hand, it would cement his position within Voldemort's circle; it would put his Death Eater status above suspicion.*

On the assumption that it was the safest of all possible locations...wards or no wards...Hermione had tucked her notes into her bra, and every time she moved during dinner, she felt the corner scratch against the bumpy surface of her scar. Only briefly had she considered the possibility that Snape was a traitor. *Perhaps Dumbledore is wrong to trust Snape? Harry certainly thinks so.* But Dumbledore's own words echoed in her mind, *"I would trust him with my life."* Dumbledore was too clever...and too manipulative...to use such a phrase lightly.

Long before the meal was over, Hermione knew that she had to speak with Professor Snape. Because of a scheduling conflict, the Gryffindor Quidditch team was only training once this week, on Thursday, but Hermione didn't think she could wait another 48 hours to broach the topic. It had to be tonight.

When Snape rose from the dinner table, Hermione rose too. The dessert had only just arrived, and Harry looked up at her in surprise.

"Where are you off to?" he asked.

"The library, sorry, I've loads to do." The most generic lies were usually the best.

"Mione," said Ron reproachfully, "You've barely eaten anything! You should stay another few minutes and eat some treacle tart."

His concern snagged at her heart. Her love for both boys swept over her with a rush, quickly followed by a stab of panic. She didn't have time for this.

"Not everyone has to consume their weight in dinner just to make it through the evening, Ronald Weasley. I'll see you later." Hermione rushed away, making it to the Entrance Hall just in time to see Snape disappear down the stairs leading to the dungeons. She hurried after him.

Snape paused about halfway down the corridor to speak with a group of second-year Slytherins. One boy, safely positioned out of Snape's line of sight, noticed Hermione as she came into view and pulled a face. His rudeness struck Hermione with a jolt of inspiration. Pulling her wand from her pocket, she pointed it at the insolent child. His face fell immediately, and he called out in fright, ducking behind his closest friend. At the commotion, Snape turned, only to find himself face to face with Hermione, her wand levelled in anger.

"What is the meaning of this, Miss Granger?" he snarled as he stepped towards her, fury emphasising the harsh lines of his face.

"Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate," she replied. Hermione was breathing heavily, willing him to understand her.

His eyes narrowed. "Detention," he barked. "Now."

She turned instantly and headed towards his office. Snape stalked behind her, an ominous, angry presence. The Slytherins scattered as they passed, their shocked whispers a syncopated staccato to the ringing sound of Snape's boot heels against the stone floor.

He slammed the door behind her as soon as they entered his office.

"You'd better have a good explanation for your behaviour, Granger, or you'll be scrubbing cauldrons without magic for the next four hours."

"I needed to speak with you, sir."

"Sit," he ordered, striding around his desk in order to take his own seat.

Enconced in her regular chair with Snape scowling at her across the table, Hermione was at a loss as to where to begin. She rubbed one hand up against her scar, the crinkle of the parchment under her fingers contributed to her sense of urgency, but still she didn't know exactly what to say.

Eventually, Snape sighed with irritation. "Had I known you harboured such a desire to stare at me, Granger, I would have sent you to the Hospital Wing, not given you detention. Do you, or do you not, have something to say that is worth disrupting my plans for this evening?"

"I . . . I do, sir." Hermione took a deep breath. "Is it true," she asked, "that Professor Dumbledore is dying?"

Snape gave her a long look. "Where did you get that idea, Granger?"

"Observation. You didn't answer the question."

"No, I didn't."

This was getting her nowhere. "He makes no attempt to hide his blackened hand, and it's getting worse. There are certain curses . . ." she trailed off.

Snape's mouth hardened. It was as if a shutter came down over his face, more rigid and terrifying than the teacher she normally interacted with. "Very astute, Miss Granger. But I assure you, the curse will be insufficient to kill Albus Dumbledore."

Hermione fiddled nervously with the edge of the desk. Almost in spite of herself, she was impressed by his ability to walk sideways through the truth. She cleared her throat; the time for Gryffindor bluntness had arrived. "I imagine that Draco Malfoy will prove similarly insufficient."

Snape sat perfectly still. When he spoke, his voice was completely level and almost conversational in its politeness. "What are you implying, Miss Granger?"

Hermione gripped her hands into fists, the nails digging painfully into her palms. "I'm implying, sir, that you and Professor Dumbledore have concocted a plan whereby you will kill Dumbledore in Malfoy's place. The other Death Eaters would have no reason to doubt your loyalty then."

Snape raised one eyebrow. "Indeed?" he queried in a tone of polite disbelief. "And what reason, might I ask, would Draco have for attempting to kill the headmaster in the first place?"

"Because, sir, he's a Death Eater, or trying to become one in order to take his father's place." Hermione's voice shook a little. It was unnerving facing this cool, disinterested Snape when she'd expected him to rant and rave.

"An underage wizard? Tasked to kill the most powerful warlock alive today? It doesn't seem very likely." He shifted slightly in his chair, and his dark hair swung forward to frame his face. "How did you arrive at such a far-fetched conclusion, Miss Granger?"

Hermione hesitated only a second, then summoned the parchment from inside her shirt. She carefully separated the two sheets, folded up the one containing the notes on Harry's Horcrux hunt and tucked it safely into her pocket. The other, she spread flat. "Occam's razor," she replied, handing it to Snape.

He read the paper through, twice, before speaking. "As a logical exercise, Miss Granger, this work is significantly flawed." He let the parchment drop onto the table between them.

She wished he would stop calling her Miss Granger and revert to his ordinary self. "What error have I made, sir?"

"The solution you propose is not the most logical." He picked up his quill and added a line of text between two of hers, then slid the parchment over towards her. Now, near the bottom of the page it read:

Assumption : Malfoy is trying to kill Dumbledore.

Fact : Snape has promised to help.

Therefore : When Malfoy fails, Snape will kill Dumbledore.

Conclusion : Snape is loyal to the Dark Lord and always has been.

Hermione's heart was thudding loudly. "Too simplistic, sir," she replied. "It doesn't adequately account for all the information. I know, for example, that you're loyal to Dumbledore."

"You have no proof of that." His voice was harsh.

Hermione's chin rose slightly, and there was a fierce light in her eyes. "I don't need proof of that, sir," she said, as clearly and confidently as she could.

Snape snarled, a guttural, growling noise that came from deep in his throat. "Then you're a fool. Who do you think would believe you, Granger, were I actually to murder the headmaster as you have suggested?"

At his use of her name alone, one of the hard knots in her stomach loosened. "No-one, probably." She hesitated for a second, biting down on her lower lip. "I imagine you're going to have a fairly hard time of it, sir." Something flickered across his face, too quickly for Hermione to be sure of what she saw. "I thought," she continued, "that this might be the information I needed to get from you. With Dumbledore dead, Harry might well lose it completely. Who knows what the Ministry will do with the school? Harry has . . . a job to do, we might have to go on the run. It's my job to keep Harry alive. I need to prepare."

"Granger..." groaned Snape. "You're babbling."

"Sorry, sir."

He ran one hand roughly down his face. He looked . . . *fragile*. Hermione was swept with a sense of injustice. *How could Dumbledore ask this of him? It's inhuman.* She bit down on her lower lip, restraining the urge to hold forth on how unfair everything was. *Don't babble, Granger*, she reminded herself.

For a long moment, neither Hermione nor Snape spoke. Eventually, he picked up the parchment covered in notes and read it once again. "How did you know I made an Unbreakable Vow?" he asked, only a tinge of irritation in his voice.

"Um, I'm afraid I can't tell you, sir."

"Can't, or won't?" He sneered. "Let me guess, it involves a certain miscreant and his invisibility cloak?"

Hermione shrugged and held her tongue. Snape sighed and tossed the paper back on his desk. "Make sure you dispose of this wisely," he recommended, gesturing towards the parchment. Obediently, Hermione levitated it and sent it soaring into the fire. For a second, they both watched it burn.

"How many others do you think might come to the same conclusion?" he asked.

"No-one, sir. No-one has all of the same information, for one. And," she hesitated.

"And?"

"And you've been too successful at walking the line, sir. Most people will readily believe the worst of you."

Snape opened his mouth as if to speak and then shut it abruptly. For an instant Hermione thought he might weep, but he pulled himself together very quickly.

"Very well, Granger," he said. "Come back on Thursday; we'll plan for your life on the run."

"Sir?"

"You are dismissed, Granger. Leave now, or you really will have detention."

Reluctantly, Hermione stood up. Snape looked terrible, and she was loath to leave. She wanted...unthinkably...to hug him, she wanted to rail against the difficulty of his position, she wanted to reassure him, to tell him that it was euthanasia not murder; but she couldn't. Though he had neither explicitly confirmed nor denied her theory, and though he left her with no doubt as to its veracity, they certainly weren't having a conversation about it. She walked to the door, hesitating with her hand on the doorknob.

"Now, Granger," he snarled before she looked round.

"Good night, sir," she replied hurriedly as she stepped out into the corridor.

Hermione stood staring at Snape's closed door until she got worried that he, or some other Slytherin, would find her there. She couldn't, though, return to the common room. Her head was buzzing, and she wasn't capable of maintaining a normal conversation. Instead, she turned her feet towards Vector's office. This was the kind of nervous energy that only Arithmantic calculations had any hope of dissipating. And Hermione had a lot of new information to code into the matrix.

A / N : Occam's razor is a logical theorem that posits the simplest explanation that accounts for all phenomena as the most probable outcome. The statement of the theorem in Latin, *Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*, translates literally as "plurality should not be posited without necessity." (I lifted the translation from wikipedia!)

Sectumsempra

Chapter 24 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Twenty-Four : Sectumsempra

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute. Dialogue quoted from the original HP books is marked with an asterisk.

Without the help of my betas, LAxo and WriterMerrin, reading this story would be a far-less-pleasant experience for everyone concerned. They have my eternal gratitude.

When Hermione Granger left his office that evening, Severus barely made it into the privacy of his chambers before he lost it. He curled up on the floor just inside the door and wept: heaving, snotty, ridiculous tears. He cried about having to kill Albus. He cried about joining the Death Eaters. He cried about the atrocities he'd witnessed, and those he had perpetrated. He cried imagining Hooch and Minerva and Poppy thinking him a traitor. He cried about the miserable waste of his childhood and the dreadful tension of the years between the wars. He cried about the way the Dark Lord lusted after him, and he cried about being in love with his student. By the time he finished, he was exhausted.

Too tired to get up, he lay flat on the floor and stared at the ceiling. Granger never ceased to surprise him.

Severus had given up comparing her to Lily when she forgave him for his ridiculous outburst over Krum. There was no comparison: Granger was smarter, tougher, and infinitely more generous. Granger, he reflected, had been fighting an adult's fight from her first year at Hogwarts; Lily, on the other hand, had led a charmed existence...up until the moment of Pettigrew's betrayal, that is...laughing at danger, playing at fighting, making light of narrow escapes. Severus couldn't imagine Granger getting herself pregnant and starting a family in the middle of a war. He snorted at the idea. Even if she did, she'd manage somehow to control everything, protect everyone and still knit a set of coloured booties for every day of the week. Under no circumstances would she retire to the "wives and mothers" corner and abdicate all decisions to whomever provided the sperm; no-one would bundle Granger away for her own safety.

Now that she had figured out the details of Dumbledore's plan, Hermione had surprised him once again. Firstly, he was astounded that she'd put the pieces together so neatly. *Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*, indeed. Secondly, and more importantly, Severus was overwhelmed by her response. She hadn't looked disgusted, or sickened, or repulsed. On the contrary, she'd seemed . . . sympathetic, worried about him. And she hadn't doubted his intentions. Not once. Though the improbability fold she'd uncovered and the logical puzzle she'd solved both pointed towards two possible outcomes, Granger had unerringly chosen "spy" over "traitor."

It unnerved him. Somehow, since their Legilimency session in the Hospital Wing only nine-and-a-half months ago, she'd changed him. Where previously, Severus had felt smug in his moral superiority to those around him, he was now worried that he couldn't live up to the expectations of one particular woman.

While Dumbledore trusted him, the old man was a manipulative bastard. Severus loved him, but he knew the guilt was carefully calculated, the evasions deliberate. He knew that Dumbledore would always make the same mistakes: some young men were more important than others, and almost always more important than the women of any age. Granger, on the other hand, left aside all pretence at manipulation and just looked at him. Looked at him as though he were real. As if he were a real person in a difficult situation who was going to make the right choice. "Unnerved" was an understatement.

At precisely eight o'clock that Thursday evening, Hermione Granger knocked on his door.

"Enter," he called.

He recognised the mulish set of her mouth at once: she had a question and she wasn't going to let it slide. "Go ahead, Granger," he instructed with a resigned sigh.

"What?" she asked warily.

"Ask your question, I can tell you're bursting at the seams."

"Oh," she said, thrown off-kilter by his encouragement. "Okay then. Is there a way to modify someone's memories and then reverse them later?"

He raised one eyebrow. "You'll need to be a little more specific."

"Well, I know that an Obliviate removes a specific memory, or set of memories, but what if you wanted to convince someone that they were someone else entirely for a specific period of time?"

"For how long?"

"A year, maybe two."

"You do know that what you are proposing is completely illegal?"

She nodded apprehensively. "I'm looking for something that will restore the person entirely to themselves afterwards."

Severus blinked. Granger looked tired. There were dark smudges under her eyes and her face was drawn *Where is this headed?* "Before I answer your question, Granger, I need to know just whose memories you intend to modify."

Her eyes slid sideways before she answered, not as if she were lying, but as if the answer made her uncomfortable. "My parents," she said at last.

Severus was surprised. "Why?"

Granger let out the breath she'd been holding with a huff of worry. "Since Tuesday night I've been working on the calculations. Mostly just clarifying elements by virtue of the new data, but also adding some new sections. One of the things I added was an equation for my parents, and their futures don't look particularly good. I fiddled around with a few options without much luck, until...almost in desperation...I coded for modifying their memories and sending them to Australia. It was the only thing that gives a really good projection. I'd rather not condemn them to a life they haven't chosen and ignorance of their previous existence, but if it comes to a choice between that and certain death, I will."

Severus absorbed the edge of grim determination that underlay her words. "What about sending them off with Krum?"

"I calculated for that, of course. It didn't look very promising."

"Show me the calculations," he demanded, holding out his hand. Granger pulled them readily from her satchel and passed them to him. "What assumptions have you made?"

"Dumbledore's death, the fall of the Ministry, and me being on the run with Harry and Ron."

The figures were devastating. If Granger did nothing, there was a 98.9% chance of death; if she sent them to Krum, 76%; if she sent them to Australia with their memories modified, 1.4%. She'd tried an inordinately high number of other options...going to Australia as they were, modifying their memories and staying in Britain, going to Europe, etc....but without anywhere near the same result. Severus ran one finger along his lower lip, considering the options.

"There is a way," he said at last, "but you don't have the skill to do it." The hope that had blossomed on her face folded. "It requires Legilimency techniques far more complicated than those we have studied, and merely to teach them to you would be illegal."

Granger's face was blank, her emotions shuttered away. "But you know how to do them?" she asked, her voice neutral.

"Yes," he confirmed.

Her lips thinned as she pressed them firmly together, before Granger dropped her gaze to her lap. He knew that she wouldn't ask.

Severus heard his own voice as if it came from far away. "I could do it for you, if you wanted." The gratitude on her face as she gazed up at him was like a fishhook lodged painfully in his chest, inexorably pulling him into her plans. "I will need your help. The procedure is extraordinarily complex: it takes one Legilimens to conceal the original memories somewhere within the subject's brain, the other to concoct a new narrative to cover up the gaps. The hidden memories can be tied to a trigger...a phrase, or situation...that will release them from their place of concealment."

Granger beamed at him. "Thank you! Oh, Professor Snape, thank you so much!" She bit her lower lip briefly. "Should we arrange a time? I had thought, perhaps the first weekend of the summer holidays?"

"In theory, that would work. I cannot be sure of my movements once the school year ends." He didn't need to explain why to her.

"Hmm." She looked thoughtful. "What should we do, then?"

"Let's say 11 a.m. on the first Saturday."

"And if you can't make it for some reason?" asked Granger.

"The same time the following day."

"Thank you, sir," said Granger, quietly confident and smiling up at him. His throat felt tight and he didn't think he could speak. He nodded instead.

After this . . . thing happens, he wondered, how many people will there be who would trust me at all, let alone ask me to modify their parents' memories? He didn't bear thinking on.

"Well," he said, his voice a little scratchy, "if you've quite finished, perhaps we might move on to today's lesson?"

Granger grinned. "Yes, sir," she said obediently.

With the final Quidditch match fast approaching, Severus gave Granger as many lessons as the Gryffindor team had practices. Once the season was over it would be much harder to schedule times without attracting the suspicions of her two idiot friends.

She took the task of planning for a year on the run as seriously as she did every other project, compiling lists and workshopping possible scenarios. Since her schoolwork hadn't suffered as a consequence, Severus knew she must be working inordinately long hours.

With each of his nerve endings attuned to her presence or mention of her name, Granger seemed to figure as a virtual constant of staff room gossip, each of her teachers regularly waxed lyrical about her achievements and intelligence. Not Severus, of course, he kept his mouth shut, although on more than one occasion he was tempted to mention the depth and brilliance of her DADA essays and the efforts he expended to critique them adequately.

It was Vector he was tempted to tell; he'd been oddly fascinated by her since the night he'd seen her and Granger work together. On the few occasions she appeared in the staff room, he'd watched her and her perennial smile. She and Granger had been so comfortable together. He remembered the way that Granger touched her, a hand on her arm, and how she had smiled at her. Vector made free and frequent use of Granger's first name; not for her was there a need to hold the girl at arms' length, to refuse to even think her given name in the privacy of her own head. Severus was jealous, but also intrigued.

On Tuesday afternoon, the week before the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw match, Vector made one of her rare staff room appearances. Severus was sitting by the fire, drinking tea.

To his surprise, Vector walked directly towards him and settled in the other armchair.

"Good afternoon, Severus," she greeted him pleasantly.

"Septima," he replied.

Vector pulled a wry face. "That's not really my name you know," she commented, "You're welcome to call me Ana, or even Anastasia...you don't seem like the type who's fond of diminutives."

Severus sneered, almost out of habit. "Well, Anastasia, to what do I owe the unaccustomed pleasure of your company?"

Vector smiled and leaned forward conspiratorially. "I've always thought you to be something of a grumpy bastard, not worth the effort of getting to know. But then, Hermione Granger thinks very highly of you, and I think very highly of her. It made me wonder whether I shouldn't reconsider."

"You will forgive me if I save my tears of joy until I'm alone, won't you?"

The corners of Vector's eyes crinkled in response to his bitter sarcasm. "Ah, yes, she did mention that your sense of humour was well developed."

"Do you regularly gossip about other teachers with the students?" he inquired coldly.

"No more than the teachers gossip about the students, Severus." Her gaze slid over to his left. "Filius! How are you?"

"Ana! What a pleasure to see you! What brings you to the staff room?" squeaked Flitwick from behind him.

"Nothing in particular, I was just discussing Miss Granger with Severus here."

"Ah, the incomparable Miss Granger! Why, just today she brought in the most marvellous undetectable extension charm to show me; it's not even on the syllabus until next year! I don't know how she finds the time!"

Severus placed his cup and saucer on the low table and rose smoothly to his feet. He gave his companions a stiff bow and escaped from the conversation. There was only another half hour before dinner...time that could be profitably spent patrolling the halls and deducting house points, time that he didn't need to spend wondering what Vector was up to or thinking unproductively about Hermione Granger.

Thus it was, that Severus was not far from the scene when he heard the unmistakable screams of the miserable young Ravenclaw ghost, Myrtle, echoing from the sixth-floor boys' toilet.

"MURDER! MURDER IN THE BATHROOM! MURDER!"

The sight of Draco, sliced violently across his chest and rapidly bleeding to death brought his heart into his throat, and initially Harry Potter's presence registered only peripherally. Severus had his wand out before he thought anything through, singing the counter curse three times before the wound healed over properly, wiping the worst of the blood from Draco's face. *Where did Potter learn Sectumsempra?* he wondered, as soon as he was capable of coherent thought.

"You need the Hospital Wing," He said to Draco, helping the boy to his feet and wrapping one arm around his body to hold him upright. "There may be a certain amount of scarring, but if you take dittany immediately we might avoid even that . . . Come . . ."

Potter was still crouched on the floor where Severus had shoved him in the hurry to reach Draco. He was drenched with blood and water, his face was nearly as pale as Draco's. *Idiot boy*, thought Severus, his relief at Draco's recovery ceding to anger. Before he shepherded Draco out the door, he turned back towards Potter. "And you, Potter" he spat furiously. "You wait here for me." The boy nodded obediently, too horrified by the consequences of his actions even to argue.

Will he never learn to think before he acts?

It took only minutes to half-carry, half-escort Draco to the infirmary, and to Severus' relief, Poppy emerged from her office the moment they arrived.

"Dittany," he instructed, manoeuvring Draco towards the nearest bed. Poppy summoned a phial immediately, and had a dose into the boy before putting him into bed. Severus sighed with relief.

"I will return," he said, directing the comment to both Draco and Poppy. "Right now I have the perpetrator to deal with." He spun on his heel, his face grim and headed back to the bathroom.

Severus was astounded to realise that Potter had possession of his sixth-year Potions textbook, though the revelation explained a lot: Slughorn's effusive praise for the idiot boy's talent at the subject, Granger's questions about why the textbook was wrong, where Potter learned a curse that was known only to a handful of Death Eaters. Potter had hidden it somewhere rather than show it to him, of course, but Severus hadn't cared enough to force the explanation. A series of Saturday detentions would be punishment enough. The thought of the upcoming Quidditch match and Minerva's impending disappointment brought a smirk to Severus' face. *Serves Potter right. How dare he use my own curse against Draco?* Severus narrowed his eyes in thought as he planned a suitable punishment for the dunderhead's detention.

Later that evening, Severus returned to Draco's bedside. The boy's normally pale face looked almost ghostly against the white bed linen. Poppy was fussing around him when Severus arrived and she greeted him with a smile.

"Well look who it is," she said cheerily to Draco, "your rescuer himself. I feel sure I can leave you in his more than capable hands." With a pat on the arm as she passed, Poppy disappeared into her office.

Draco, however, looked less than happy to see him, turning his face resolutely in the opposite direction as Severus seated himself in the chair beside the bed. "I have nothing to say to you," he remarked in a petulant tone.

"Your father brought you up to display better manners than that, Draco," replied Severus evenly.

"Well, my father's not here, is he?"

Severus cast his gaze heavenwards in silent prayer for forbearance. "Draco, I'm trying to help you. Today I saved your life. The least you could do is repay me with some trust. Why don't you talk to me? Tell me your plan?"

"I don't need your help. Just go away and leave me alone."

"Very well." Severus got to his feet once again. "If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

Towards the end of May, Granger managed to slip away from her shadows using an Arithmancy study group as her excuse. From the jut of her chin as she sat opposite him, he knew she was poised to ask yet another question.

"Sir," she began with a deep breath.

"Go ahead, Granger," he sighed melodramatically and tucked his hair behind his ears. "I knew the absence of your questions was too good to last."

"The thing is, I've been thinking about the information that you were supposed to give me."

"I thought we'd well and truly covered that?" he queried, one eyebrow raised.

"Well, the thing is, in actual fact I worked that information out for myself. You didn't really tell me any of it. We didn't even really discuss it. It made me wonder if there wasn't something else you need to pass on." She paused, then added ominously, "Before it's too late."

Severus raised a second eyebrow. There might be something in that. "Did you have anything specific in mind?" he asked.

From the look in her eye, he knew she did. "I know it's redundant," she said awkwardly, "because you never would tell anyone, but will you promise me that this won't go any further?"

Severus curled his upper lip masterfully, but drew out his wand without protest. Holding it up he said, "You have my word." His wand flared gold.

"Your word alone would have been sufficient, you know," Granger chastised him, though she looked relieved. "I don't know why you always feel obliged to take an oath at the smallest opportunity." She bit her lip and looked a bit panicked as soon as she had spoken, clearly realising how close she'd come to chastising him for having become a Death Eater in the first place.

It was a fair question. Every time he thought he'd outgrown the urge to swear unbreakable oaths, he found himself impulsively doing it yet again.

Hermione took a deep breath before continuing. "I wondered what you could tell me about Horcruxes, sir."

Horcruxes. Potter. Horcruxes. Plural. Dumbledore's words came back to him: "If I know him, he will have arranged matters so that when he does set out to meet his death, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort."

"Would it be safe to assume that you're interested in destroying them, Granger, and not in making one?"

"Absolutely."

Severus looked appraisingly at the young woman in front of him, at the eager lines of her body and the determined set of her mouth. "I do have some books that might help," he acknowledged. "Not here, but at my home, at Spinner's End. I'll bring them in," he added, "before it's too late."

Granger's thanks was evident in the width of her smile.

A / N : WARNING! WARNING! This is the penultimate chapter! That's right, the next one will be the last!

I do, however, have plans for a sequel : *Phoenix Tears (or, Hermione Granger and the Deathly Hallows)*. What do you reckon? It would mean that Hermione might have to spend an awfully long and boring time in a tent, Severus will be stuck at Hogwarts where none of his friends will love him anymore . . . only Hermione will know which side he's truly on . . . I dunno, are you interested?

Felix Felicis

Chapter 25 of 25

When Professor Snape heals Hermione's injuries after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, they are both surprised by what they learn. The two must work together to help Harry defeat Lord Voldemort.

Phoenix Song, Chapter Twenty-five : Felix Felicis

DISCLAIMER : The characters and many of the situations described in this story are the property of the incomparable J.K. Rowling. I make no money from this story, which exists as a work of tribute. Dialogue quoted from the original HP books is marked with an asterisk.

Without the help of my betas, LAxo and WriterMerrin, reading this story would be a far-less-pleasant experience for everyone concerned. They have my eternal gratitude.

Hermione knew it wasn't particularly gracious, but she couldn't help saying "I told you so" to Harry with regard to the Half-Blood Prince. His attitude was driving her up the wall. Despite a seemingly endless series of detentions, he wasn't particularly stricken with remorse, and certainly, once Gryffindor won their match and he and Ginny got together, Harry spent most of his time in a happy daze.

It disturbed Hermione more than she cared to admit how close he had come to killing Malfoy. Sure, Malfoy was probably a Death Eater, but it wasn't as if he and Harry had met in a deserted graveyard somewhere and duelled for their lives. They were at Hogwarts, in the bathroom, and stupid schoolboy rivalry had almost cost one of them the ultimate price.

It bothered her that Harry could act as if Snape's swift actions erasing the marks from Malfoy's body also healed Harry's conscience. Didn't he get it? Didn't any of them get it? Hermione had recognised the counter-spell Harry had described: it was the "phoenix song" with which Snape had healed her own wound from the Department of Mysteries a year before. That meant that Harry and the Death Eater had used the same spell. The circumstances were frighteningly similar to the situation with Percy's old boss, Mr Crouch, during the last war: would it really be a moral victory of good over evil if both parties were reduced to similar means to achieve their ends?

Hermione's righteous indignation fuelled several hours of library research. She had hoped to uncover something that might make Harry rethink his reliance on dangerous scribbles authored by an unknown source, but the only lead she uncovered was an article about an Eileen Prince. The rather unattractive girl had attended school at the right time, although the brief discussion of interschool Gobstones that accompanied her picture made no mention of Potions. It certainly wasn't enough to convince Harry: the near argument left Hermione fuming, and she decided to take a quick walk around the corridors before settling down to do some study.

Only minutes later Ron came hurtling after her.

"Hermione!" he called, "Hermione!"

"What, Ron?" She was still irritable.

"It's Harry," Ron pulled up beside her, panting heavily. "He got a message from Dumbledore. He has to go to his office right away...I think they're going to go and find one!"

There was no need for him to qualify what the "one" referred to.

"Oh my God!" Hermione covered her mouth with both hands, all irritation forgotten. "Come on, let's wait for him in the common room."

They found a seat well away from anyone else, with a good view of the door. Tension vibrated through their bodies at the point where they touched. Much sooner than they anticipated, Harry was back.

"What does he want?"* Hermione asked, then noting the pinched expression on his face added anxiously, "Harry, are you okay?"*

"I'm fine,"* he replied. Without stopping to talk, he ran up the stairs to the boys' dormitories. Hermione exchanged a telling look with Ron, and they were just about to follow him up when he came back at a run. "I've got to be quick,"* he panted, breathless from the stairs. "Dumbledore thinks I'm getting my Invisibility Cloak. Listen,"* Harry glanced around quickly, then cast Muffliato. "Dumbledore's found another Horcrux and he's taking me to find it. The thing is, that on the way to his office, I ran into Trelawney and she..." Harry broke off for a second, a funny expression twisting his face. "She had just tried to get into the Room of Requirement. She heard a boy's voice shouting with glee, and when she tried to find out who it was, he threw her out of the room."

Hermione gasped.

"What, you mean Malfoy?" asked Ron.

"Who else?" replied Harry, his face grim. "So you see what this means? Dumbledore won't be here tonight, so Malfoy's going to have another clear shot at whatever he's up to."*

"Harry," began Hermione, knowing full well that with Dumbledore absent Malfoy couldn't carry out his plan, but Harry talked over her interruption.

"*No, Listen to me!* I know it was Malfoy celebrating in the Room of Requirement. Here..."* Harry pressed the Marauder's Map into Hermione's hand. "You've got to watch him and you've got to watch Snape too. Use anyone else who you can rustle up from the D.A., Hermione, those contact Galleons will still work, right? Dumbledore says he's put extra protection in the school, but if Snape's involved, he'll know what Dumbledore's protection is, and how to avoid it...but he won't be expecting you lot to be on the watch, will he?"*

"Harry..."* she said again, more insistently this time.

"I haven't got time to argue,"* he replied, turning towards Ron. "Take this as well..."*

"Thanks,"* said Ron, obediently grasping the proffered object. "Er...why do I need socks?"*

"You need what's wrapped in them, it's the Felix Felicis. Share it between yourselves and Ginny too. Say good-bye to her for me. I'd better go, Dumbledore's waiting..."*

"No!"* Hermione tried to grab hold of Harry's arm but he shook her off. "We don't want it," she said desperately. "You take it, who knows what you're going to be facing?"*

"I'll be fine, I'll be with Dumbledore." His words weren't as reassuring to Hermione as he clearly intended them to be. "I want to know that you lot are okay . . . Don't look like that, Hermione, I'll see you later . . ."

Harry was off and running again before Ron or Hermione could say anything. Hermione turned to Ron. He looked nervous, but as he caught her eye, his back straightened and he smiled reassuringly.

"All right?" he asked, reaching out and gripping her shoulder.

"Yeah," she replied. "I'll get the Galleon from upstairs. Wait here."

Hermione took the stairs two at a time. The D.A. Galleon was in a decorative bowl on her bedside table, along with the personal Portkey Viktor had given her, a handful of small change and a button that had recently fallen off her school robes. She grabbed the false coin at once and hurried back out. On the way downstairs, she poked her head into Ginny's room, relieved to find the younger girl seated on her bed surrounded by her Transfiguration notes.

"OWLS," explained Ginny with a distracted smile.

"Ginny." Hermione paused. "Um, I haven't really got time to explain now, but it looks like Death Eaters might be about to break into the castle."

Ginny leapt up immediately, grabbing hold of her shoes and pulling them on. "Where's Harry?" she asked.

"I'll explain once we've got as many D.A. people as we can, let's go."

Hermione clattered down the stairs, Ginny hard on her heels. Ron was waiting where she'd left him, Neville by his side.

"Let's go," she said to all of them, gesturing towards the portrait hole. "We can't talk here."

The four of them tramped out into the corridor, and she pulled them into the first empty classroom, opening the door with Alohomora and locking it again behind them. The first thing she did was trigger the contact Galleon, though Hermione thought it unlikely that anyone but Luna would notice. Since even Hermione's own coin had been left beside her bed, she couldn't imagine many others had bothered to carry them round a whole year after the D.A. had stopped holding regular meetings. While Ron filled Ginny and Neville in on the gist of events, skating over the reason for Dumbledore and Harry's departure without mentioning the Horcruxes, Hermione activated the Marauder's Map and poured over it, seeking Snape and Malfoy. Snape was easily located, stationary in his office, but Malfoy was nowhere to be seen.

Luna turned up just as Ron finished his explanation.

"Hullo, everyone," she said. "Are we going to the Ministry again?"

"No," replied Ron, his face grim. "We're expecting the Death Eaters to come here tonight, instead."

"Fair enough." Luna was as calm as ever.

"Listen," interrupted Hermione, "Malfoy's in the Room of Requirement, Snape's in his office. We're going to have to split up. Ron: you, Ginny and Neville keep an eye on Malfoy. Take the map with you. Luna and I will watch Snape...I'll fill you in while we wait, Luna." She looked at the faces around her. Everyone nodded.

"Okay," said Ron. "That just leaves this." He extricated the Felix Felicis from his pocket and held the small phial up at eye level. "I reckon there's enough for one mouthful each." He offered the bottle to Hermione.

"After you," she said, touched by his courteous gesture.

With infinite care, Ron levered out the stopper. Hesitantly, he raised it towards his lips, then paused. "To the defeat of Lord Voldemort," he intoned, holding out the phial as if in a toast. He took a careful mouthful and then passed it to Ginny.

"Wow," he remarked, "that stuff feels amazing on the way down."

"To the defeat of Lord Voldemort," echoed Ginny and swallowed her share of the lucky potion. As the small bottle of Felix Felicis made its way around the circle, they each toasted their victory with solemnity. Hermione went last. When it was finally her turn, she wrapped her hand completely around the phial, holding it up as she proclaimed the toast and then carrying it to her mouth. But she didn't swallow. Hermione kept her lips pressed firmly together and quickly lowered the potion to her side. Surreptitiously, she palmed the stopper from the table, corked the bottle and slipped it into her pocket. *Plenty of time to use it later*, she rationalised.

"Alright," she said, aiming for the confident tones of someone who had just swallowed liquid luck. "Let's go."

"If I realised I was going to get lucky tonight, I would have worn nicer pants," quipped Ginny as they left the room, sending Neville into flights of nervous giggles. They split into two groups at the stairwell, with Neville, Ron and Ginny continuing on to the Room of Requirement and Hermione and Luna heading downstairs to the dungeons.

Hermione and Luna hovered outside Snape's office for hours. There was plenty of time for Hermione to explain the situation to Luna and plenty of time for Luna to regale Hermione with patently untrue stories courtesy of her father. It wasn't until almost midnight that they heard Flitwick's high-pitched voice shouting about Death Eaters as he ran towards Snape's office. Hermione grabbed hold of the back of Luna's robes and stepped into the shadow of a nearby doorway. Flitwick ran past without noticing them.

"SEVERUS! There are Death Eaters in the castle; you must come at once! They're in the Astronomy Tower!" squeaked Flitwick as he raced through Snape's door without knocking.

"You should probably take your Felix Felicis now," whispered Luna into Hermione's ear.

Before Hermione had a chance to respond, there was a distinct crash from within Snape's office, and Snape himself exploded out into the corridor, his wand in hand. Hermione stumbled forward into his path, pulling Luna with her. Snape stopped abruptly, his eyes flickering from one girl to the other.

"Professor Flitwick is unwell," he drawled. "He seems to have collapsed, and you will need to take care of him. I am needed elsewhere: as you no doubt heard, there are Death Eaters in the castle."

Luna gasped. "Professor Flitwick!" she cried, hurrying into Snape's office without further ado. As soon as Luna's back was turned, both Snape and Hermione gestured for the other's attention.

"Professor," she said in an urgent whisper, just as he said, "Granger," in a low voice.

He continued quickly, "There are some books for you in the second drawer. You will need to come back for them later, the wards have been altered to let you in. Keep them to yourself."

He moved, as if to go, but she caught at his arm to hold him back. With her other hand, she fished the phial of Felix Felicis from her pocket and pressed it into his palm.

"This is for you," she muttered, glancing quickly back to check that Luna was out of earshot and stepping away from her professor.

Snape shot a look at the bottle in his hand, his brows snapping together in surprise. "Felix Felicis?" he asked. "Where did you get this?"

"It's Harry's . . . it's a long story. We divided it up tonight."

"This is your share," said Snape.

"No," replied Hermione unconvincingly. She grimaced, knowing that her body language laid bare her lie.

Snape pushed the phial back towards her, but Hermione shook her head and put her hands behind her back, refusing to take it.

"You need it more than I do, sir," she urged.

Snape looked at her, then down at the potion; he made a quick decision. Thumbing the stopper from the bottle, he raised it to his lips and poured the contents into his mouth. Noting that the bottle was indeed empty, Hermione smiled with delight. She was still grinning when Snape struck.

Moving faster than Hermione would have thought possible, Snape shifted the empty bottle from his left hand to his wand hand and reached out to grip her chin with long, bony fingers. It hurt. His fingers dug into her cheeks, forcing her mouth open and her teeth further apart. Then he kissed her. He crushed his mouth against hers and opened his lips. The liquid fire of Felix Felicis dribbled from his mouth to hers.

Hermione struggled not to swallow, but her head was tilted upward at such an angle that she had little choice. She clutched desperately at his hand, scrabbling to pull his fingers from her face and swaying slightly as her balance tilted. She felt weak at the knees. As she spluttered, and unwillingly swallowed, Snape's mouth and grip gentled. He pulled back just enough that their lips parted, slowly, almost reluctantly. Hermione's heart was thudding in her chest, the infinite, tingling possibilities of the golden luck potion spread through her body like a song. She and Snape stared at each other, their faces barely an inch apart. She could feel the air of his breath against her lips, she could smell his distinctive, smoky scent. His hand against her cheek trembled, then slipped the short distance to rest against her throat, his fingers gently brushing against the line of her jaw.

She wanted to kiss him again.

"Hermione!" Luna called suddenly from the office, her voice panicked and urgent. "Come quickly!"

The whole encounter had taken less than a minute, though it seemed to have lasted for much longer. Snape blinked, and then he was gone, running towards the stairs in long, loping strides. Hermione brushed the fingers of one hand across her mouth wonderingly. She could still feel the memory of his warm mouth on her, her lips still glistened from the violently generous caress. With Felix thrumming through her veins, her concern for him was numbed. She felt certain that Snape would be just fine, that everything would turn out the way it needed to. With a small, private smile, she turned towards Snape's office. Luna needed her help.

Flitwick had cracked his head rather badly as he'd fallen, and neither Luna nor Hermione was game to return him to consciousness without treating the head wound first. Hermione conjured a stretcher, and together the two young women levitated the diminutive figure of their Charms professor onto it. Hermione spent several minutes fussing until his body was on its side, his head slightly tilted back and his airway unobstructed...long-ago memories of first aid classes and the drug in her system increased her confidence that it was the right thing to do.

"We can drop him in the Hospital Wing on our way to the Astronomy Tower," decided Hermione. "I'll levitate the stretcher; can you open the door?"

Luna leapt to do so, and the two of them set off up the corridor, their pace slowed somewhat by the stretcher that bobbed along in front of them. Once they'd consigned Flitwick to Madam Pomfrey's care...and finally extricated themselves from under her keen eye...Hermione and Luna broke into a run. As they drew closer to the tower, they could hear the sounds of the battle ahead, Hermione even thought she heard Snape shouting something over the fray. Yet, when they finally skidded around the last corner, their wands out and ready to fight, the chaotic scene before them was devoid of Death Eaters.

Hermione looked around in some confusion. "What's happening?" she gasped, her breathing irregular from the several flights of stairs she'd just pounded up.

"They've gone," replied Lupin, stating the obvious. "I think they're on their way out of the castle."

"Bill!" The panic in Tonks' voice caught everyone's attention, and Hermione spun towards the sound. "He's still alive! Quick! We have to get him to the Hospital Wing!"

Hermione ran to where Tonks knelt over Bill's sprawled form. There was a substantial amount of blood on the floor, on his clothes and all over the pulpy mess of flesh that should have been his face. The Felix Felicis came to Hermione's rescue, dislocating the horror of what she was looking at from what she needed to do. The golden potion was still singing in her veins, and she tingled with a sense of what had to be done. She conjured another stretcher before her brain had even processed the situation. Tonks was weeping, too upset to focus her wand on her injured friend.

"Out of the way," ordered Hermione, levitating Bill onto the stretcher as Ron pushed Tonks aside and grabbed a frightened handful of his brother's clothing.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked, his voice high and thin with anxiety.

Hermione's control seemed to kick Lupin into action. He put one hand on Hermione's shoulder and gave it a brief squeeze, though he spoke to Ron.

"He was bitten by Greyback; you and Hermione take him to the Hospital Wing immediately. I'll see to the others."

"Let's go, Ron," said Hermione gently, lifting the stretcher into the air. Ron rose to his feet without letting go of his brother, stumbling along beside the stretcher as Hermione manoeuvred it out of the knot of concerned Order members. As she left, Hermione could hear Lupin conjuring another stretcher and ordering some of the others about. She wondered who else was injured. The Felix Felicis was stopping her from feeling as upset as she knew she should, and it bothered her.

"But he wasn't a werewolf," muttered Ron distractedly, "or Lupin would have been too. It's the wrong time of month."

Even through the fuzzy warmth of the Felix Felicis, Hermione's heart ached at her friend's clear distress.

They'd only made it about a third of the way back to the Hospital Wing when Ginny ran up behind them, falling into step on the other side of the stretcher and, like Ron, gripping the nearest part of her injured brother as if physical contact would will him back to consciousness and health.

"Did either of you see where Harry got to?" she asked.

"He came back?" asked Hermione in reply, panic cutting through her drug-induced calm for a split second. Her tight control of the levitated stretcher faltered, but she recovered it after the briefest of wobbles. "Where was Dumbledore?"

"Dunno," responded Ginny. "Didn't see him. Harry went haring after the Death Eaters as they made a run for it."

Concern for Harry and for Snape flooded through Hermione's body. *And Dumbledore, does that mean that Snape* . . . she cut off that line of thinking abruptly. She would find out soon enough. For now, she had to deal with Bill.

Madam Pomfrey took charge from the instant they crossed the threshold, whipping Bill into a bed and casting a variety of diagnostic charms at his face. Looking grim, she began to clean the wounds; Hermione turned her attention to the two youngest Weasleys. Their doses of Felix Felicis had clearly worn off, and they were both visibly distraught. Encouraged by the drug that still flowed freely through her system, she took hold of Ginny's hand and rubbed small circles on Ron's lower back. Ginny gave her a grateful look, though Ron seemed oblivious, muttering under his breath and never moving his eyes from his brother's face.

When the others arrived, Madam Pomfrey bustled off to see to Neville, though she returned within moments. Noting who had arrived and who hadn't, Ginny looked grim.

"I'm going to find Harry," she announced, pulling her hand from Hermione's and striding off towards the door. Ron didn't move. Hermione was torn, but decided to stay. She felt certain Harry would come to the Hospital Wing as soon as he could: nothing would keep him away from his injured friends.

As Lupin, Tonks and Luna joined Hermione and Ron beside Bill's bed, Madam Pomfrey finished cleaning the numerous cuts and abrasions that marred Bill's normally cheerful, pleasant face and began to anoint them with a pungent green ointment.

Hermione shot an inquiring glance at Lupin. "Neville will be just fine," he responded reassuringly.

"Neville?" echoed Ron, the information that someone else was also injured penetrating the cocoon of his concern for his oldest brother. Hermione patted his arm, and he graced her with a wan smile. "Thanks, Hermione," he whispered.

Harry and Ginny arrived shortly afterwards, relieving one of Hermione's pressing worries. He soon relayed the fact of and the circumstances surrounding Dumbledore's death. *Poor Snape*, thought Hermione, knowing how little he was looking forward to his task.

"Shh! Listen!" exclaimed Ginny suddenly, cutting across Madam Pomfrey's tears and interrupting Hermione's thoughts.

Hermione recognised the sounds, though in reality, she'd never heard them: phoenix song. Out in the grounds, Fawkes was singing, an aching elegy on the death of Dumbledore. Like her concern for Snape and Harry, the phoenix song seemed to effortlessly penetrate the dampening fog of the Felix Felicis. The music was both inside and outside Hermione, vibrating in the very flesh of her body, piercing her heart as it wrapped her in an envelope of sound. The sensation was extraordinarily familiar, and the scar across her breast ached in sympathy. For Hermione, the song and her experience of it resonated in her awareness as the memory of Snape. Unbidden tears ran down her cheeks, as she cried for the man Dumbledore had left behind. She wondered where he had gone and what he was doing; she thought about how lonely he would be from hereon in.

Fawkes' song was an exquisite agony. She wanted the sound to last forever, she wanted never to lose the feeling of it pulsing through her veins.

It was unclear how long they all stood there listening, though the spell was lifted abruptly when McGonagall came into the room, the heavy door thudding shut behind her. McGonagall's normally pristine appearance was in abeyance: her hair was dishevelled, her clothes torn and smudged. She, too, had to be notified of Dumbledore's death and Snape's role, collapsing into a chair at Harry's explanation.

Hermione found the speed with which the Order members around her revised their opinions of Professor Snape to be an object lesson in the limits of trust. She burned to defend him, though to do so would invalidate the drastic lengths Dumbledore and Snape had gone to in order to maintain the murderous facade. She had her own role to play, too, and once again, the Felix Felicis came in handy, urging her to bury her face in her hands as she related the heavily edited version of events outside Snape's office. In some odd way, lying to her dearest friends was made easier by the presence of everybody else and the horrific spectacle of Bill's ravaged face.

Once Professor McGonagall took Harry away for a private word, Hermione made her own excuses and left the Weasleys alone with Bill. The Ministry representatives were on the way, and Hermione knew it might be her only chance to retrieve the books Snape had left her.

Luckily, the hallways were deserted, and she made it down to the dungeons without running into anyone. She felt odd as she approached the door to Snape's office, more than half expecting to catch sight of his black robes or to hear his voice. The urge to knock was almost overpowering. Instead, she laid the palm of her hand flat against to wood and pushed. The door swung open easily. Shutting the door firmly behind her, Hermione crossed the room quickly, moved behind Snape's desk and opened the second drawer. There were three books inside. The largest, *Secrets of the Darkest Art*, was bound in black leather and had a folded sheet of parchment tucked inside the front cover. Hermione withdrew it eagerly and unfolded it to reveal the single word written inside: Polyjuice.

Of course.

Tucking the three books inside her robe, Hermione tuned towards the door that led to Snape's private lab. That too opened at her touch. The Polyjuice they'd brewed

together was bottled, labelled and laid out in a neat row on the top of the work bench. There were also several phials of dittany and some basic healing potions. Hermione cast around for something to carry them in, discovering a black felt roll lined with small pockets hanging from the back of the door. She slipped the phials into the various pockets and wrapped it up into a neat roll, tucking it into her robes beside the books. With one last look around, she closed the lab door behind her and re-entered the office. She didn't have much time. As if that thought had conjured the Aurors, Hermione heard steps in the corridor outside: it seemed that her Felix Felicis-inspired luck had just run out.

"Blimey, these wards'll take a while. He didn't mess around, did he?" The man's voice was slightly muffled by the door, and Hermione heard an indistinct female voice make some reply. Her eyes widened in panic, and she glanced around the room. With relief, her eyes fell on the fireplace, and she hurried across to it. Taking a handful of Floo powder, she threw it into the flames. "Gryffindor common room," she said in a low but clear voice. The fire flared green, and she stepped through with an audible sigh of relief.

Hermione stumbled out into the empty common room, pausing only briefly to check no-one was around before hurrying up the stairs and into her bedroom. Toeing off her shoes, she climbed onto the bed and pulled the curtains tightly closed. Then she cast every protective ward Snape had taught her before pulling out the three books from inside her robes and taking a closer look.

It was only because she specifically looked for it that she noticed the name written into the front of *Secrets of the Darkest Arts*. A clever and subtle notice-me-not charm made it otherwise difficult to discern. What she read there surprised Hermione more, almost, than the horrific contents of the volume: "This book is the property of Eileen Prince."

Hermione told Harry the information that Eileen Prince was Snape's mother...and that therefore Snape was the Half-Blood Prince...the night before Dumbledore's funeral. He took it better than she had expected, but not without several nasty comments about Snape. She intervened unthinkingly when Harry drew a parallel between Snape and Voldemort himself. "'Evil' is a strong word," she said firmly, half wishing the words unsaid as soon as they were uttered. *You are a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and you have an important role to play*, she rebuked herself. *There is information that Harry must not know*

Harry and Ron went up to bed soon afterwards, and Hermione seized the opportunity to slip out of the portrait hole. It was almost curfew, but Hermione was past caring. Moving quickly, she made her way across the building to Vector's office and knocked on the door. Vector was in and called for her to enter.

"Hermione, good evening," Vector's smile was more drawn than usual, but still welcoming. Having recognised her visitor, she frowned at the wall and muttered, causing the matrix equations to shimmer back into view. Vector stood over by one blackboard, a cup of Greek coffee in one hand, a piece of chalk in the other. She had clearly been hard at work. She gestured at the calculations with her cup of coffee. "I've been trying to work out why I didn't manage to predict our current situation," she said, her voice tinged with professional and personal disappointment.

"I did," replied Hermione apologetically.

"You did?" Vector turned in surprise. "Sit down," she ordered, pointing towards her desk and moving towards her own chair.

"I had some information from a dubious source, I'm sorry I didn't share it with you but I wasn't sure . . ." Hermione pulled a copy of her version of the equations from her pocket as she spoke, and held it out to her professor.

Vector waved her coffee forgivingly. She had pulled a small handheld blackboard towards her and was scribbling furiously, glancing from Hermione's work to her own. "And you can see a way forward?" she asked without pausing in her calculations.

"Yes."

Hermione waited patiently for Vector to solve the equation. After another few minutes, the older woman raised her head and smiled. She tucked the front white lock of her dark hair securely behind one ear. "As long as you knew, Hermione, there is still hope." Pulling her wand from her pocket, Vector tapped it against the frame of her small blackboard, duplicating the calculations onto a conjured piece of parchment. "This is for you," she said, handing the copy to Hermione. "It's the noumenal alteration curve through which we can filter the existing data set to reflect the current state of events...it leaves Albus as the origin of the overall plan but alters the main actors and the keepers of information."

Hermione was impressed. "That's phenomenally difficult maths!" she protested.

"Thanks," responded Vector with something of her usual spark. "You'll have to keep feeding it with new information, of course, or the equations will stagnate." She folded up the sheet of parchment Hermione had given her and tucked it safely inside her own robes.

"Hermione," Vector continued in a more serious tone, "these calculations could prove very important to you over the next year...and I'm pretty sure it will be a year. Anything you don't have already, you should copy down tonight. I'm going to destroy all record of them after the funeral."

"But..."

Vector silenced Hermione's interruptions with one raised finger. "Severus has seen the matrix, of course, but since it's constantly changing and since he already knew most of the information, I don't suppose it makes that much difference. The thing is, though, that with Albus gone, the Ministry will fall very quickly." Vector drained her coffee and placed the cup on the table. She fumbled in her pocket for a second, then withdrew a very familiar looking silver object. "Your friend Viktor sent me this."

"A Portkey?" Hermione was at a loss, the conversation had taken a very unexpected turn.

"According to the Ministry records, Septima Vector is Muggle-born." Vector shrugged. "As a point of fact, Anastasia Papavasiliopolous was also Muggle-born. Once the Ministry falls, life will become more difficult for all of us, but for a Muggle-born foreign witch living under a hurriedly cobbled-together false identity, things could get very sticky very fast. I thought an escape route was in order."

"Oh," said Hermione blankly. "Indeed."

Vector smiled and tapped one finger on a nearby sheet of calculations. "I see that you're also going to be absent from Hogwarts next year."

"Yes," she replied weakly.

"You have the makings of an extraordinary Arithmancer, Hermione. All things going well, it would be my pleasure to work with you again in the future." Vector extended her hand to Hermione across the desk and when Hermione took it, shook her hand firmly. "Take care," she added, bringing the surprising conversation to a close.

On the way back to Gryffindor tower, Hermione detoured past the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and his dancing trolls. Armed with Harry's quite detailed description, it was a relatively simple matter to enter the Room of Requirement and find Snape's old Potions book. Feeling slightly guilty, Hermione tucked it inside her robes. It wouldn't do to leave that behind.

The funeral was every bit as dreadful as Hermione had anticipated. The eulogy in particular was miserable...Dumbledore was an incredible man, and nothing the diminutive celebrant included in his long speech came close to capturing his fierce intelligence or generosity, let alone the manipulative genius of his Machiavellian schemes.

The only thing worse than the speech was the sight of Jocelyn Smith's drawn face. Hermione caught a glimpse of the slight, young girl among the other Slytherin students,

the block of them ostracised by the rest of the school body, marked out by Snape's supposed treachery. Jocelyn's miserable face pressed upon Hermione with all the weight of her secret knowledge and the thought of the consequences it would have for those who knew Snape, and most importantly for Snape himself. Hermione remembered the short list of his friends, as enumerated by Professor Vector earlier that year. Of the scant five names, only Lucius Malfoy remained now...and he was in Azkaban. *Who else, she wondered, has made such sacrifices in order to defeat Voldemort?*

It was for Snape, and not just for Dumbledore, that she sobbed her heart out onto Ron's broad and comforting shoulder, his friendly and reassuring embrace both an anchor and a reminder of how awful it was to lose one's friends.

She and Ron caught up with Harry not long after Rufus Scrimgeour left him, and they settled down under their favourite beech tree, thankful to be free of the crowds. It was weird to sit in such a familiar place and discuss the frightening task that had been left to Harry after Dumbledore's death.

"You said to us once before," said Hermione firmly in the face of his protestations of independence, "that there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We've had time, haven't we?"

"We're with you whatever happens," confirmed Ron. "But mate, you're going to have to come round my mum and dad's house before we do anything else, even Godric's Hollow."

"Why?" Harry was genuinely mystified, the tremulous realisation of his friends' sincerity still visible on his face.

"Bill and Fleur's wedding, remember?" prompted Ron.

"Yeah," said Harry after a short, stunned silence. "We shouldn't miss that."

Hermione turned her head, looking from one of her best friends to the other. *Love and politics*, she reminded herself, *are a fierce combination*. Reaching out with both arms, she slung one around Harry's shoulders and the other around Ron, squeezing them both towards her in a clumsy hug. She and Ron were crucial to Harry's success, she knew that: she'd seen the maths. As long as they were together, there was plenty to hope for. And she, Hermione Granger, had a job to do. She was going to keep Harry alive.

Staring out over the lake, Hermione let herself wonder where Snape was and what he was up to. She pulled the memory of his promise to help her modify her parents' memories close to her heart. He would come, she knew, no matter how difficult it was for him to get away; Severus Snape was a man of his word.

A / N : I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has read this story to its end, and to proclaim my eternal gratitude to those who have reviewed. This is the first piece of fiction I have written . . . ever (with the possible exception of a few short stories in primary school), and the feedback and constructive criticism from all of you has made this an incredibly rewarding experience for me; I cannot overemphasise the importance that the reviews have had.

After the enthusiastic response to the question of whether a sequel would be out of the question, I am happy to inform everybody that I am thoroughly committed to writing the next part: *Phoenix Tears (or, Hermione Granger and the Deathly Hallows)*. I've a horrible RL deadline on June 3, but sometime soon after that I promise to be back with more of the story.

In closing then, I want to re-thank my betas...LAXo and WriterMerrin...without whom this story would be but randomly peppered with commas, and you, of course, for reading.