

Phoenix Tears (or, Hermione Granger and the DH)

by grangerous

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. ****DH SPOILERS****

Felix Felicis

Chapter 1 of 25

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Phoenix Tears, Chapter One : 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 books is marked with an asterisk.

PLEASE NOTE : This story is the SEQUEL to *Phoenix Song (or, Hermione Granger and the Half-Blood Prince)*. I strongly recommend that you read *Phoenix Song* first.

Thank you very much to LAXo and to WriterMerrin for making this story better than it was. Please be aware that any remaining errors are 100% my own!

Thank you, too, to all of the readers who left reviews to my earlier story. Your encouragement has had the following result . . .

Severus Snape stared down at the small phial she had pressed into his hand. He recognised the contents immediately. "Felix Felicis?" he asked. "Where did you get this?"

"It's Harry's," replied Hermione Granger. "It's a long story. We divided it up tonight."

Only a scant mouthful remained in the bottle. "This is your share," he said, struck by sudden certainty. He pushed the phial back towards her, but she stepped away from him, shaking her head and pulling her hands behind her back in refusal.

"No," she lied, then added more truthfully: "You need it more than I do, sir."

Severus had no need of Legilimency to read the sincerity behind Granger's gesture. Her good faith glowed. He glanced from her to the small glass container in his hand. His heart ached. *Felix Felicis, liquid luck* There was no clearer way to display her trust. Yet whatever decision he made now, it had to be quick: Death Eaters had breached

Hogwarts' defences, he had to find Dumbledore and kill him before someone else did, and Luna Lovegood was only feet away, separated from Severus and Granger by his office door. This was not the moment to stare at a student and think about kissing her.

Or was it? With only the tiniest twinge of guilt, Severus thumbed the cork from the bottle in his hand and tilted back his head, drawing the contents into his mouth.

Granger's response was immediate. She beamed at him with delight; her lips parted slightly as her smile spread across her face. Severus struck immediately. Shifting the empty bottle into the hand that held his wand, he freed his left hand and reached out across the distance that separated them. He took a firm grip of her chin. The tips of his fingers dug into the soft flesh of her cheeks, forcing her jaw open. As he stepped closer and lowered his head, her smell washed over him. The Felix Felicis tingled against his tongue. The warmth of it spread outwards...down his throat and up through his sinuses...though he had been very careful not to swallow any. He crushed his mouth against hers, and as soon as he managed to manoeuvre his bottom lip between the two of hers, he opened his mouth, transferring the liquid contents from one person to the other. She struggled silently: her hands pulled ineffectively at his fingers and her tongue pushed up against his in a futile effort to push the Felix Felicis back up into his mouth.

Severus' eyes were pressed closed, his concentration narrowed to the points of bodily contact. Her lips were inordinately soft. Within seconds, she was forced to swallow, and her struggles ceased. Severus could provide no justification to prolong his behaviour, but he drew back only reluctantly, stretching out the last brief seconds of contact between his lips and hers as long as possible.

His eyes fluttered open almost immediately, and he stared at the face before him: the curl of an eyelash, the curve of her lip, the soft groove between her nose and her mouth. His left hand slipped from her chin, sliding across the edge of her jaw and down her throat to rest with his fingertips lying in the hollow at the base of her neck. He could feel the unsteady beat of her heart and the rise and fall of her breath. He wanted to kiss her again.

"Hermione!" Lovegood punctured the moment, her panic evident in the cadence of her voice. "Come quickly!"

The interruption brought Severus immediately to his senses. He pulled away from the young woman in front of him and gave her one last glance before he turned on his heel and ran.

He ran through the melee upstairs unscathed, unsure whether it was the residual effects of the Felix Felicis he had absorbed through the membranes of his mouth, the compulsion of his Unbreakable Vow taking over, or merely coincidence. The passageway up to the Astronomy Tower shimmered distinctively, and Severus recognised the barrier that would admit only those in the Dark Lord's service. Leaping over a fallen and unrecognisable body, he ran up the stairs.

Severus threw open the door at the top with the kind of bang he normally reserved for the Potions classroom. As he stepped outside, a gust of cold air blew back his hair from his face and ruffled the clothes of the unlikely tableau that was frozen before him: Dumbledore leaned against the ramparts, dreadfully pale and barely upright. Two broomsticks lay abandoned beside his feet; his wand was nowhere to be seen. *Is he so keen to die that he didn't even bother to draw his wand?* Draco was as pale as the headmaster, and his wand hand shook alarmingly. Yaxley and the Carrows also had their wands out; Greyback had been thrown to one side. The Dark Mark hung above the scene, casting an ominous green light over the participants.

"We've got a problem, Snape." It was Amicus Carrow who spoke. Severus heard his words as if they came from a great distance. "The boy doesn't seem able..."

"Severus . . .""Albus barely raised his voice above a whisper, but it caught at everyone's attention.

Severus strode towards him, roughly pushing Draco out of his way, his eyes fixated on Albus. The relief on Albus' face twisted uncomfortably within his chest.

"Severus . . . please . . ."

The hatred Severus felt seemed to begin low in his body, sweeping up his chest and throat like nausea, clenching the muscles of his jaw and arms tight*That it should come to this.* Dumbledore looked old. He looked weak. He stood precariously, as if another gust of wind might topple him from the tower, as if his knees might give in and send him sprawling at the feet of his enemies. *How dare he?* This was the man Severus had trusted to rescue him and to protect him, the man he had thought would save the wizarding world from the malignant cancer of the Dark Lord's insatiable desire for power. And here he was, about to die. *How dare he look so vulnerable? How dare he beg me?* Severus raised his wand and pointed it unerringly into the impossibly dear face before him. Albus..*Damn him!*...smiled.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" cried Severus. His own voice sounded strange to him.; the green flash from his wand moved as slowly as treacle. He watched it stretch out across the distance between them before...too quickly...it thudded into Dumbledore's chest. He thought he heard the old man sigh softly as the curse impacted. Devoid of the twinkling sparkle that had characterised him in life, Albus' broken body was lifted by the force of the Killing Curse. It hung in the air for an infinite second, then tumbled out of sight. Severus spun on his heel. "Out of here, quickly," he ordered, grabbing a hold of Draco's collar and pushing the boy before him towards the staircase.

Severus Disapparated as soon as he got beyond the Hogwarts gates. Only seconds later, he appeared on the black and white tiled floor of Malfoy Manor's Apparation foyer. Draco hovered beside the door, waiting for his arrival. The boy, always pale, looked a little green around the edges.

With a mammoth effort, Severus pushed his last altercation with Potter from his mind: he needed to keep his wits about him. With his left hand, he felt up along his right shoulder blade. The hippogriff had left him with a large gash: it was oozing blood, but not enough that it needed his immediate attention.

"We mustn't keep the Dark Lord waiting, Draco," he snapped, once again grabbing the boy by the scruff of his neck and pushing him before him. The short walk to the drawing room was over far too quickly.

"Sir," gasped Draco uncertainly just before they entered.

"Keep your mouth closed," he snarled in reply.

Severus threw open the drawing room door and pushed Draco inside. Most of the furniture had been shoved back to the periphery of the room, with the exception of the winged armchair in which the Dark Lord sat. The Death Eaters stood in a loose circle, their attention focussed on the new arrivals. The anticipation was palpable. Severus stepped towards Voldemort, sinking to one knee and pulling Draco down with him until the boy's head was pressed against the carpet.

"My Lord," remarked Severus, bowing his head.

"Ah, Severus. News of your exploits has preceded you. I believe you have something important to relate."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Come closer, Severus."

Severus left Draco where he was and crawled on his knees towards the Dark Lord.

"Well?"

"I am pleased to inform you of the death of Albus Dumbledore." Severus couldn't help but feel impressed by the conversational tone of his own voice. Somehow it was always easier to actually face the Dark Lord than to anticipate the meeting. He looked up into the distorted, snake-like features of the almost-man who loomed over him.

Voldemort smiled. "That is good news, indeed, my spy. You must be relieved."

Severus ducked his head in deference to his master, but the Dark Lord reached out and lifted his chin with two pale fingers.

"Tell me, Severus," he hissed. "Is it true that the old man begged you for mercy?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"And, tell me, Severus." Voldemort's eyes gleamed red. "How did that make you feel?"

It was almost too easy to smirk up into the dehumanised face that loomed above him and speak the truth: "It seemed like an appropriate moment to demonstrate my loyalty, my Lord."

Severus pushed forward the memory of what had happened atop the Astronomy Tower, knowing that the Dark Lord would want to see for himself. Within moments, he felt Voldemort shoulder his way in. The Dark Lord was so intent on the vision that he forgot to cause the kind of mental discomfort that was typical of his excursions into Severus' mind. The absence of pain left Severus oddly wrong footed by the experience.

"Rise up, Severus!" Voldemort took hold of the front of Severus' robes, and the two stood as one. Voldemort turned Severus to face the assembled Death Eaters, one cold hand rested on his shoulder...thankfully not the one that had been mauled by the hippogriff. "Tonight you have proved yourself the most loyal of my followers! You shall be rewarded!"

Severus said nothing, allowing his gaze to sweep across the faces of the circle that surrounded him. None looked delighted by the Dark Lord's pronouncement, though only Bellatrix stared at him with pure, unadulterated hate.

"As for the young mister Malfoy, however," Voldemort began, turning his attention towards the figure who remained prostrate in the middle of the floor, "he shall be punished."

"NO!" The words escaped Narcissa as a broken sob, and she flung herself forward, covering her son's body with her own. "Please!" she begged. "Please!"

"Out of my way!" shrieked Voldemort. With a bang, Narcissa's body was thrown back against the wall. She continued to sob, though the Dark Lord ignored her, raising his wand and pointing it at Draco.

Severus spoke before he struck.

"My Lord," he said, his tone deferential. Only because it was Severus, and only because Severus had just killed Dumbledore, did the Dark Lord hesitate. Without lowering his wand, he turned back towards Severus. Severus shrugged, as if to point out a minor impediment. "I promised to protect the boy," he said, almost apologetically.

"The Unbreakable Vow?"

Severus bent his head in agreement.

Voldemort's attention snapped briefly back to the boy cowering at his feet, then up, across the room, to Bellatrix.

"Bellatrix," he crooned, a threatening lilt to his voice. "It occurs to me to wonder why you didn't point this out yourself. Surely you want to protect your precious nephew? And surely you wouldn't want harm to come to Severus?"

"My Lord!" Bellatrix fell to her knees. "I didn't think!"

"Remove the Unbreakable Vow!"

Bellatrix scrambled to draw her wand. "Cissy!" she hissed, glaring at her sister who managed to stagger to her feet, pushing herself up off the wall where she had fallen and moving across the room towards Severus. Narcissa's beautiful face was streaked with tears, and she grasped hold of Severus' hand as if it were a lifeline.

"Severus . . ." she begged. "Please . . ."

Does no-one have the dignity not to beg? Severus stared at her, unblinkingly, his face impassive. Bellatrix brought her wand to bear over their joined hands.

"As your bonder, I wish to recall the terms of your Unbreakable Vow." At Bellatrix's words, the glowing magical lines of the Vow shimmered into view. Severus noticed Draco raise his head. The boy's attention was fixed on the evidence of the promises Severus had made to protect him. He looked terrified.

Narcissa drew a shaky breath. "I, Narcissa, proclaim that you have fulfilled the terms of your Vow. You no longer need to watch over, protect or assist my son, Draco,"...a sob interrupted the formal words of the dissolution, and for a moment it seemed as if she might be entirely overcome by her tears..."for you have ably and adequately served as I desired."

As she spoke, the bonds broke and withdrew into nothingness, leaving only the shadow of their luminescence to fade slowly on the retinas of the people present. As the last streamer of magical compulsion disappeared, Narcissa crumpled, burying her face against the carpet. Severus stood up and stepped away; Voldemort laughed, a high, brittle sound.

"Now, Draco," exclaimed Voldemort, with evident pleasure, "your punishment will begin."

"No." Once again it was Severus who interrupted and, though his tone of voice was mild, his contribution was so unexpected that it shocked even Narcissa into silence. The other Death Eaters froze warily, obviously concerned that Severus was about to spark a rage that would see the Dark Lord punish everyone present. Severus strode forward into the centre of the circle. He bent down and grasped a fistful of Draco's robes, pulling the boy up by his collar until he rested in a kneeling position, his head hanging by Severus' side. "I gave my word, my Lord," said Severus, giving Draco a slight shake and looking fearlessly into the slit pupils of Voldemort's pale face. "There are those here who would do well to learn that I stand by what I say, regardless of whether or not an Unbreakable Vow is invoked."

Voldemort looked at him appraisingly for a long moment before his lips twisted into a thin and entirely humourless smile. "You wish to protect the boy, still?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Severus nodded. "He could be useful to me. His Potions marks are adequate, or were, while I was his teacher. There are tasks he could complete." Severus waited, letting no outward sign of his internal tension register on his face or in the set of his body.

Finally, Voldemort spoke. "Very well, Severus," he said, flicking his fingers dismissively towards Draco's limp form. "The boy is yours; do with him as you please."

Severus bowed deeply. "My Lord is generous." He gave Draco another mild shake. "Say thank you, Draco," he drawled, sounding for all the world like an indulgent parent with a forgetful child.

Draco glanced up at Severus, then quickly across at the Dark Lord, before ducking his head once more; his face was ashen. "Thank you, my Lord," he managed.

Voldemort laughed at the exchange. "What a lovely pet he makes, Severus," he said conversationally. "Do tell me when the novelty wears off...it's never too late to feed him to Nagini."

Instincts honed by years of working with volatile substances kicked in only just in time, and Severus twisted Draco's body away. The boy emptied the contents of his stomach onto the lush carpet of his parents' drawing room.

"*Evanesco*," snarled Severus quickly, removing the offensive matter. He turned towards the Dark Lord apologetically, "My Lord..."

Voldemort cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Take him away, Severus. You and I will talk soon."

"Very good, my Lord, thank you." Severus bowed once more before pulling Draco fairly roughly to his feet and moving quickly towards the Apparation Foyer. He had no desire to hang around and be thanked ad nauseum by Narcissa Malfoy.

Severus Apparated directly into the living room of Spinner's End with Draco's neck tightly grasped in one hand. On arrival, he pushed the boy gently, but firmly, into the nearest armchair and summoned the Firewhisky and two glasses from the cupboard. He poured them each a generous slug.

"Drink this," he said unnecessarily, pressing the glass of alcohol into the boy's hand.

Draco drank immediately, the glass clattering against his teeth as his body trembled. Severus swallowed his own drink smoothly, appreciating the sharp burn as it slid down his throat and the comforting warmth that pooled in his belly. Banishing his glass to the mantle piece, he knelt to open the fake mahogany doors of the cabinet under the old television. Rummaging around, he withdrew a healing salve and several pieces of gauze bandage. As he unbuttoned his robes, his waistcoat and the front of his shirt, he rocked back on his heels. Within a very short time, he had shrugged his right arm out of his clothing, and he peered back over his shoulder to examine his wound. Most of it lay just out of his line of vision.

"Draco," he ordered. The boy lifted his face from his hands and looked up, gasping at the sight that met his eyes. "Come here," said Severus curtly, holding out the salve and the gauze squares. "Clean the wound with Tergeo, then wipe this salve into it," he instructed.

Draco fumbled for his wand and came to kneel behind his host. Before turning away, Severus caught sight of his stricken face.

"I didn't realise you were hurt." Draco sounded genuinely upset at the revelation. *Tergeo*." He laid his wand on the coffee table and reached for the salve. Hesitantly at first, he began to rub the salve along the rough edges of the long cut. He took a deep breath. "You saved my life."

"Yes." A short breath hissed between his teeth as Draco pushed against a particularly painful area. "I have been trying to save your life all year."

"I thought,"...Severus could feel the redoubled trembling of Draco's hand..."I thought you wanted to profit from my failure. Aunt Bella even thought that you might betray me to Dumbledore."

Severus grit his teeth at the mention of Bellatrix, but he was savvy enough to recognise the positive implications of Draco's attempt at honesty. "It's about time you learnt to think for yourself, Draco. Betraying you to Dumbledore would have saved your life far more easily and, from your perspective, far more pleasurably than I was able to this evening. Albus Dumbledore, unlike the Dark Lord, was a firm believer in the power of forgiveness. A contrite apology would have sufficed to gain you his protection. He would have put you and your mother far from the reach of the Dark Lord and his punitive gestures." Severus was facing the television, and he could see Draco's expression reflected in the blackened glass of the screen. The boy had frozen as he spoke.

"He said as much," whispered Draco, "on top of the tower before the others got there."

"A shame you didn't take him up on the offer," replied Severus in an entirely unsympathetic tone of voice, twisting to look back over his shoulder at what he could see of the wound on his shoulder blade. "Now that I have murdered the headmaster, with Potter as witness, I can't see the Order of the Phoenix welcoming either of us with open arms..."

"Potter as witness? But...?"

Severus twisted on his heel to look Draco directly in the face. "There were two broomsticks up there on the top of the tower. Unless one was yours, we have to assume that Potter was there, concealed under his Invisibility Cloak." Severus raised one eyebrow derisively. "Presumably he was also privy to your conversation with Dumbledore regarding forgiveness. It would seem that your best bet is to somehow save his life during the coming conflict. If you play your cards right, you might still manage to switch sides and live to tell the tale."

Draco's mouth hung open in surprise, the gauze forgotten in his hand. "Whose side are you on, anyway?" he stammered.

"Dear me," sneered Severus, turning away to hunt through the cupboard under the television once more, "how foolish I was to believe that my actions tonight might have answered that question once and for all." Having located a box of Muggle butterfly plasters, Severus turned and upended the contents onto the coffee table. "We're not talking about me, Draco, we're talking about you." He looked across at the boy, who was shaking once again. "You're not a killer, Draco, and you do not have the Dark Lord's favour. To earn it, you would have to become a killer...or worse. Even if he, or the tasks he might set you, didn't literally kill you, the process would destroy the parts of you that make you who you are. And as irritating, ungrateful and self-obsessed as you have been for most of your young life, your parents seem quite fond of you." Severus shrugged. "Who knows why?" he queried sarcastically.

Draco was as white as a sheet and seemingly unable to process the information Severus had just articulated. "What are you saying?" he asked, his voice cracking.

Severus looked up from the butterfly plasters he was counting off the tabletop and into the outstretched palm of his left hand. "I'm not sure that I could make it much clearer without resorting to crude sign language or words of one syllable. What exactly don't you understand? The Dark Lord is not the forgiving kind. You fucked up. Your life will be miserable for the foreseeable future. Your best hope is that Potter wins, and you save his life somewhere during the process. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Draco mechanically, ingrained habits of his six years at Hogwarts stepping into the breach when his power of speech had otherwise deserted him.

"Good," said Severus, taking Draco's hand and tipping the butterfly plasters into it. "Use these to close the wound on my back." When Draco stared at the white adhesive strips with a completely blank expression, Severus elaborated further. "You have to peel off the backing, the exposed side is sticky. Use them to fasten the edges of the cut closed. It's Muggle first aid; quite frankly I don't trust your spellwork in the state you're in."

Comprehension blossomed, and Severus swivelled back around to give Draco access to his shoulder. The boy took a couple of tries to get the hang of peeling back the paper from the back of the plasters but soon had most of the cut carefully pressed back into place.

"Sir?" he ventured when he was nearly finished.

Severus glanced up at the television, but Draco's head was ducked, intent on his task, and his reflection showed only a smudge of his blond hair, oddly distorted across the curvature at the edge of the screen.

"Yes?"

"Why did you kill Dumbledore?"

"Because, Draco," he replied, suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion, "my master told me to; I got the impression that the Dark Lord was pleased."

Charming Memories

Chapter 2 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Two : Charming Memories

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My beta readers, LAxo and WriterMerrin, are brilliant beyond belief!

Hermione heard the doorbell ring punctually at eleven a.m., but she didn't manage to beat her mother there to open the door. Skidding into the hallway on stockinged feet, she did overhear the exchange.

"Good mor...*you!*"

"Mum! No!" cried Hermione as her mother slammed the door in the face of her unexpected visitor. This was not a fortuitous start to what already promised to be a difficult conversation. The week Hermione had spent at home had been pleasant, if melancholy. No-one had directly mentioned Dumbledore's death...her parents had been sympathetic without demanding that she talk about it, and since she had owed them all that she was comfortable telling them before she left Hogwarts, she hadn't had much to say. The time had passed all-too quickly, however, each moment marked by the bittersweet quality of pleasure in her parents' company and fear for their futures.

Her mother was shouting, "Terry! We've got to..."

"Mum!" interrupted Hermione. "It's not what it seems! We need to speak to you and Dad. Let me open the door." She tried to reach around her mother and get a hand to the deadlock, but the older woman had her back against the door and spread her arms wide in a dramatic gesture of protection.

"Hermione! He's a murderer! If you open this door, he'll kill us all!"

Hermione ran both hands back into her hair in frustration. Every second that he spent exposed on the doorstep was dangerous. "Don't be ridiculous! He's an extraordinarily powerful wizard. He could blow this door down in a heartbeat. Just let him in so that we can talk."

"What's going on?" asked her father, Terry, appearing in the doorway from the sitting room.

"It's Snape!" exclaimed her mother, nearing hysteria.

"Listen," said Hermione, battling for her composure and drawing her wand. "I'm going to let him in; you have to talk to us. It's not what it seems."

"Put that thing away, young lady!" shouted Terry, at the exact same moment that her mother cried, "How dare you point that thing at me?"

"Mum," she replied, "step away from the door. As soon as we are all seated in the sitting room and discussing things calmly over a cup of tea, I'll put my wand down. Now, move aside."

Staring at Hermione as if she were unrecognisable, her mother complied, one hand pressed against her heart, her mouth open in shock. Hermione wrenched the door open at once.

"Good morning, Professor," she said as politely as she could with her chest heaving from the emotional exertion of the last few minutes. "Please come inside and sit down."

"You're supposed to check it's really me and not a Polyjuiced impersonator," he drawled, one eyebrow raised.

Professor Severus Snape was dressed as a Muggle: black jeans, a soft grey t-shirt, and a battered black leather jacket that looked almost as old as he did. Hermione's own eyebrows rose as she took it in. He looked good. "Well," she pondered for only a split second, "what did I call you in the Hospital Wing when I was delirious?"

"A phoenix," he replied with a small smirk, stepping forward to enter the house.

"Wait, aren't you going to ask me a question?"

He raised an eyebrow. "From what I heard before the door opened, Granger, it could only be you."

Hermione blushed and stood back to let him in. Her parents stood warily a few metres away from the door, her father's arm slung protectively across her mother's shoulders. The moment the door closed behind Snape, he waved his wand over his outfit and Transfigured it back into his more usual garb. Hermione felt a simultaneous pang of disappointment and a wash of relief...the situation was already strained enough without Snape dressed like an aging rock star.

"Professor Snape," she said, "I'd like to introduce my parents: Dr Susan Granger and Dr Terry Granger; they're both dentists. Mum, Dad, this is Professor Snape." She turned back towards her professor apologetically. "It turns out that they get *The Prophet*, but only on Saturdays." Until that morning she had imagined her letters to be their sole source of recent news about the wizarding world. It was only when she had made her leisurely way downstairs for breakfast that she had discovered...too late to warn her professor...that her parents knew something of his actions and the accusations against him. She waved a hand in the direction of the sitting room. "Let's sit down and have some tea."

The situation in the sitting room was incredibly awkward. The Drs Granger sat down on the couch, leaving the two armchairs for Hermione and Snape.

"I'll make tea," offered Hermione, moving towards the kitchen.

Her mother leapt up at once, her horror at the idea of remaining in the sitting room with only her husband and the murderous professor clearly visible. "No you won't," she snapped. "I'll do it. You stay here, and mind you put that wand of yours on the table where we can all see it."

Hermione sat down with a thud, slightly sickened by the ready mistrust of her parents, and rubbed her palms nervously on her thighs. She carefully laid her wand out on

the coffee table, grimacing slightly as she put it down. Although she could easily grab it if she needed to, she felt exposed without it. Terry Granger's eyes flickered from Hermione's wand to the face of their visitor, then quickly back to the thin strip of vine wood. Hermione bit down on her bottom lip and risked a glance at Snape. He was sitting with his legs crossed and the tips of his fingers pressed together. His hair hung over his face, and he looked far more relaxed than a wanted man should. Without moving his gaze from Terry's face, Snape took out his own wand with infinite slowness and laid it on the coffee table not far from Hermione's.

"Mum?" Hermione called out suddenly, leaping back to her feet and stepping towards the kitchen doorway. "Can you pass me the phone?" Shooting her an irritated look, her mother complied, picking up the cordless phone from the cradle on the bench. Hermione turned back towards her father. "Dad? Can you give me your mobile?" He did so, with better grace than her mother had displayed, and Hermione lined up both phones on the coffee table beside her wand. It made her feel much more secure.

It seemed to take forever for the kettle to boil and her mother to reappear with the tea tray.

"How do you take your tea, sir?" asked Hermione, mortified by her mother's behaviour: her arms and legs were tightly crossed and she was glaring furiously at Snape.

"Black, no sugar."

Hermione's hand shook slightly, and the cup rattled against the saucer as she passed it across to him. As he took it from her, their eyes met, and Hermione drew a quick, reassuring breath.

"Spit it out then," snarled her mother. "Why is he here?" She was still staring at Snape, but her question was directed at her daughter.

"He's here because I asked him to be. Because you're in danger."

"We're in danger because he's here, Hermione, not the other way round."

Hermione smothered a sigh of frustration. Her mother was every bit as stubborn as she was, and on the rare occasions in which they argued, Hermione tended to rely on her father to smooth things over. A quick glance at him, and the reassuring hand he had tucked behind her mother's back, was indication enough that this time they were united against her. Hermione reached into the back pocket of her jeans and withdrew a thick wad of parchment. Unfolding it, she smoothed it flat against her thigh. "Do you remember when I explained about Arithmancy?" she asked, aiming for the least confrontational tone possible.

Her mother made no reply, merely flicking her a dismissive glance before returning her disapproving gaze to Snape's face. Terry, on the other hand, nodded uncertainly.

"It's a mix of advanced probability, actuarial studies, multi-dimensional arrays and magical calculus derivatives. Basically, it can be used to predict the future," explained Hermione. "I know you know I'm involved in the war against Lord Volde . . ." She trailed off, knowing that Snape didn't like her to use his name. "Anyway, I did some calculations regarding your safety over the next year. If you stay here, you will almost certainly become a target. Because of me." A wave of guilt swept over her. "I'm terribly sorry," she added.

"Are you saying our lives are in danger?" asked Terry.

"That's exactly what she's saying," confirmed Snape, entering the conversation for the first time. His voice was so deep that it sent small shivers down Hermione's spine.

"Our lives have been in danger since the moment *he* appeared on our doorstep!" snapped Susan.

"No, Mum! The danger has nothing to do with Professor Snape!" Hermione leant forward and pushed the top sheet of figures towards her parents. "Just look at the predictions."

Terry picked them up and ran an eye down the column of numbers. His eyebrows rose. "Here you are, love," he said once he reached the end of the page, offering the sheet to his wife.

"Read it out to me," she replied curtly, seemingly convinced that Snape could be restrained by the force of her glare alone.

Terry cleared his throat, giving Hermione a long look before he began: "Chance of death under current circumstances, 98.9%, ditto if sent to stay with Viktor Krum in Bulgaria, 76%."

"Viktor is going to provide a haven for Muggle-born witches and wizards," interrupted Hermione. "Sorry, go on," she added.

"Ditto elsewhere in Europe," continued her father, "84.3% . . ." The list went on.

After about a minute, Susan interrupted Terry's recitation, "For Christ's sake, are there any options that put our chance of death at less than 50%?"

"Just one," replied Terry as Hermione bit down on her lower lip, "ditto with modified memories and travel to Australia, 1.4%."

"1.4? Let me see that!" Susan finally turned her attention from Snape and grabbed at the sheet of parchment her husband held, scanning down the list with a frown.

"That's why Professor Snape is here," commented Hermione nervously, "to help me modify your memories. I'm not skilled enough to do it by myself."

"How do we even know these figures are accurate?" questioned Susan acidly. "They could be completely made-up."

Snape spoke for only the second time since he'd sat down. "I can assure you, Madam, that I wouldn't have taken the risk of coming here if I wasn't certain those calculations were accurate."

"You are a criminal," exclaimed Susan, dropping the parchment to her lap and glaring at Snape once again. "Why would your opinion count for anything?"

"At this point he is a suspect in Dumbledore's death, nothing more!" Hermione burst out. She had just made an enormous lie of omission, although what she said was technically true. Hermione didn't risk a glance at Snape, staring instead at her parents and willing them to believe her.

"What exactly were you hoping to achieve today?" intervened Terry gently, directing his comment towards his daughter.

His words left Hermione slightly relieved. "Basically," she began, taking a deep breath, "it would be like a Witness Protection Programme; you would both have new identities and new lives. The only difference would be that instead of faking a new identity, we'd...that is, Professor Snape and I...would create the new identities for you inside your head. That way, you wouldn't be able to accidentally reveal the truth. Once the war is over, I would come and get you."

"You want me to let *him* mess around inside my head?" asked Susan, only a decibel or two short of a shout. Terry put a hand on her thigh reassuringly.

"Mum, I trust him. *The Prophet* is far from the most reliable news source; I wish you could trust my judgement." Hermione drew a shaky breath and shot a distressed look at Professor Snape. She was worried he'd be offended by what she had to say next. "Besides," she continued relentlessly, smoothing out the second sheet of parchment she held and proffering it across the coffee table towards her parents, "I did the calculations for all eventualities. In actual fact it didn't make much difference."

Her dad took the paper from her, and both he and Susan cast their eyes over it.

"Are you suggesting," he asked, "that even if Professor Snape, here, were working for the other side, he would still modify our memories accurately?"

Hermione turned her eyes towards her professor once again, wincing in anticipation of his reaction to her father's words. To her surprise, he was looking at her appraisingly and gave her a short, barely perceptible nod of approval as he caught her eye. Reassured, she turned her attention back to her parents.

"Yes," she replied. "Professor Snape has been working as a double agent for a long time. The Arithmantic projections suggest that either he is on our side and always has been or that he would want to maintain such a facade with me for as long as possible." She shrugged. "Since he can do so by saving your lives without directly contradicting an order from Vol...from the other side, it would make complete sense to do so."

Terry looked pensive at her words; Susan just looked distressed. "And what exactly are *you* going to do while this war is going on, young lady?" she asked, her voice harsh and accusative.

Hermione had been dreading this question. She couldn't think of any way to answer it that didn't sound melodramatic. "I'm going to fight."

"You're a child!"

"Mum, I'm seventeen. In the wizarding world, that makes me an adult. Even in Muggle Britain you can join the army at sixteen."

Susan Granger was speechless with frustration. She ran her hands back into her curls in a gesture Hermione recognised as one she had inherited.

"Mum," Hermione tried again. "This is a *wizarding* war. Against the powers these people have, you...and Dad...are helpless." Her voice cracked and the tears she'd been battling for the entire length of the conversation leaked traitorously down her cheeks. "If our positions were reversed, and you could save my life by sending me away, what would you do?"

It was as if Hermione's regression into tears wiped the anger from her mother's face. Susan's shoulders dropped, and she returned her eyes to the sheets of parchment she held in her lap.

"And if you're killed, Hermione? What then?" asked Susan, in a small and intensely unhappy voice.

Hermione swallowed, and new tears coursed down her face. She rubbed roughly at them with the heels of her hands. "At least you won't know," she whispered.

Susan made a choking noise. "You would deny a mother the chance to mourn her child?" she asked, her face turned away and one hand gesturing blindly.

Hermione did not know what to say. "I..." She broke off before continuing. "I would rather that than mourn you knowing I could have saved you and yet did nothing."

"Granger." At Snape's intervention, all three of the room's other occupants turned towards him; he was looking at Hermione. "It has to be their choice."

"But..."

"Granger," he warned...and something about his tone of voice caught her immediate attention..."there are some people in this war who don't believe that Muggles deserve to have autonomy over their own lives."

Hermione flushed. "That's not what I meant," she protested, guilt curdling her stomach. Both of her parents were watching the exchange with interest, tears momentarily unheeded on her mother's cheeks.

"In intent, perhaps not, but the consequences would have been the same." He held her gaze until she lowered her eyes. "Come," he instructed, standing up in one fluid movement. "We should give them some time alone to think it over. Drs Granger, if you will excuse us."

Hermione followed him out into the hall with a last reluctant look at her parents. Her dad had pulled her mother close, and she was crying onto his shoulder. Only once Hermione closed the door behind her did she think to pull out the handkerchief from her pocket and dry her own tears. Snape, who was leaning up against the wall with his arms crossed, gave the handkerchief a funny look.

"Is that mine?" he asked.

"You said that I could keep it," replied Hermione a little defensively. She took the opportunity to blow her nose, guessing he'd be unlikely to ask for it back if it were dirty.

Snape merely rolled his eyes.

For several minutes they stood without talking. The silence was awkward. Without intending to, Hermione's gaze strayed to Snape's lips. She couldn't help thinking about their last encounter and reflexively strengthened her Occlumency shields. She knew that it hadn't been a real kiss: he'd taken the opportunity to force the Felix Felicis on her and nothing more. But it had still felt like a kiss to her. She wanted it to have been a real kiss.

She felt mortified at the thought of the scorn Professor Snape would unleash were he to know that she thought as much; if he realised the extent of her crush, he would think her a foolish little girl. She forced her eyes away, casting around for something innocuous and yet interesting to say.

She wanted to ask how he felt about the events on top of the Astronomy tower. She wanted to ask him what had happened when he returned to Lord Voldemort. She even wanted to ask whether Draco was okay. But she didn't.

There was another topic, one that she desperately wanted to broach, but the moment didn't seem quite right. At the same time, she was worried this might be her only chance to talk to him alone. She shoved the handkerchief back into her pocket, leaving her hand there and fiddling with the contents, turning a small piece of metal over and over between her fingertips. Just at the moment she had psyched herself up to speak, the sitting room door opened.

"Hermione," said Terry, "your mother would like a word."

"Thanks, Dad," she muttered, shooting a glance at Snape's imperturbable face as she turned to enter the room, leaving both men behind in the hallway. Her mother looked a lot calmer. Her tears were dry, and her eyes only the slightest bit red. She had the calculations spread flat before her on the coffee table. Hermione hesitated for a moment and then sat beside Susan on the couch. She chewed nervously on her lower lip.

"The calculations you've done are pretty damning," remarked Susan, looking down at the parchment before her and not at her daughter.

Hermione grimaced, though her mother wasn't looking to notice.

"This fighting you think you need to do," began her mother, "how much has it got to do with Harry Potter being the Chosen One?"

Hermione drew an involuntary breath and let it hiss out between her teeth. Her parents must have been reading *The Saturday Prophet* for much longer than she'd imagined. *How to explain things without lying or breaking my promises of secrecy?*

"Dumbledore said once that whether Harry is or isn't the Chosen One isn't really important. What's important is that Voldemort and some members of the public think he is. Harry doesn't really have much choice: Voldemort will hunt him down if he tries to hide; he has to fight no matter what. We might as well be as prepared as possible."

"I don't suppose that anything I might say would convince you that you don't need to be there with him?" For the first time since Hermione had come back into the room, Susan was looking directly at her, and Hermione heard the feeble attempt at humour in the question and caught the slight curve that lifted one side of her mother's mouth.

"No." Hermione gave her mother a tremulous smile, tears prickling once again at the back of her eyes. "Harry's my best friend. He needs me. Besides, it's not just that. What Professor Snape said before is true: the ideological lines of this battle are drawn along the issue of blood...magical blood. I'm Muggle-born, or as the purebloods would say, Mudblood. In the world they envision, I wouldn't exist. I have to stand up to them for my own sake, too."

"And what would you do if your father and I decided to stay?"

The blood drained from Hermione's face. She felt sick. "Professor Snape is right," she whispered, "it has to be your choice."

"But you would recommend otherwise?"

Hermione searched her mother's face for some sign of where the conversation was headed. "Yes," she replied.

"I've another question for that professor of yours; you'd better call the others in."

Hermione walked quickly to the door and opened it. Her father and Snape were speaking intently in low voices and broke off the moment the door opened. Hermione wished she knew what they had been saying, but their faces gave nothing away. She held the door open for them wordlessly as they tramped in; her dad and Snape took the two armchairs, as if Hermione and her mother had claimed the couch. It was a better arrangement: less combative.

"Professor Snape," remarked Susan in a pleasantly non-confrontational tone, "in recent years I've heard a great deal from Hermione about your propensity to protect the students." Hermione blushed slightly and stole a glance at Snape from the corner of her eye. His head was tilted forward just enough that the dark wing of his hair concealed his face. "Can I assume that such behaviour will continue?"

"To the very best of my ability," replied Snape. From a lesser man it might have sounded evasive, however Hermione knew just how extensive his abilities were.

"And," continued Susan, "were Hermione to die, would you come find us, restore our memories and tell us so?"

"In the unlikely event that I survive and your daughter does not, I will come and let you know as soon as it is safe to do so."

Hermione felt unaccountably relieved that her parents were not the sort to demand an Unbreakable Vow, for she was certain that Snape would have acquiesced. The man exhibited a compulsive willingness to assume responsibility for impossible tasks, and the last thing he needed right now was yet another magically binding obligation.

"Very well then," said Susan after exchanging a long look with her husband, "change my memory. You'd better do it straight away because I don't think I can bear any delay."

Snape lifted his head in surprise, swinging around to face Hermione. She felt as shocked as he looked.

"Are you sure, Mum?" she queried.

"Just do it, and be quick about it," was the slightly irritable reply.

Snape held out his right hand, clenching and unclenching his fist as he wordlessly and wandlessly summoned his wand from the coffee table into his palm. He stood smoothly.

"Dr Granger," he stated, "your daughter and I are going to enter your mind using Legilimency. I am going to conceal your memories of Hermione, she is going to concoct a false narrative of the missing elements of your life. The two will be woven together and triggered to a phrase." He swung his gaze towards Hermione and addressed the next comment to her as well. "I imagine that 'I am the daughter you always wanted' would be adequate. Afterwards, we will put you to sleep. When you wake in the morning, your daughter and I will be gone. You and Dr Granger will believe yourselves to be other people..."

"Wendell and Monica Wilkins," supplied Hermione.

"You're not serious?" interjected Terry, a disgusted look on his face.

"A distinctive name will make it much easier to locate you," responded Hermione firmly, her chin tilted at an angle that brooked no arguments.

"If I may continue?" drawled Snape, raising an eyebrow at Hermione, who obediently fell silent. "The whole process will take about forty-five minutes. I must ask that we are not interrupted during that time."

Both Drs Granger nodded quite determinedly.

"Mum," ventured Hermione awkwardly as she rose to her feet beside Snape and took hold of her own wand, "I really love you."

Susan Granger reached out and cupped Hermione's face gently with one hand. "I know, sweetheart," she replied, "I love you, too."

"Okay," stated Hermione, rubbing her left hand down her jeans nervously. "I'm ready." She glanced up at Snape.

"Relax back into the couch, Dr Granger," he instructed, his eyes fixed on Susan's face. Without turning to look at Hermione, he held out his left hand, palm up, and she covered it with her own, her fingers curling round to grip his hand firmly. They both extended their wands, crossing their wandarms at the wrist and resting the tips of their wands on Susan's temples. The woman looked terrified, but determined; the familial relationship to her daughter had rarely been more apparent.

Hermione took a deep breath. "*Legilimens*," she murmured as she heard Snape do the same.

Inside her mother's head, Hermione could see herself and Snape standing before her line of vision in a dislocating switch of perspective; she could also feel Snape beside her inside her mother's mind. The dual awareness was disconcerting. *Keep it together, Granger*, she heard in Snape's distinctive tones. She knew that he'd spoken aloud, but his instruction resonated within her as if it were her own thought. The perspective altered, and images from the last week began to flicker before her: Snape was corralling her mother's memories of her, beginning with the most recent. Grasping hold of the memory of the living room, Hermione began to weave a web to contain them. *Monica Wilkins*, she thought, tying one thought to another, *was happily married...though had always longed for a child. She and her husband were dentists, and worked together in their own practice. They made enough money to retire early and decided to move somewhere warmer . . .*

Home, Sweet Home

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Three : Home, Sweet Home

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.

As always, I want to thank my truly excellent betas, LAXo and WriterMerrin. Your help is very, very much appreciated.

By the time they had finished modifying the memories of both Susan and Terry Granger, it was past three o'clock in the afternoon. Severus felt the strain on his own magic and could tell Hermione Granger was exhausted from the dark shadows under her eyes. Following Granger's directions, Severus levitated the sleeping bodies of her parents and transported them upstairs to their bedroom. Granger remained behind, slumped on the couch, her forehead resting on the heel of her hands, her elbows propped on her knees.

Switching the Grangers' clothes for the pyjamas located under their pillows took only seconds with the help of a relatively simple spell, and Severus tucked the blankets over them with his wand and headed back downstairs. He located Granger in the kitchen, where she was rummaging in the fridge.

"Food?" she asked tiredly, pulling out a salad bowl covered with a horrifically blue coloured plastic wrap and full of leftover penne ragù. Severus grunted his assent, and Granger spooned out two bowls of pasta, heating them with a non-verbal warming charm. She poured them each a glass of water from a filter jug and levitated the lot to the kitchen table. They ate in silence. "Coffee?" she inquired once she'd finished eating.

"Black, no sugar."

Granger got to her feet, busying herself with the electric kettle and a Bodum plunger. She hovered until the kettle boiled and clicked off, before filling the pot and bringing it to the table. She looked grim.

"Slytherins are always calling me out on bad ethical choices," she remarked suddenly.

The switch from the mundane to the personal took Severus by surprise. He raised an eyebrow inquisitively. He'd called her out a few times, to be sure, but she had said "Slytherins," plural.

"Jocelyn pointed out the error of my ways, too." Hermione pressed down the plunger.

"Gryffindors often get caught up in their own self-righteousness," replied Severus, keeping his voice as neutral as possible.

"Right." As Granger poured the coffee, her lower lip trembled.

He really didn't want her to cry.

"Granger," he said abruptly, reaching into the pocket of his robes. "I have something for you." He pulled out a small phial filled with a virulent green liquid, the stopper carefully sealed with wax. He put it down on the table beside her cup of coffee.

Granger's eyes widened slightly in surprise. She picked up the bottle and turned it over curiously in her hand, holding it up to the light to gauge the potion's colour and consistency. "What is it?"

"Antivenom to Nagini's poison."

"Where did you get it?" She sounded astonished.

"I brewed it, Granger. I have some small skill with potions." She looked at him so blankly that he relented and provided a more explicit explanation. "When Arthur was bitten, a year-and-a-half ago, I managed to procure some of the venom and, eventually, to formulate an antidote. Since the Dark Lord's pet is something of an occupational health hazard in my line of work, I've been brewing it regularly and dosing myself daily. I can't supply you with enough to keep you or Potter immune for a year, in fact I can only spare this single dose. With circumstances as they currently are, it's not clear when I will next have the opportunity to make more. Once the bottle is open, the antivenom will degrade quite quickly; you will only have an hour or so to use it. It can be applied topically or swallowed. Hopefully you'll only need it once."

"Thank you," she breathed, all hint of tears having evaporated. "Actually, I have something for you, too." She leant back in her chair, twisting her hips slightly in order to reach into the pocket of her jeans without having to stand. She pulled out a flat, silver button and held it out towards him on her palm.

Severus recognised it at once, but he couldn't acknowledge that he knew what it was without revealing that he'd spied on her private conversation with Krum. Wisely, he stared at it and said nothing.

"It's a voice-activated Portkey," explained Granger. "To set it you have to put it in your mouth and speak a phrase that you're not likely to say by accident."

"You will need this more than I," Severus managed, his tongue felt thick in his mouth.

Granger's mouth twisted bitterly. "The Portkey takes you home. As of today, I don't have a home. And since the whole point of moving my parents is the likelihood that Death Eaters will come here, suddenly turning up here myself is not a very sensible idea." She turned the Portkey over several times between her fingers. "You, on the other hand, may find yourself in a tricky situation and need to escape." She looked up at him, not needing to list the possible circumstances: the Dark Lord might discover his treachery, or even just tire of him; or the Order might find him. "It works even within anti-Apparation wards," she added, "or if you've lost your wand."

She was offering him an escape route.

Slowly, unbelievably, Severus reached out and lifted the Portkey from her hand. It was warm from her pocket. "How do I set it?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Put it into your mouth with the shank between your molars and the flat edge against the inside of your cheek. Um," she hesitated. "I can wash it first, if you want."

Severus ignored her belated offer to clean it and slipped it into his mouth. He tried, and failed, not to think of the fact that she'd had it in her mouth, and then her pocket.

"Now say the trigger phrase," she instructed, her brown eyes unwaveringly fixed on his own.

Severus inhaled through his nose. For a moment he considered using a line of poetry, but the sensible side of his brain decided against it. In an emergency, he would need something quick, yet it had to be a word he wouldn't say by accident. He decided on a word in Italian.

"Fenice," he said clearly. Then he extricated the Portkey from his mouth with finger and thumb. It was damp with his saliva, and he felt slightly foolish.

"Phoenix?" asked Granger.

"Yes," he replied, pulling out his handkerchief and fastidiously drying off the flat silver disk. He avoided her eye.

Taking her wand in her hand, Granger conjured needle and thread and moved round the table to stand next to him. She laid her wand down and took the Portkey from him. He felt inordinately relieved that he had wiped it. "Hold still," she instructed as she undid the top couple of buttons of his frock coat and slipped several fingers inside his collar.

He froze. "What are you doing?" he hissed. His voice was soft, but his fury was palpable.

"I'm sewing on the Portkey so that it stays in contact with your skin." Granger had temporarily stashed the needle between her lips, and she spoke out of one side of her mouth. "I'm not sure how many frock coats you have, but I suggest you wear this one continuously and just make frequent use of cleaning charms. Otherwise the Portkey will be useless."

He felt the slight chill of the metal Portkey against his throat as she slipped it into place.

"Don't move," she warned as she removed the needle from her mouth and began to stitch into the fabric of his coat. He could see the needle in his peripheral vision at the end of each stitch as she pulled the thread tight. He could feel all four fingers of her hand pressed against his neck as she held the button in place. Her breath blew softly against his cheek as she leant forward, intent on her task; one of her curls brushed his face.

Something was caught, almost painfully hard, in his chest. He thought it might fade once Granger moved away from his immediate proximity, but it didn't. It stayed throughout the rest of the afternoon as he watched her sort through the accumulated belongings of her parents' lives, packing their bags for the trip to Australia and concealing all sign of her own presence throughout the last eighteen years. It stayed as he wandered the aisles of the small gourmet supermarket-cum-greengrocers two blocks from the house, looking for something to cook for dinner. If anything, it only got worse as he scowled down at a simmering pot of seafood stew with fennel and ground hazelnuts and realised that he was trying to impress Granger with his cooking.

Granger, as it turned out, was very much impressed. She sighed appreciatively as she mopped up the last of her second helping with an edge of bread, "That was absolutely delicious."

Severus changed the topic. "What do you have left to do?"

"Not much. Just the food in the kitchen, I think."

It was late. They hadn't started eating until eleven, but if Granger really did only have the kitchen to do, there was plenty of time. The Drs Granger were due to wake at five a.m. and set out for the airport soon afterwards. Their passports, magically modified to display their new identities, and two international tickets sat ready on the end of the counter. Granger had emptied her childhood savings account and spent most of the money on the flights. Catching her eye across the table, Severus encouraged his companion back to her task with a single raised eyebrow.

"Alright," she huffed, pressing her hands flat on the surface of the dining table and levering herself to her feet.

Severus had allowed Granger the privacy to sift through her parents' effects, but he felt no such compunction with regard to the contents of their kitchen cupboards...after all, he'd rifled through them once already in the process of making dinner. With both his and her energies focused on the project, they made short work of separating the perishables from food that could remain in storage.

"I'll take these with me to the Burrow," remarked Granger as she stuffed the first of several cardboard boxes full of foodstuffs into a small beaded purse. "Molly won't say no to some extra food." She took a last look around the room, her eyes pausing momentarily on the passports and tickets. "I guess we're done."

"Good," replied Severus, twisting his wrist to check the time on his watch against that of the kitchen clock. "Time enough for you to catch a couple of hours sleep before we leave."

Granger sucked in a deep breath. "I don't think I could. Now that I've emptied my room . . ." She trailed off.

"Sleep on the couch, then," he responded, turning from her desolate face and striding up the few stairs that separated the kitchen from the front room.

A few seconds later, Granger followed. Plonking her beaded bag down on the coffee table with a disproportionately loud thud, she sat gingerly on one end of the couch. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

Severus pulled the latest issue of *Ars Alchemia* from an inside pocket as he folded his long limbs into one of the armchairs. "I was planning to read you a bedtime story," he drawled.

His sarcasm drew a reluctant chuckle from his companion, and as if the brief bout of laughter had decided her, she finally turned and lay down on the couch, a cushion tucked under her head. The main lights were off, leaving only the reading lamp beside the chair in which Severus sat. He could feel her looking at him, and he forced his eyes to move across the page as if he were reading, though he took nothing in.

"I wish you would," she said suddenly, interrupting the awkward silence.

"You wish I would what, Granger?" he replied irritably, turning the page.

Her response was barely louder than a whisper: "Read me a bedtime story."

It took several seconds before Severus could breathe, but when he could, he huffed out his breath into a long sigh. Rolling his eyes, he flicked back several pages to find the beginning of the article. He looked up and caught her eye briefly before resolutely turning his gaze back to the words before him. He took a deep breath.

"Reception Theory: Potions and the Magic of the Recipient," he began, "by Tamberlina Tatters. Old wives tales, myth and anecdote relate frequent instances of involuntary immunity to potions applied with malicious intent, yet outside the realm of fiction and fable, the phenomenon is difficult to trace or track with any accuracy. Were the phenomenon to exist, it would, by definition resist the repeatability necessary for the application of scientific method. How can you build a control group against maliciously applied potions? How does one categorise 'malicious intent'? How, indeed, can a subject be deemed to act 'involuntarily' . . ."

Within minutes, Granger was fast asleep. Once Severus was sure she wouldn't wake, he closed the journal, one finger tucked between the pages to mark his place. He let his eyes rest on Granger's sleeping form, noting the small movements of her breathing, the soft sheen of her curls in the dim light, the angle of one foot as it dangled off the couch; it wouldn't do to waste a moment of this night reading.

At quarter to five, he woke her. She moved slowly, bleary with sleep, but gathered her shoes and her beaded bag without fussing. Slipping on her shoes, she followed him to the front door. As silently as possible, Severus and Granger slipped out into the street. Crossing the road, they walked towards the end of the block where they stopped at a convenient bus stop. From there they could stand and watch the house without raising suspicion.

Within moments, the lights came on. Knowing the layout of the house, Severus could imagine the Drs Granger...or, more accurately now, Wendell and Monica Wilkins...fumbling through their morning ablutions, making breakfast, tucking the tickets safely into their hand luggage. Granger's attention was fixed on the windows, her arms wrapped tightly around her chest as she shivered slightly in the chilly early morning air. He knew she must be imagining the same scenario. Almost too quickly, a cab pulled up in front of the house, honking once on the horn to announce its arrival.

The front door was thrown open, and golden light spilled out onto the front step. Wendell, once Terry, wrestled the bags down the short flight of stairs and into the back of the waiting taxi. Monica, once Susan, locked up. He could hear their laughter and excitement as they climbed inside. As the cab swung past the place where he and Granger stood, he caught a glimpse of two smiling faces.

Granger looked grim. "Well," she said, in a flat voice, "that's that. Let's go."

"Wait," he said suddenly, his long fingers closing round her upper arm to hold her back. Her eyes swung up to stare at him, her pupils huge in the dim early-morning light. She was so close, and his attention was caught by the way the clumps of her lashes arced away from her eyelid.

"As a very last resort," he said, "my home can be found at Spinner's End. I will modify the wards so that you can Apparate right in, but be warned: other Death Eaters are frequent visitors. It would not do to arrive there unless you truly had no other option. Do I make myself clear?"

Granger nodded. "Th-thank you, sir," she stuttered. She looked honestly taken aback.

"Good." Severus gestured towards her parents' house with his chin. "Come along, then."

Without speaking again, they walked back across the road, pausing only for Granger to mail a letter to her cousin at the postbox, and she let them through the front door. They climbed the stairs to the master bedroom and went in. Granger tapped the mantle with her wand, causing a Disillusioned jar of Floo powder to pop back into sight.

She turned and looked at him then, both hands gripping the beaded bag tightly enough that her knuckles gleamed white. "Thank you, Professor, for everything," she said awkwardly. Briefly, she bit down on her lower lip before thrusting one hand forward. "Good luck," she added.

Severus took the proffered hand. "You, too," he replied and foolishly imagined pressing his lips to the soft hand cradled in his; he imagined kissing her lips. Abruptly, he let go. "Hurry up," he ordered, jerking his head towards the fireplace in an unmistakable gesture of dismissal.

Granger nodded. Her lips pressed together into a thin line. She looked just like her mother had in the moments before they modified her memory: worried, yet determined. She turned and grasped a handful of Floo powder. Severus conjured a fire.

"Good bye," she said, in the moment before she threw in the powder, then, "The Burrow!"

She stepped through and disappeared. Severus refused to let himself wonder whether he would ever see her again. Instead, he busied himself dismantling the Floo connection. Then he Apparated away.

The soft pop as Severus reappeared in his living room at Spinner's End woke Draco with a start. The boy was fully dressed, and the lights were all on; he had clearly fallen asleep at some point during the night.

"Calm yourself, Draco," drawled Severus as the groggy boy fumbled for his wand and squinted into the bright light in an attempt to see who had just arrived.

"Severus," he sighed in relief, sinking back into the couch and rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. "I was worried about you."

Severus sneered in lieu of a response, but Draco's eyes were closed again, and he wasn't likely to notice *Perhaps there is hope for the boy yet*, thought Severus.

"There's a letter for you," added Draco suddenly, sitting up straight and opening his eyes. "From Mother."

He was pointing towards the coffee table, and Severus leisurely summoned the scroll that lay where the younger man was pointing. He cracked the wax seal, embossed with the Malfoy coat of arms, and scanned the missive. Since he had saved Draco's life the previous week, he'd had a similar letter each day. Narcissa was at pains to demonstrate the continuing depths of her gratitude. This time, she'd been thoughtful enough to include the information that a meeting was scheduled for three p.m.

Forewarned is forearmed, he thought. That gave him all of the morning to catch up on sleep.

The expectant, attentive look on Draco's face caused him to scan the message once more. *Surely he had a letter, too? He shouldn't be waiting on information via one . . .*

On the second read through, his tired mind picked up the subtle inferences of Narcissa's prose: she'd thanked him for his continual support of her *entire* family. Without a doubt, then, the Azkaban break out was scheduled for that afternoon. Since Draco's failings had done nothing to endear the Malfoy family to the Dark Lord, Lucius might well become the newest whipping boy on his release. Severus bit back an urge to sigh. He was going to eat something, and then he was going to sleep.

Severus concentrated on the ring of his boot heels against the stone floors (which, in a melancholy kind of way, reminded him of Hogwarts) and his Occlumency shields: the number of Dementors swarming throughout the building was oppressive, and he couldn't very well conjure his Patronus in his present company. One of the few human guards scurried by his side, a scrawled list of cell numbers clutched in his hands. Behind them were a handful of Dementors and an equal number of freshly-liberated Death Eaters...not that the guard realised they were in the process of being liberated. He was operating under the mistaken impression that Severus was escorting the lot to the Ministry to appear before the Wizengamot. *Fool*, reflected Severus idly. *As if one official would be sent to escort eleven prisoners*

"Here we are, sir," wheezed the guard, peering at his list. "This is the next one: Stanley Shunpike."

"Stanley Shunpike is no Death Eater," replied Severus dismissively.

"Well, I wouldn'ta thought so, either. Cried for 'is Ma, 'ee did, when they brought him in. But 'ee's on the list. All the Deaf Eaters, you said. You can't pick an' chose."

Severus paused for a long second, considering the options. "Very well."

The guard unlocked the door with a key from the heavy ring that hung at his waist. Once the door was open, two Dementors floated in and encouraged the inmate out into the corridor to join the group of prisoners who stood patiently behind Severus.

"Next?" inquired Severus irritably, once Shunpike had shuffled into position.

"Lucius Malfoy," was the reply. "Next door along."

"I'll go in this time," responded Severus, surprising even himself with the proposition.

The guard looked sceptical, but merely shrugged. "You're the boss," he commented as he held the door open.

Automatically, Severus cast Muffliato as he stepped into the room. He wanted neither the guard nor any of the other Death Eaters to overhear their conversation. Lucius was slumped against the far wall and nearly unrecognisable. His hair was so dirty and matted that its natural colour was indiscernible; the prison robes so shapeless that his distinctively svelte silhouette was hidden from view. As Severus approached, the prisoner glanced upward.

"Severus," he said, in a fair approximation of Lucius' usual debonair tones. "How lovely of you to drop in once again."

"Once again?" queried Severus, one corner of his mouth twitching. *So, Lucius has been hallucinating my presence?*

"You really are making quite a habit of stopping by. I'm sorry I've no refreshments to offer you this time, you really should come on Tuesdays, instead."

Severus felt a pang of pity for his long-time friend. "I've come to take you home, Lucius."

"That's what you always say." Lucius brushed back his matted hair from his face in a parody of his typical gesture. "I do hope you've come alone this time. I really didn't appreciate Potter's presence."

"Potter? What on earth was he doing here?"

"Don't ask me, Severus, you were the one who brought him." Lucius looked pained. "Then you had the temerity to say that you'd betrayed us to the Order."

Severus laughed at that, the incongruous sound echoing eerily against the stone walls. "Please, Lucius. I'm a Slytherin. If I were to betray you, I wouldn't tell you about it. Surely you recognised that as a figment of your imagination?"

"I could only hope."

Severus reached out a hand. "Come on, Lucius," he urged, "let's go."

Lucius swatted at Severus' outstretched hand as if his own would pass through it. When, instead, they connected with a thud, he did a double take, staring up at Severus with unnaturally wide eyes.

"Come on," said Severus again, "I promised Narcissa you'd be home for tea."

"You're..." Lucius broke off. He tried again, "You're real."

"As ever."

Tentatively, Lucius reached out and took Severus' hand. He staggered slightly as Severus pulled his emaciated form upright. He hesitated at the door, half turning back towards Severus who stood just behind him.

"I hope you've scheduled a shower before tea: I have no intention of entertaining Narcissa in this state."

Severus raised one eyebrow. "You'll have to take that up with the Dark Lord, but in my opinion, he'll be as happy as the next person to see you cleaned up: you're far from fragrant in your current state, my friend."

Lucius stood a little taller before facing forward once again and stepping out into the corridor.

Disobeying Orders

Chapter 4 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. ****DH SPOILERS****

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Four : Disobeying Orders

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.

To LAxo, who alpha read this, and to WriterMerrin, who beta read it, my deepest thanks.

Though it was not yet six o'clock when Hermione stumbled out of the Floo into the Burrow's kitchen, Molly Weasley was already up and busying herself making breakfast. The whoosh of the Floo activating had alerted her to the imminent arrival, and Hermione found herself staring into the business end of Molly's wand. For a middle-aged witch, whose spreading hips testified to the seven children she had birthed, she assumed and held a duelling position with terrifying speed and accuracy.

"Hermione!" exclaimed Molly. "I wasn't expecting you so early." Smiling distractedly, she tucked her wand back into her apron pocket.

"I'm sorry," replied Hermione, her heart hammering from the unanticipated confrontation. "I didn't want anyone to get up just for me."

Molly had turned back towards the bench where she set several knives chopping a large pile of mushrooms. "Tea?" she asked solicitously.

"Yes, please."

Molly pointed her wand at the kettle, which boiled immediately and tipped itself forward to pour water into the pot. Molly's cooking was like an elaborate choreography, with ingredients and utensils soaring through the air and Molly effortlessly sliding plates and saucepans into their positions with impeccable precision.

"Oh," exclaimed Hermione, remembering the boxes in her bag, "I brought you these."

Molly didn't bat an eyelid at the sight of the large boxes emerging from Hermione's tiny bag, but she was surprised when she looked inside.

"What's this? You must have brought half of your parents' kitchen!"

"Er . . . yes. That's exactly what I did." Catching the look on Molly's face, Hermione took a deep breath and gave a very-nearly-full explanation. "They've moved to Australia. I was worried about them becoming a target."

"Oh, Hermione," sighed Molly. Unexpectedly, the older woman pulled Hermione into a tight embrace, one hand rubbing small circles on her back.

After a second of surprise and hesitation, Hermione returned the hug. She felt suddenly overwhelmed by the events of the evening. Pulled against Molly's motherly breast,

tears that she hadn't realised lay so close to the surface rolled down her face; her breath came in huge, choking sobs.

"There, there," crooned Molly.

Unlike Harry, Hermione found herself on the receiving end of Molly's maternal concern only infrequently, but this once, she wasn't complaining. It took several minutes for her to cry herself out. Afterwards, she found herself seated at the table, a cup of tea in one hand and a sweet biscuit in the other. Her offers to help prepare breakfast were waved away, and she sat back and sipped at her tea appreciatively. She only hoped that by the time the others appeared for breakfast, the signs of her crying would be sufficiently faded so that no-one would notice.

Later that day, when Hermione explained to Ron the danger their departure with Harry was going to cause for his family, he caught on quickly.

"You're right, 'Mione. As soon as we fail to turn up at King's Cross, they'll know that the three of us are off somewhere together."

"I think my parents are going to be safe in Australia, but we can't exactly force your family into hiding. For one, there's too many of them, and for another thing, they have jobs they need to do, including work for the Order."

They were up in Ron's room, having ducked away from the others in order to have their conversation in private. Hermione had cast several Silencing Charms and put an Imperturbable on the door for good measure: she loved the whole Weasley family, but living in the house where Extendable Ears were invented had its downsides.

"Maybe if they pretend I'm sick or something?" Ron suggested from his position sprawled on the bed with his head hanging back off the edge of the mattress.

"The Ministry is bound to check up on an excuse like that." Hermione was extricating clothes from Ron's wardrobe and folding them away into her beaded bag. His cupboard looked like he'd stirred the contents with a large stick.

"Not if I'm supposed to have something really contagious."

"So contagious that the Ministry won't risk sending someone to check, but not so dangerous that you're not admitted to St. Mungo's?" Hermione sounded sceptical.

"Hmm. I suppose you're right." Ron was silent for a moment. "I know!" he exclaimed, rolling over onto his front and pointing a finger at her excitedly. "We'll get someone to pretend to be me using Polyjuice! That way they'll never even know I've gone!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "And who's going to do that?"

"Fred or George would, hell, they could take it in turns. I reckon they'd think it a great lark being back at Hogwarts disguised as somebody else."

"Ron, Fred and George have a business to run. I can't see them wanting to spend time back at Hogwarts taking classes all over again. It would be a full-time job: they'd have to sleep there, do their homework..."

"Nah, not if they were pretending to be me, they wouldn't have to do homework. If they were pretending to be you, though, it'd be a different story!"

Hermione threw a pair of rolled up socks at Ron's face, but he caught them with ease and tossed them back.

"Besides," she added, "that kind of plan would require gallons of Polyjuice."

"Mad-Eye's got heaps."

"Perfect, Ron," replied Hermione, her voice heavy with sarcasm. "Why don't you steal the Polyjuice from Mad-Eye, and once you've done that, we'll move ahead with the plan."

"Constant vigilance!" Ron shouted, laughing at the very idea. "Alright, not Polyjuice then." He flopped back onto the bed again, letting one arm dangle over the edge. "Mum's got a book of magical maladies, though," he commented, reverting to his earlier suggestion. "We should check that and see whether there's something I can fake."

Ron swiped *The Healer's Helpmate* from the shelf on the second landing, and Hermione skimmed through it that night after she climbed into bed. Ginny gave the title a very dubious look on her way back from the bathroom.

"Sickening with something, Hermione?" she asked. A brittle quality in her voice indicated that she clearly didn't think so.

Hermione looked up at once, a serious look on her face, and met the eye of her younger friend. Ever since Harry had broken up with the girl in a spasm of nobility and dedication to the cause, things between Hermione and Ginny had been a little strained. Not being able to tell her the full story didn't help. For a long moment, Hermione cast around for the right thing to say.

"These basic healing spells are so useful. I wonder why we don't learn them at school? There are so many things that children raised in the wizarding world take for granted . . ."

Ginny interrupted her babbling by leaning across the bed and twisting the book around to see what exactly Hermione had been reading.

"Spattergroit?" queried Ginny, her voice falsely sweet. "I didn't think there was a cure for Spattergroit."

Hermione swallowed heavily. "Well, exactly! That's just it. I'd never even heard of Spattergroit until I opened this book."

"It's fine, Hermione," sighed Ginny, turning away towards her own bed and pulling back the covers. "You don't have to tell me," she added bitterly. "I know Harry has some plan, and I know that whatever it is and wherever he goes, you're going to be there too." Ginny clambered into bed and pulled the blankets up over her chest. She lay flat on her back, staring at the ceiling, her arms crossed fiercely across her front.

Hermione let the book fall from her fingers where it lay open on the quilt. After a second's hesitation, she threw back her blankets and climbed out of bed. Striding across to Ginny's bed, she perched on the edge. Her own arms were crossed and she stared at Ginny for a long moment.

"Ginevra Weasley," she began finally, "if you're jealous of my friendship with Harry, you'd better spit it out."

Ginny huffed irritably and swivelled her face towards the wall.

"You are, aren't you?" insisted Hermione. Still Ginny said nothing. "Ginny," she tried again, this time managing to muster a less accusatory tone, "Harry loves you. He's my friend, but he loves you. Harry is like . . . a brother to me. I swear it. I've never even thought of him any other way. If you think that I'm planning to, I don't know . . . *steal* him from you, then you've got the wrong end of the stick."

Almost reluctantly, Ginny turned her eyes to look at Hermione, though her face still pointed towards the wall. "I don't think you're trying to steal him!" she sighed, exasperated. "I know you don't like him like that. It's perfectly obvious and has been for ever." She paused, then continued, "But I am jealous. I just feel left out. It's like my whole life I've been told I'm too young, I'm just a girl, I have to behave . . . and now, there's a war on, and I'm still too young, too girly. It's not fair!"

"Move over," directed Hermione suddenly. Ginny wriggled over obligingly, and Hermione crawled under the covers with her. "You're right," she said once she and Ginny were facing each other, heads resting on the same pillow. "Every single other member of your family is in the Order, officially or unofficially, and yet they expect you to leave the room every time there's an important conversation."

"Ron was always following along after Harry, even when he was younger than I am now! And no-one told him he should stop trying to play with the grown-ups!"

"It's like the flying thing, all over again," remarked Hermione. Ginny's brothers had never let her play Quidditch when she was younger...because she was a girl. She'd had to learn on her own, flying when no-one else was home.

"Yeah, well. Imagine how much better I'd be at Quidditch if they'd let me play!"

"That's not my point, Ginny." Hermione poked Ginny's shoulder with one finger. "You're an excellent player and one of the most valued members of the team *despite* their lack of help. You'll prove yourself just as necessary in this war, mark my words."

Ginny pulled a face. "I wish I could believe you. Mum'll probably have me locked up in my bedroom when the Final Battle comes."

"If there is a battle . . . who knows how this will end? Besides, with Dumbledore gone, I'm not convinced Hogwarts will be so safe anymore. You're going to have to look out for yourself and for the other Gryffindors."

"You guys really aren't going to be there, are you?"

"No." Hermione bit her lower lip. "You know I can't tell you what we're going to do."

"Yeah, I know."

"Ginny," said Hermione, rushing to talk through the awkward moment and prolong the fragile truce they'd just negotiated. "You're the only real female friend I have. Losing you because you were jealous of my friendship with Harry would be like me not talking to you because I was jealous that you'd known Ron longer than I have."

Ginny sniffed loudly, then gave a watery chuckle. "You didn't miss much," she joked. "Even when he was eleven, Ron was still a bit of a pillock, and before that he was worse."

They lay in companionable silence for a moment. "Harry broke up with you as much for his own safety as for yours," said Hermione suddenly.

"Prat," replied Ginny, without much heat.

"Seriously, he's the one that can't stand the stress of taking someone else down with him; breaking up doesn't really make you any less of a target."

"He's happy to take you and Ron along!" Ginny exclaimed, the hurt back in her voice.

"Gin-nee," moaned Hermione, elongating each syllable. "He's stuck with us. You don't want Harry to put you into the same category in which he lumps Ron and me! You want him to think of you differently; you want to be in a special category all on your own!"

"Not if it means putting me back on the shelf!" retorted Ginny, but Hermione could tell from her tone that Ginny essentially agreed with what she'd said.

"Listen here," Hermione promised, "if he even looks at another girl while we're away, I'll set the canaries on him."

"Deal," replied Ginny promptly.

"You and me, we're okay?"

"Yeah, Hermione. We're solid gold."

Hermione grinned with relief, and Ginny smiled back. Living at the Burrow would have been pretty awkward if she and Ginny hadn't managed to talk things through. After a few minutes of more casual conversation, Hermione returned to her own bed. *The Healer's Helpmate* was lying atop her blankets, open to the entry on Spattergroit. Conjuring a bookmark, Hermione marked the page and placed the book on the table beside her bed. Spattergroit was a distinct possibility.

"Ugh," said Ron. "This has to be the most disgusting disease ever! Not only are there horrible purple and red pustules all over your body, but, listen...did you read this? 'The fungus begins to grow in the ear canal, spreading through to the sinuses, and from there to the throat, the nose, and in severe cases, even reaching the tear ducts.'"

"Yes, Ron, I read it." Hermione rolled her eyes and leant her head back against the mattress of Ron's bed. Once again they'd snuck up to his bedroom to discuss the problem of how to hide Ron's departure. Hermione was sitting on the floor with her back against the bed, Ron was sitting on the bed itself.

"Cripes, did you look at this picture?"

"Honestly, Ron, yes! Did you think I just randomly opened it to that page before I handed you the book and asked you for your opinion?"

"Well I just gave you my opinion: this has to be the most disgusting disease ever!"

"Thank you, Ron. Very good. I'm going to assume that what you meant to imply by that statement was your agreement that it might suffice as a plausible excuse."

"Well . . . I'd never use the words 'suffice' or 'plausible,' but otherwise that was the gist."

Hermione sighed in exasperation and dropped her head forwards again. She had a headache, and the ghoul had chosen today for a particularly spectacular spot of pipe bashing. Plus Ron was driving her nuts.

"Hey, 'Mione, don't be mad." Ron rolled over onto his stomach and scooted to the edge of the bed, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I've stopped staring at the picture, and now you've got my full attention."

"What I've got, Ronald Weasley, is a blinding headache. Even if we think Spattergroit is a distinct possibility, we're no closer to a plan. The Ministry is bound to send someone to verify the truth of such an unlikely story, and unless we think of a solution, we're only postponing the danger to your family not...oh." Hermione broke off as Ron's strong Quidditch-keeper's hands began to massage the top of her shoulders, his thumbs pressing into the soft tissue either side of her spine. "Don't stop," she urged.

Ron chuckled at her sudden change in demeanour. Swinging his feet off the bed, he placed a leg on either side of her back and began to apply himself to the back rub. "We'll work out the details, Hermione; we always do," he said reassuringly. "You'll come up with something; you know you will."

His words were as mollifying as the massage, and ten minutes later Hermione was in a much better mood.

"Okay," she said, "let's go through the possibilities."

"Polyjuice," replied Ron promptly, shifting his attention to her neck, kneading the skin just behind her ears.

"Not good enough. Even if there was enough warning of the Ministry's arrival and someone was here to take it, they might be convincing as you, but they wouldn't look like they had Spattergroit."

"I bet Fred and George could develop a Spattergroit Sweet that would recreate the symptoms . . ." remarked Ron pensively.

"I bet you're right!" Hermione felt a momentary wave of enthusiasm, but it faded almost immediately. "It took them ages to perfect the other ones, though, and we don't have much time." They both fell silent for a few minutes. Ron worked his way back down Hermione's neck, across the tops of her shoulders and began to rub the tops of her arms. "Maybe we could transfigure something to look like you," suggested Hermione eventually. "It wouldn't move, of course, but they might not get close enough to notice. They wouldn't want to get within range."

"I bet they'd check that it was alive, though. Any number of spells would check that without the caster even having to come into the room." Ron was right. "Maybe if we transfigured something living," he added, "like one of Dad's chickens."

"A chicken?" Hermione had to laugh. "Don't be ridiculous, Ron. Can you imagine the mess it would make? You can't exactly explain to a chicken what you want it to do for months on end."

"Fair call," remarked Ron, laughing himself. "It pro'lly wouldn't be able to work out how to eat with a mouth and hands, either."

As they both laughed, his hands slid gently back across her shoulders, coming to rest against her neck. She could feel the tips of his fingers pressing lightly on her collarbone, and her breath caught in her throat. All of a sudden, the atmosphere in the room changed. The thumb of Ron's right hand caressed a slow circle across the nape of her neck. Hermione let out her breath in a soft sigh and relaxed back against the inside of Ron's legs.

Only seconds later, however, she started upright again when a particularly loud crash from the attic above broke the mood. Hermione bit back an exasperated huff.

"Isn't that ghoul ever quiet?" she asked, her irritation colouring her voice.

"Nah," sighed Ron, dropping his hands from her shoulders in recognition of the fact that the mood had well and truly disappeared. "He only listens to Dad. Dad reckons he just wants attention or something . . ." He trailed off at the same moment Hermione span around to look at him, an arrested look on her face.

"I've never seen a ghoul," she breathed. "How big is yours?"

"Bout the right size," replied Ron with a calculating gleam in his eye. "He smells terrible, though."

"That's perfect. Spattergroit stinks."

"We'll have to tell Dad, but that was going to happen sooner or later."

"You might never get your room back," warned Hermione.

Ron shrugged. "Who knows when I'll be back? Besides, I can always kip in Fred and George's room."

Hermione bit down on her bottom lip, "Transfiguration shouldn't hurt the ghoul," she pondered, "but I'd better check in *Advanced Transfiguration* . . ." Just at that moment, Ron blanched. "What's wrong?" she asked, with some concern.

Ron flopped backwards onto his bed with a groan. "Mum's going to go spare!"

Ron got his chance to inform his parents over dinner that same evening. Tonks, Fred and George had joined the inhabitants of the house for the evening meal, and the room seemed more crowded than usual as a consequence of the gales of laughter the three guests were eliciting.

"Oi!" exclaimed Fred at one point, pulling a serving platter away from Ron. "If this one eats any more, he won't fit even our old school robes!"

"That reminds me," commented Molly, "where are your old school robes? I've been looking for them precisely because Ron is going to need them."

Hermione found Ron's foot with her own and pressed down on it firmly. Ron took the hint and laid his cutlery down on the table with an air of finality.

"Actually, Mum," he said, "that won't be necessary. I'm not returning to Hogwarts next year."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," replied Molly dismissively, "it's your NEWTs year. Of course you're returning to Hogwarts."

"I'm serious, Mum," said Ron, matching tone to statement.

"Arthur!" Molly appealed to another authority. "Say something!"

Arthur cleared his throat; the other occupants of the room were watching the scene avidly. "Ron," responded Arthur obediently, "what reason can you possibly have for not finishing your education?"

Ron shot an apprehensive look at Hermione, who nodded encouragingly. She bit her tongue; better that this come from him.

"Well," he said, somewhat reluctantly, "Harry has a job to do, and me and Hermione are going to help."

Hermione and I, thought Hermione automatically, but she said nothing.

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed Molly. "All three of you will be returning to Hogwarts where it is safe, and I'll hear nothing more about it!"

"Why?" protested Ron, an edge of petulant younger child creeping into his voice. "Fred and George quit school without their NEWTs!"

"Oi!" Fred and George began talking in tandem.

"Leave us out of it!"

"We had a business plan..."

"And savings..."

"And premises..."

"And inventory..."

"And a dedicated customer base..."

"Before we left school!"

"I wasn't happy about Fred and George leaving school, but I couldn't..." began Molly.

"Couldn't what?" interrupted Ron. "Couldn't stop them? Well, I'm of age, Mum, and you can't stop me either. I'm going with Harry and that's final." He crossed his arms but somehow managed to pull it off, looking determined rather than sulky.

Hermione had expected more of an explosion from Molly, but she was looking surprisingly deflated by the turn the conversation had taken. Unexpectedly, it was Tonks who came to Molly's defence.

"Have you thought about what your disappearance will mean for your family?" she inquired, wrinkling her nose in disapproval. Not for the first time, Hermione wondered what Tonks was like as an Auror, though this time, she did so with much more respect than on previous occasions.

"Of course we have." Ron sighed and unfolded his arms. "Hermione and I have been working on a plan, but we need some help."

It didn't take him long to elaborate on the details. As he did so, Hermione caught Ginny's eye across the table. Ginny raised one eyebrow, but thankfully didn't look irate as the reason for the Spattergroit research became apparent.

"We can help Transfigure the ghoul," offered Fred to Hermione's surprise.

"Yeah, we're dab hands," added George.

It was a measure of Molly's distress that she didn't even think to ask where and how the twins had become experts at ghoul Transfiguration.

Hermione was stretching her hamstrings on the back porch after a hard and quick three miles when Molly pulled open the back door.

"Hermione," she said, keeping her face blank and her voice neutral, "I think you'd better come in."

Hermione straightened up, lifting her ponytail up off her sweaty neck with one hand. It wasn't yet seven a.m. and she hadn't anticipated that she would be missed. A slight crease between her eyebrows betrayed her consternation as she ran lightly up the stairs and stepped through the door.

The kitchen was unexpectedly crowded: Professor McGonagall, Mad-Eye Moody, Kingsley and Arthur were all seated at the table, their faces grim. Molly remained by the door, still holding it open with one hand.

"Miss Granger," remarked Professor McGonagall politely but without enthusiasm, "a word in the living room if you wouldn't mind." As she spoke, all four of the Order members who had been seated rose to their feet. They turned and began to file through into the hallway, Mad-Eye's wooden leg thumping ominously against the floorboards.

Hermione felt horribly conscious of the brevity of her running shorts and the film of sweat that covered her skin. She shot a glance at Molly...who hadn't moved...from the corner of her eyes. The older woman's lips were pressed together firmly with disapproval. Hermione wondered vaguely whether Molly disapproved of her or of the meeting that was about to take place. *Pull yourself together, Granger*, she rebuked herself. Taking a deep breath, she ran quickly through the most effective of the calming exercises Snape had taught her and pulled her wand from the wristband she used to hold it while running. Banishing the sweat from her skin and Transfiguring her running clothes into a set of serviceable robes took only seconds. Then she hurried after the others and into the living room.

McGonagall, Kingsley and Arthur sat along the length of the couch, displaying various degrees of comfort. Mad-Eye stood off to one side, his arms crossed, and both of his eyes trained upon her. Facing the couch was an uncomfortable looking straight-backed chair, so at-odds with the rest of the Weasley decor that it had obviously just been conjured into existence. Hermione would have bet money that McGonagall was the one responsible.

"Sit," ordered her straight-faced professor, pointing towards the chair in question.

Feeling thankful that she'd had the presence of mind to Transfigure her clothes, Hermione obeyed.

"What's this about Potter, you and the Weasley boy leaving school?" barked Mad-Eye the second she was seated.

"It's the truth," replied Hermione as calmly as she could. "Professor Dumbledore left Harry a task, and Ron and I are going to help him."

"Miss Granger," intervened McGonagall, "I am sure that you are intelligent enough to realise that since Professor Dumbledore's death"...a spasm of sorrow and suppressed emotion registered on each of the four faces before Hermione..."plans have changed. It is not possible for us to allow Mr Potter to embark on such a foolish endeavour without the support and protection of the entire Order."

Hermione took a deep breath. "Your plans may have changed," she began, attempting to address all four of her interlocutors and not just Professor McGonagall, "but Harry's haven't. And neither have mine."

Kingsley was the next to enter the conversation. "Hermione," he ventured in his deep, resonant voice, "I understand that you alone among your friends have sworn an oath of allegiance to the Order."

Hermione nodded her agreement. *Did I read Dumbledore correctly?* she wondered. This would be the moment of truth.

"Since Dumbledore's death," he continued, and this time they each managed to keep their faces impassive, "we four have assumed leadership of the Order. It is in this role that we have gathered this morning, and it is as your superiors that we must ask you to tell us Harry's intentions. We must also secure your promise to help us convince him to return to Hogwarts, where he will be safe."

"I'm afraid that I can't help you," replied Hermione. As she spoke, she scanned through the sensations of her body: she was definitely feeling nervous, but she felt no hint of magical compulsion in relation to her oath of allegiance. She felt a sudden rush of certainty that she had understood the precision of Dumbledore's choice of words.

"Miss Granger!" gasped McGonagall. "This is a direct order!"

"The oath I made Professor Dumbledore was quite specific," said Hermione apologetically. The words were so fresh in her mind that she could quote them directly: "'I, Hermione Jean Granger, pledge my loyalty to the Order of the Phoenix, under the leadership of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.' Furthermore," she elaborated, "the task Dumbledore set me was to protect Harry and to help him with his task."

In other circumstances, the look of surprise on McGonagall's face might have been comic. Arthur, who had yet to say anything, was frowning slightly. While Mad-Eye looked furious, Kingsley actually grinned...though the expression was fleeting and he quickly replaced it with a look of mild amusement.

"Well," drawled Kingsley, "that's that, then." He leant forward in his seat as if he was about to stand up.

"It certainly is not!" protested McGonagall.

"Come now, Minerva," replied Kingsley, relaxing back into the couch and turning towards McGonagall "despite having refused our request, the girl has shown no symptoms of having broken her oath. We can only assume she speaks the truth."

"But we have Potter's best interests at heart!"

"Really?" inquired Hermione, her voice came out a little harsher than she had intended. "Have the school governors named a new headmaster yet?" The silence that greeted her question was confirmation enough that they hadn't. "Once the Ministry falls," she continued, "Hogwarts might prove the most dangerous place Harry could be."

Mad-Eye clunked several steps forward and loomed over her, his magic eye spinning crazily. "And how do you know that the Ministry is going to fall, girl?" he inquired aggressively.

"Back off, Alastor," intervened Kingsley smoothly, "anyone with half a brain could tell that the Ministry won't last long. And Hermione has more than her fair share of brains."

Hermione caught Kingsley's eye, and to her surprise, he winked. Mad-Eye, in contrast, narrowed his real eye dubiously, looking far from convinced, though he straightened up and turned away.

"I think," continued Kingsley, "that we should make our farewells and leave Hermione to shower and breakfast in peace." He stood and gave Hermione a half bow. "Thank you for your time, Miss Granger," he said formally.

Hermione rose as well and returned the bow. "You're welcome, Kingsley; I'm sorry that I couldn't be of more assistance."

McGonagall's lips were thinned in annoyance, and Mad-Eye looked far from mollified, but at Kingsley's insistence, they took their leave and filed away towards the Floo connection in the kitchen.

Once they were gone, Arthur rose to his feet and stepped towards Hermione. After a quick glance at the doorway to make sure they were alone, he leant towards her, taking hold of her upper arm. "I'll help with the ghoul," he whispered in her ear. After another look towards the door, he added a corollary: "Just don't tell Molly."

A/N : When you leave a review, all my hard work becomes worth it. :)

Acting Alone

Chapter 5 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Five : Acting Alone

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

As always, my thanks go to LAxo and WriterMerrin, for their time and their energies--this story would be the lesser without their help.

"Severusss, how lovely to see you."

Severus could tell from the elongated sibilants with which his name was spoken and the crumpled newspaper in Voldemort's hand that the Dark Lord was far from happy. He inclined his head respectfully. "Greetings, my Lord," he said.

Voldemort gestured with the offending copy of the *Daily Prophet*. "One of your inestimable colleagues has seen fit to lower the already deplorable standards of the wizarding press."

My colleagues? The use of the possessive pronoun did not bode well. Severus raised an urbane eyebrow. "I take it that you're referring to the Burbage garbage, my Lord."

A long, pregnant pause greeted his mild witicism. Finally, the Dark Lord threw back his head and laughed. *Snape: 1, Snake: 0*, Severus noted irreverently.

"Burbage garbage," echoed Voldemort with delight. "I knew I could rely on you, dear Severus, to put things back into perspective."

Severus bowed.

"Sit," commanded Voldemort, conjuring a chair and stationing it just to his left. On the Dark Lord's right lay Nagini, coiled into great folded loops. Severus sat.

"This abomination," Voldemort began, gesturing once more with his newspaper, "only encourages me to forge ahead with my plan to remove all Muggle-born teachers from Hogwarts."

"Charity Burbage is a fool," responded Severus. "Her views on Muggles are as enthusiastic and as inaccurate as those held by Arthur Weasley."

"She will be disposed of," declared Voldemort, "along with Septima Vector." He paused, one long finger tapping his pursed lip in contemplation. "One at a time, I think," he concluded, "so that Nagini can enjoy them to the fullest extent." Voldemort reached out with one foot and rubbed gently against the body of the snake. "You, Severus, shall take the position of headmaster...so recently vacated by our late, lamented friend."

Severus could hear the smug contentment and implied praise dripping from Voldemort's words. He folded up each incriminating thought about Dumbledore, stuffing them into the Hogwarts' library books of his brain. He concentrated on the satisfaction that he had played his role admirably; that satisfaction was what Voldemort would sense of his emotions.

"For the Muggle Studies position," continued Voldemort, "I think Alecto will prove an admirable candidate, which leaves Amycus free to teach the Dark Arts."

Dread scratched across the back of Severus' neck like a feather. The Carrows were as stupid and as brutal as they were inbred. While the Muggle Studies position was always going to be a loss, Severus had held out some hope for the Dark Arts job. "Amycus?" he queried, careful to keep his voice as neutral as possible.

"You disapprove, Severus?" responded Voldemort.

Severus shrugged. "His methods lack subtlety," he replied. "I had thought, perhaps Lucius?" Amycus Carrow was no teacher. His skills were crowned by a particularly effective Cruciatus curse; anything more complicated was beyond him. Lucius, at least, would be more interested in teaching the students than torturing them, and his talent for the Dark Arts was formidable.

"No." The denial was stated with finality. "I won't have Lucius free to pander to the fears of his good-for-nothing son. I'd rather keep him here under my eye."

"Here," was Malfoy Manor where the Dark Lord continued to reside. If initially Voldemort had manipulated Draco to punish Lucius for his errors at the Department of Mysteries, the terms of the equation had now switched: Lucius...so recently released from Azkaban...was being punished for Draco's inability to complete his set task. To add insult to injury, Voldemort had pushed back the anti-Apparation wards to lie beyond the perimeter of the property. Claiming that it was too suspicious for Lucius to show his face immediately outside the gates of the ancestral family home, Voldemort kept him safely hidden behind the walls of the Manor: Lucius was effectively under house arrest.

Lucius was taking his demotion from the favoured position he had once held badly. Severus had even dared to hope that, once removed from the poisonous and stifling environment of Voldemort's continual presence, Lucius' well-developed sense of self-preservation might kick in. The suggestion of switching sides that Severus had planted in Draco's mind might have borne fruit in Lucius' actions.

Faced with the Dark Lord's blunt refusal, Severus let that hope wither without further protest. "Very good, my Lord," he remarked obediently. Once, years earlier, Lucius had acted to save Severus from a life of imprisonment. Given the opportunity, Severus would return the favour...not, however, at the risk of losing the war.

Severus concentrated so carefully on his destination that the noise of his Apparition was slight...no louder than the crack of a small twig. Immediately, he Disillusioned himself and took one sharp step sideways. He froze, his senses on high alert. Nothing moved. No-one, it seemed, had noticed his arrival. Unconsciously, his eyes strayed to the place where, in other circumstances, a grey tabby cat would have watched for his appearance. Tonight, her place was empty.

Adding a silencing charm to his boots, Severus picked his way towards the gates. A successor to Dumbledore's position had yet to be named. Hopefully, that meant no-one would have been able yet to change the castle wards. Of course, Hogwarts was the last place Severus Snape, suspected murderer, would be expected to visit, and surely, that too would work in his favour. At the gates, his hunch proved correct: the lock clicked open at the touch of his hand against the cool metal.

Severus let out a sigh of relief. He slipped inside the grounds, keeping the gap of the open gates as small as possible, and carefully shut them behind him. Once inside, he froze again, ascertaining that his presence remained undetected.

It was odd to sneak into Hogwarts...the place in which he had lived for so much of his life...but also something of a relief. Like his visit to Granger's parents' house, his actions now were a consolation: physically doing something to undermine the Dark Lord made the long hours in the company of Death Eaters easier to bear.

Severus moved through the grounds silently. He skirted the edge of the Quidditch pitch, deliberately choosing a route different from that which he typically took. He had no intention of entering the castle via his own rooms and headed, instead, for the opposite wing entirely, where he availed himself of a rarely used service door. There, too, the wards allowed him past without question. Once inside, he redoubled the Disillusioning and Silencing charms...being caught in the corridors was low indeed on his list of priorities.

Miraculously, he made it to the gargoyles outside the headmaster's office without encountering anyone. Though it was the summer holidays and late at night, he had anticipated running into at least one of the castle ghosts, if not Minerva herself on the prowl. With one last look in each direction to be sure the coast was clear, he placed his lips close to the gargoyles' ear.

"Pepper Imps," he breathed. The gargoyles leapt obligingly aside, and Severus stepped up onto the moving staircase, letting it carry him up to the office door. He listened at the door for a few seconds before opening it; then he moved quickly inside.

Upon his arrival, the torches flared automatically to life. The room, he was relieved to note, was unoccupied. It looked as it had always looked, with two exceptions: Fawkes was absent, and a new portrait hung behind the desk. Steeling himself, Severus dropped the Disillusionment charm.

The occupant of the portrait rose to his feet and stood, leaning forwards with his hands pressed flat against the picture plane. "Severus," he said. "I am so glad to see you."

"Albus," replied Severus, inclining his head politely. He turned abruptly and crossed to the cupboard where the Pensieve was normally stored. He pulled an enormous tome from the lower shelf and, holding it carefully in both hands, carried it over to the headmaster's desk.

"Severus," said Albus' portrait again, speaking from behind where Severus now stood. "Everything went to plan?"

Severus paused in the act of opening the old book. The entire cast of previous headmasters and headmistresses stared down at him with interest, keenly anticipating his answer. He straightened his back, but didn't turn. "I lived to fight another day, Albus. You, on the other hand, did not. That much, surely, was clear?"

"And the Malfoy boy?"

"Draco," replied Severus, emphasising his given name, "is fine."

"Well done, Severus." The warmth of Dumbledore's tone did little to appease his interlocutor. "I knew I could count on you."

If you knew, he wanted to ask, then why did you beg? Severus had promised to do the unthinkable. He had given his word, only to find, at the last, that Albus wasn't truly convinced he would go through with it. He wanted to rage. He wanted to shout the emotional truths of that betrayal at the top of his voice. But he didn't. *This isn't Albus*, he reminded himself. *This is merely his echo, captured in a thin layer of magical varnish* True to form, Severus concealed his emotions and went off on a tangent.

"Albus," he remarked, "there is a favour you can do for me." Finally, he turned to face the portrait completely, noting the willing expression on the painting's familiar face. "Warn Charity and Septima: their lives are in very real danger."

"So," the simulacrum of Albus replied, "Voldemort plans to replace only the Muggle-born teachers."

Severus nodded his acknowledgement.

"Who will replace them?"

"Aleto Carrow will teach Muggle Studies," Severus' mouth twisted bitterly, "which will become compulsory and be taught according to a new, Death-Eater approved syllabus. The Dark Lord sees no need for the study of Arithmancy under the new order."

The portrait looked thoughtful. "You will become headmaster?" he asked.

"It seems likely."

"And Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

Severus hesitated, only fractionally: "Amycus."

"Both the Carrows?" The reproof in Dumbledore's tone was unmistakable.

Severus' eyes fluttered closed for a second. Then he turned his back to the painting and his attention to the book on the desk. "Feel free to send someone else to negotiate if you find my attempts inadequate," he commented. *I'm not going to argue with his portrait* he told himself sternly.

Opening the stiff cover of the student registry, Severus flipped back and forth through the central section until he found the records of those students who should be about to enter seventh year. *Granger's year*, said a small voice that he hurriedly squashed. The adult wizards and witches of Britain would have to fend for themselves, but Severus intended to ensure that the children and unqualified young adults of Hogwarts would be removed from harm's way.

Pulling the headmaster's chair up to the desk, Severus sat down and fished several pieces of parchment, a quill and a bottle of ink from his pocket. A simple spell would have copied out the relevant names and addresses within seconds; however, Severus was a wanted man and far too careful to leave his magical signature on anything that would remain within the castle walls. Unlike the guards at Azkaban prison, the stones of Hogwarts were impervious to even the strongest Confundus Charm.

Carefully and methodically, Severus set about copying the list by hand, transcribing the name and address of every Muggle-born student. The half-bloods, he had to assume, would be fine. The process didn't take too long, as there were only half-a-dozen or so Muggle-born students in each year. When he got to Jocelyn Smith, he hesitated. After a moment's consideration, he wrote her name on a separate sheet. Her name was the last but one in her year, and Severus copied the final name onto his original list. He completed the process with the Muggle-borns from the incoming first year.

"Muggle-born students," he wrote across the bottom, "arranged from oldest to youngest. You might want to act in reverse order." Rolling up the parchment, he sealed it with the wax that lay ready on Dumbledore's desk. "Torvik Murk," he wrote on the outside, "Bulgaria." The piece of parchment on which he'd written Jocelyn's name and address, he tucked into an inside pocket.

Rising to his feet, Severus closed the heavy registry and carried it back to the cupboard. Taking the rolled, sealed and addressed scroll, he turned as if to leave. He graced Albus' portrait with a brief grimace that, to a generous observer, might have counted as a farewell.

"Wait, Severus," interrupted the portrait.

Severus turned with a look of polite inquiry on his face.

"There is a further task I need you to do: you will have to give Voldemort the correct date of Harry's departure from his aunt and uncle's," instructed Dumbledore. "Not to do so will raise suspicion, when Voldemort believes you so well informed. However, you must plant the idea of decoys; that, I think, ought to ensure Harry's safety. Try Confunding Mundungus Fletcher." Severus must have looked less than impressed, for the portrait continued reprovingly. "And Severus, if you are forced to take part in the chase, be sure to act your part convincingly. . . . I am counting on you to remain in Lord Voldemort's good books as long as possible, or Hogwarts will be left to the mercy of the Carrows."

Severus felt a wave of irritation sweep over him at the realisation that no clear plan had been left in place to evacuate Potter from the Dursley's. With Potter's seventeenth birthday approaching, the place was less of a safe house and more of a death trap with every passing minute. *I will not argue with a portrait* he reiterated to himself. It seemed...to Potter's detriment...that Dumbledore had kept less from Severus than Severus had anticipated.

"Very well," he replied. "Is there anything further?"

"No."

Severus turned once more to leave. This time he made it to the door before Albus spoke.

"Good luck, Severus."

Severus didn't bother to reply. He Disillusioned himself, Silenced his boots and crept his way up to the Owlery. Once his list was winging its way towards Viktor Krum and Bulgaria, he felt a little calmer. He had done his best.

He made his way back through the deserted castle and across the grounds to the Apparation point. Mundungus was a tricky man to catch, but Severus was a talented spy: he would catch up with him, of that there was little doubt.

Severus chose early morning as the most likely time to find the Smith family at home. Several days had passed since he'd copied Jocelyn's address and sent the others to Krum: long enough for Severus to track down Mundungus and Confund him, long enough for Charity Burbage to be tracked down and killed...*despite* his warning to Dumbledore who seemed to have done nothing about it...and long enough for Severus to inform Voldemort exactly when the Order planned to liberate Potter.

Dumbledore's plan seemed ludicrous, and Severus wasn't quite sure why he had continued to follow the poorly-conceived orders given to him by the portrait. So, there would be several identical Polyjuiced Potters, but it was still a terrible risk. With an entire horde of Death Eaters on the watch, there was a very real chance Potter might be killed...not to mention that any number of other Order members might perish, too.

As a plan it rivalled some of Dumbledore's other suggestions for sheer idiocy, not least the old man's ridiculous insistence that Severus be the one to inform Potter of the crucial need to die. Severus was to act when Voldemort placed Nagini under magical protection...assuming that he managed to live that long, and that Voldemort did so in such a way that it was noticeable to the naked eye. *Then* he was to locate Potter...despite being cut off from the Order and with no foreseeable means to communicate with any of them. And *finally* he had to convince Potter somehow to sacrifice his life...assuming that Potter could be made to believe him, that he wouldn't think it a trick to ensure the Dark Lord's victory, and that Potter didn't kill him on sight. All in all, a pretty stupid plan; the situation left him with a feeling of sick despair.

The realisation that both of his masters were insane did, however, make it easier for Severus to act independently when given the chance. Hence, his presence in Muggle clothes, in a dreary suburb of East London, early on a Tuesday morning. One last time, he checked the address against the parchment in his pocket.

The estate was in visible disrepair, so much so, that Severus' shabby jeans and leather jacket looked precisely the part, and he had needed to take the stairs to the twelfth floor because the lift was out of order. *Flat 1215*. He had arrived. Severus raised his fist and rapped sharply on the door.

The walls were so thin that he could clearly hear the conversation that his knock triggered.

"Who the hell is that?" shouted a man's voice.

"Jocelyn!" shrieked a woman. "Go get the door."

Severus felt his heart lighten at the knowledge she was home, though it plummeted the instant he saw her face. The door rattled open as far as the chain would allow, and a thin sliver of Jocelyn's face and body appeared in the crack. He had forgotten how uncared for and miserable she'd looked when she first arrived at Hogwarts; her appearance now brought that back with a rush.

She looked astonished to see him, and her eyes widened with surprise. For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

"Jocelyn!" shrieked the same woman as before. "Who is it?"

"Jocelyn," ventured Severus as gently as he could, "may I come in?"

Jocelyn swallowed heavily and then closed the door. Severus' eyes blinked shut, then flew open as he heard the sound of the chain scraping in its socket. Moments later Jocelyn opened the door wide and stood back to let him in.

"Thank you."

Jocelyn made no reply. She closed, deadlocked and bolted the door, then put the chain back on. With a jerk of her head, she gestured down the narrow hallway towards the voices and, presumably, the kitchen. Severus waved one hand for her to go first, then followed her down the hall. Jocelyn was dressed in pyjamas that were at least one size too small, her ankles and wrists stuck out awkwardly from the end of her trousers and sleeves. Her feet were bare. The outfit made her appear younger than her twelve years.

This house, though Severus bitterly, is no place for a child.

"Jocelyn? Who was it?" Severus recognised the woman as Jocelyn's mother from his numerous forays into the young girl's memories.

"Ms Smith," he said smoothly, holding out his hand to be shaken, "my name is Professor Snape; I am a teacher at Jocelyn's school."

His hand hung between them, completely ignored. Ms Smith's eyes were wide and she shouted over her shoulder without turning her eyes from his face. "Jake! Get out here! Now!"

"What the fuck?" muttered a male voice in the next room. The comment was followed by the sounds of someone clambering out of bed and fumbling for some clothes.

"What did you do?" hissed Jocelyn's mother at the girl. Jocelyn flinched slightly, but said nothing.

The difference between Jocelyn's home life and Granger's was stark.

Jake appeared in the doorway, buckling his belt and adjusting his jeans as he came. Severus judged that he couldn't be much older than 25, the mother perhaps a few years older. Jake's shirt hung open, revealing a tightly muscled chest and a pretty decent tattoo of a motorbike; he looked like he spent more than his fair share of time working out at the gym. "Who the fuck are you?" he demanded aggressively, jerking his chin at Snape.

"Professor Severus Snape, I'm a teacher at Jocelyn's school."

"Snot her school any more, it ain't. Sorry to have troubled you. I fink you'd better leave."

Jocelyn's mother was nodding at Jake's words. Severus turned his gaze towards Jocelyn. She looked bleak, her eyes focussed on the space between the three adults.

"Jocelyn," Severus inquired, relived when she glanced towards him, "what's your opinion on this matter?"

Jake interrupted before she could reply. "She hasn't got anyfink to say about it. Where she goes to school is for her mum to decide." He strode across the room towards the young girl. Jocelyn held her ground, but once again she flinched.

"I'm afraid you're wrong about that," replied Severus. "The decision is as much Jocelyn's as it is anyone else's."

"The little freak," hissed Jake, his attention focussed on the young girl, "will shut the fuck up if she knows what's good for her." He swung his left hand up and across his body, poised to backhand her across the side of her face.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," remarked Severus. Even someone who had never met him before should have recognised the deadly edge to his voice.

"Or what?" sneered Jake. "You gonna stop me?"

Severus moved before Jake's hand connected with Jocelyn. Before the arrogant young thug had realised what had happened, his body had been slammed back against the wall, Severus' left hand crushing his throat. Severus was a least a foot taller, and he was using his full height to loom ominously. His wand was out, and he pressed the tip of it against the inside of Jake's left wrist, dragging it up the wall until Jake stood with one arm splayed out at shoulder height. Though he struggled, Severus had charmed him to the wall. He was stuck where he was, unable to pull away.

Jocelyn's mother was screaming, but Severus Silenced her with a flick of his wand.

Moving with the utmost precision, Severus drew his wand along the inside of Jake's arm, slicing his shirt from his wrist to the inside of his elbow. The fabric flapped open, exposing the pale skin of his forearm. Pressing his wand against the exposed skin, Severus frowned in concentration. From the tip of his wand, inky tendrils spread, twisting and writhing over themselves as they formed an elaborate, copperplate tattoo, complete with decorative swirls. "Child beater," it read.

Severus stepped back, his head tilted to one side to better appreciate his handiwork, leaving Jake pinned to the wall.

"A year and a day," he remarked conversationally, breaking the unnatural silence that his charms had obtained. "That's how long the tattoo will last. Unless, of course," he added, "you ever do it again. In that case, you'll have it for life."

Jake's lips were drawn back from his teeth in an exaggerated display of terror. His eyes flicked back and forth from Severus to his own arm.

Severus turned his attention to Jocelyn's mother, who cowered away.

"For Jocelyn's safety," he informed her, "she will need to leave this address. She will be unable to return for the next year or so. Do I have your permission?" He waved his wand to release the charm that had silenced her, though he left the one that was keeping Jake quiet.

"Good riddance," she spat.

Severus clenched his teeth. "You don't deserve a daughter such as Jocelyn," he replied.

"You got that right, mister," retorted the mother. "I wish she'd never been born."

Severus himself felt her words as a physical blow; he could only imagine how terrible they felt to Jocelyn. He turned towards her. "Jocelyn," he asked, his voice simmering with barely contained rage, "I am going to take you away. Would it bother you if you never saw this woman again?"

Jocelyn looked pale, even for one of her complexion, her blue eyes overlarge in her face. Slowly, she looked from her mother to Severus, then back again.

"I won't hurt her," whispered Severus. "We'll just go away."

Resolutely, Jocelyn nodded her permission.

Severus registered an angry flash of triumph within his own breast. "Jocelyn Claire Smith is no child of mine," he quoted at the mother. "Go on, say it," he urged, holding his wand out towards her, point down, like a dagger.

Hesitant, but defiant, she echoed him: "Jocelyn Claire Smith is no child of mine."

"Do you have kids, Professor Snape?" Dr Terry Granger's words in the corridor echoed in his mind.

"Say it again," he instructed, snarling at Jocelyn's mother.

"Jocelyn Claire Smith is no child of mine." There was a hard edge of anger in her voice.

"It's amazing . . . impossible to describe. When you hold something so precious, so fragile, and you face that responsibility . . ."

"One more time."

The third time, she rushed through the phrase, her nervousness apparent, "Jocelyn Claire Smith is no child of mine!"

His wand flared with blood red light, casting eerie shadows for the few seconds the light took to fade.

Ms Smith...no longer Jocelyn's mother...gasped. "Wh-what just happened?"

"Jocelyn Claire Smith," Severus sneered, irritated beyond measure by her stupidity, "is no child of yours."

"And you realise you'd do anything, anything at all to keep them safe."

He turned away from her then, towards Jocelyn, ignoring Jake, who remained magically glued to the wall. He leant down so that his face was level with hers. "Get your wand and anything else you want to take with you. Then we'll go." She didn't move. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Jocelyn?" he queried, reaching out and grasping hold of her upper arm.

Her mouth twisted, and instead of replying, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the pieces of her wand. It was broken in two. Severus swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing almost painfully as he did so. "Who did this to you?" he whispered. Her lips thinned and she glanced towards Jake. "Is there anything else you want to take with you?" She shook her head. "Books? Robes?"

"Gone." It was the first word she had spoken since he arrived, and it cut him to the quick.

"Let's get out of here," he replied, holding out his arms towards her. She stepped towards him and threaded her arms around his neck. When he lifted her as he stood upright, she wrapped her legs tightly around his waist. Severus spared one last glance at the two adults they were leaving behind. Jake's new tattoo looked rather good at this distance. Waving his wand, he set the charm that held the younger man to the wall to finish ten minutes after he left. Then, without another word, he Disapparated both himself and Jocelyn away.

Moments later, they reappeared in a deserted alley in Muggle London, not far from The Leaky Cauldron. Severus set Jocelyn down gently.

"Hold still," he instructed, training his wand upon her and transfiguring her too-small pyjamas into a serviceable set of robes. Next, he turned to his own clothing, transfiguring his Muggle outfit into his traditional black. As he worked, his mind was racing. He hadn't anticipated that Jocelyn would need a new wand, and in the current situation, that posed a rather large difficulty: with Olivander locked in the dungeon of Malfoy Manor, and Severus as a wanted criminal, he couldn't very well stroll into Diagon Alley and buy her a new one. She needed clothes, too, for her transfigured robes would do only in a pinch. As it was, he could see only one solution.

"Sit," he ordered suddenly, taking hold of her shoulders and manoeuvring her backwards several steps until he could push her down onto a wooden fruit box. Once she was seated, he squatted in front of her. "We are going to visit Diagon Alley," he informed her, "but it is imperative that no-one recognises me for who I am. Do you understand?"

She responded with a question of her own: "Is it true that you killed Dumbledore?"

Severus hesitated. "Yes." Jocelyn stared back at him without blinking. "Remember this," he commanded, his voice harsh but quiet. "Once you swear your allegiance to someone, Jocelyn, you lose control over certain elements of your life."

He wasn't sure what response he was expecting, but it certainly wasn't for her to reach out and take a firm hold of one of his many buttons.

"Fair enough," she replied calmly. "Thank you for being honest. If no-one is to recognise you in Diagon Alley, what should I call you?"

"If and when I reveal myself to someone, call me Professor Snape. In front of strangers, however," said Severus, his own voice sounding thick to his ears, "call me Daddy. Do I make myself clear?"

Jocelyn grinned, looking more like her old self than she had since she'd opened the door. "Perfectly, Daddy," she affirmed.

Severus contented himself with raising one eyebrow.

"And you realise you'd do anything, anything at all to keep them safe . . ."

"I require one of your hairs," he informed her, holding out his hand. Obediently she plucked one of the pale blonde strands and placed it in his palm. Reaching into an inside pocket, Severus withdrew a phial of Plurijuce and dropped the hair inside. It fizzed for a second, cycling through several colours before settling into a clear, sky blue.

Severus gulped about half of it down. The process was similar to Polyjuice, but rather than effecting a physical change that left him indistinguishable from Jocelyn, the Plurijuce shifted his features into an approximation of hers without changing his gender, height or basic physique. As a result, he looked like he could have been her father...with blond hair, blue eyes and a much, much smaller nose.

He rose to his feet and held out his hand. "Let's go, child." With a grin, she obeyed.

At The Leaky, he bought her a decent breakfast and nagged her until she polished off the last mouthful. At Madam Malkin's, he bought her a variety of robes and insisted that she stock up on a full set of underwear as well. Jocelyn played up the Daddy's-little-girl act in each location, and no-one in their right mind would have suspected Severus Snape in the role of indulgent father.

Finally, backed by another fortifying mouthful of the Plurijuce potion, Severus decided it was time they snuck into the Ministry. They took the visitors' entrance, and Severus surreptitiously Confunded the guard who wanted to check their wands; it was almost too easy. Severus knew his way around reasonably well, and it took him only a few minutes to locate Runcorn's office. Luck remained on their side, as Runcorn was in and unoccupied.

"Can I help you?" he asked irritably, looking at his unknown blond visitors.

"Albert," responded Severus smoothly, closing the door and casting Muffliato for good measure. Once he stepped inside, he dropped Jocelyn's hand and pulled up his sleeve to reveal his Dark Mark. "Despite my appearance, I am Severus Snape."

"Severus!" the bearded man replied immediately, his tone much more welcoming. "Who is your young friend?"

"This is Jocelyn Smith; she requires a wand."

Runcorn's eyebrows shot together. "Jocelyn Smith?" he queried, looking dubious. "Isn't she . . . ?" Runcorn shifted his weight from one foot to another. "It's just that, er, I know the Smiths, and I don't remember ever having met . . . I'm under strict instructions as to who can have access to Ollivander's stock." Severus was so highly placed in Voldemort's establishment that Runcorn was loath to contradict him, yet the man was intelligent enough to think himself entitled to a touch of initiative rather than blindly following orders. He'd have to change that if he hoped to earn the Dark Mark.

Severus reached out and lifted a lock of Jocelyn's pale blonde hair, folding it back over his fingers and turning it against the light. "Such a distinctive colour," he mused. "You rarely see this shade of blonde, do you, Albert?"

Runcorn froze, the cogs of his mental faculties clearly ticking over.

Severus pushed a little harder. "And yet, I seem to recall . . . yes, having seen this particular colour quite recently. *Come on, Albert*, he urged silently. Lucius' rather undeserved reputation as a philanderer was so well-publicised that the inferences Severus was making did not require a miracle of deductive logic.

The penny dropped. "How is Lucius these days?" asked Runcorn smoothly.

Severus smirked. "Devoting his energies to our Lord's entertainment," he replied.

"How about that wand then?" asked Runcorn, addressing Jocelyn in an awkwardly avuncular tone.

Severus' smirk grew.

They made it out of the Ministry a mere half-an-hour later, one wand better off. Severus had intended to send Jocelyn off to Bulgaria at the first opportunity, but the success of his ploy with Runcorn had given him a better idea. If Severus played his cards right, he could keep Jocelyn safe right under the Dark Lord's eye. And Draco was the first person he needed to talk to. Taking Jocelyn's hand firmly in his own, he Apparated them both to Spinner's End.

A / N : Remember [to be intoned in your best public-radio voice], your review is an investment in this story's future.

Pursued

Chapter 6 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Six : Pursued

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

To LAxo and WriterMerrin, who once again graciously beta-read this for me, thank you.

Hermione couldn't understand why the Order had sent Harry back to the Dursleys'. Considering the scant few weeks of protection he had garnered from the arrangement, the risks of getting him out were astronomical. Not that she had raised this point in meetings...Mad-Eye Moody was still furious about her perceived disobedience. His magical eye followed her whenever he was in the house, glowering and spinning at her at every possible opportunity. As a consequence, Hermione kept her head down and her mouth shut.

So, here she was, standing in the Dursleys' kitchen, inhabiting Harry's body. It was weird to be a boy. When she'd stripped off her own clothes to put on something a better size, she'd found herself holding one arm awkwardly across her chest where her breasts should have been, although the Harry-who-was-really-Fleur seemed to have no such instinct. *She's probably never felt embarrassed by her appearance in her whole life* thought Hermione, a little bitterly.

The Harrys-who-were-really-the-twins were clowning around, and Hermione found her mind wandering. She tried to ignore the sick feeling caused by nerves: knowingly becoming a decoy was nerve-wracking. It made her wonder how Harry felt on a day-to-day basis. She also spared a moment to wonder what Hogwarts house Mundungus had been in: he certainly wasn't displaying the traditional dose of Gryffindor courage.

Finally, it was time to go, and Hermione was relieved to be partnered with Kingsley. He had continued to treat her with warmth and respect even after the fiasco of her meeting with the Order leaders.

"In front or behind?" he asked her as he thoughtfully placed her hands on the body of the Thestral. She would be fine once she got on, but since she still couldn't see the magical animals, she required some assistance for the actual mounting procedure.

"Whatever's easiest for you," she replied.

Kingsley considered the question for a few moments. "In front," he decided, lifting her easily...despite the extra height of Harry's body...and depositing her on the Thestral's back. She could feel the wing joints pressing against her legs. "After all," he added, "if we are attacked, you'll be safer that way." Kingsley swung up behind her immediately afterwards. His chest and thighs pressed against her back, and his arms reached around her, grasping handfuls of nothing that she assumed was the Thestral's mane. "Just between you and me, Miss Granger," he whispered in her ear, "I've no objection to an armful of Harry Potter."

The deep baritone hum of his whisper and the chuckle that followed sent a tingle down the outside of Hermione's neck and straight to her groin. The odd sensation of balls (that she hadn't realised that she had) tightening with arousal made her gasp, and as they shot skyward with a rush of energy, she was laughing. She squinted her eyes shut against the cold rush of the night air, weirdly disorientated by the lack of blustering curls that in normal circumstances would be pulling and blowing in such a wind.

Moments later, however, her hair and Kingsley's sexual proclivities were the last things on her mind. The seven odd couples of Harry's escape party had risen directly into the centre of a ring of Death Eaters, and the Death Eaters lost no time in seizing the advantage of surprise. The paths of their offensive spells lit the night with vivid flashes of green; from the ground, it must have looked like fireworks.

"Sweet Ganymede's butt crack," swore Kingsley softly, if fluently, into her ear as he twisted the Thestral towards the gap between the two nearest Death Eaters. Then he called out, as loudly as possible, "Hold on, Harry!"

Smart man, noted Hermione through her shock. She'd have been a poor decoy had those in earshot realised who she really was. In the sudden confusion, it was difficult to process what was happening; everywhere was a blaze of spells, the sounds of which echoed in her ears. Someone fell from their broom, though Hermione couldn't tell who it was, not even if it was one of the Order or one of the Death Eaters. She did know that he or she was dead. The proof of that materialised suddenly between her legs as the Thestral she was riding flickered once and then popped...horrifically, unmistakably...into view.

The sight of the dark hair of the Thestral's mane twisted through Kingsley's fingers brought the current situation into immediate focus. He had stunned the nearest Death Eater and blasted another sideways, making room for the wide wingspan of their mount to break through the circle into clearer space.

Both Kingsley and Hermione were right handed, and his left hand was tightly wound into the hair at the base of the Thestral's neck. Hermione wrapped her own left arm tightly around his and twisted her body across it, facing over his left shoulder towards the enemy. She cast the strongest shield spell she was capable of and was gratified to see several spells ricochet back towards their pursuers.

Four Death Eaters had peeled off from the group to follow after them. Though the Thestral was setting a punishing pace, Kingsley had it ducking and weaving in an attempt to avoid being hit.

"Well done, Her-arry," he cried, catching himself before he gave the game away. "I'll hold the shield and steer, you try and take out the opposition."

Hermione was too smart to shout her spells aloud and give her opponents the advantage of knowing what they were, but she was also concerned that one of her pursuers might be Snape undercover. It might not have mattered, since the moving targets proved difficult to hit from an unpredictably swerving flying horse, but Hermione limited herself to non-verbal disarming charms. Stunning someone at this height would mean certain death.

"Kingsley!" she shrieked suddenly, her anxiety causing Harry's voice to crack in a way that it hadn't for years. "It's Voldemort!"

She knew that she couldn't kill him, but somehow, the logic of that premise failed to halt the instinctive reaction of her body to his proximity, and Hermione cast the nastiest, darkest spell she knew. *Sectumsempra*, she thought viciously with her wand pointed directly at Voldemort. Terrifyingly, he laughed...a ghastly, high-pitched sound that bore no relation to humour...and waved the curse away with an almost nonchalant gesture.

Harry had described to Hermione the reptilian cast of Voldemort's face, but his description had failed to capture the sheer inhumanity of his curiously blank face and distorted features. *He thinks I'm Harry*, thought Hermione, panic a heavy weight in her stomach. It was all very well for Mad-Eye to have reassured them that the "Harrys" would be in less danger than the protectors...for the simple reason that Voldemort wanted to kill Harry himself...because now here she was looking like Harry and looking at Voldemort.

Kingsley chose that moment to send the Thestral into a dive.

"Hold on," he shouted over the violent rush of air. His words were barely audible.

Voldemort followed them downwards, his body streaking through the air with no visible means of support, effortlessly keeping pace with the Thestral's breakneck speed though they quickly outstripped the Death Eaters on brooms. Hermione fired curses at him as fast as she could string them together, but Voldemort continued to wave them aside. He was laughing as they flew, clearly convinced that he had Harry cornered. Then, as suddenly as he had appeared, he swerved away and was gone.

"He's gone," Hermione shouted to Kingsley, almost as panicked by Voldemort's unexpected disappearance as she had been by his arrival. Kingsley slowed their speed, swinging the Thestral around in a quick circle in order to scan their surroundings carefully. Voldemort was nowhere to be seen. Their moment of hesitation, however, had allowed the pursuing Death Eaters to draw back into spell range, and Hermione slammed up another shield charm.

Unmistakably, the nearest Death Eater shouted Avada Kedavra. Luckily, he missed, because Hermione was certain that her shield was insufficient to withstand the Unforgivables. It did provide her with the certainty that it wasn't Snape under that particular hood, however, and she took careful aim. She was exulted when her stunner hit the target and horrified when the body dropped away towards the ground far below, the broom still clenched between his or her thighs.

I just killed someone.

A second Death Eater peeled away to follow the falling body.

Or maybe not.

Her body kept breathing, blinking and firing curses, though her mind seemed fixated by the possibly dead, possibly rescued Death Eater she had stunned.

But you tried to kill someone, even if they survived.

She aimed at one of the two remaining Death Eaters, but her spells went wide.

"Any second now," called Kingsley just before the noise and the spells of the chase were abruptly cut off.

The Death Eaters were no longer visible, and in less than a minute, the Thestral banked sharply, coming to land gently on a small square of lawn. Warm light spilled over the garden, throwing a bed of roses into sharp relief. Kingsley swung himself down at once, then lifted Hermione from the Thestral onto the ground. Her knees buckled under her own weight.

"All right?" he asked, one hand on each of her shoulders, as he turned her face towards the house in order to look her over more closely in the bright light that shone through the copious glass of the kitchen windows. Hermione wrenched herself away and promptly lost what remained of Molly's delicious cooking into an adjacent flowerbed. Kingsley patted her on the back solicitously. "Come inside," he said, "I'll make you a cup of tea."

Hermione rocked back on her heels and wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. She vanished the small puddle of her vomit and rinsed out her mouth with an Aguamenti. After another thirty seconds or so spent composing herself, and desperately trying to put her worries over the others' safety out of her mind, Hermione rose and followed Kingsley up the ramp from the back garden and into the house.

The kitchen was unexpectedly modern: all stainless-steel surfaces and huge glass windows that fit incongruously with Hermione's experience of the wizarding world.

"Welcome to my house, Hermione," remarked Kingsley. "Well," he amended, "my sister's and my house, though she lives in the States. Have a seat."

He pointed towards a long, pale wood dining table that wouldn't have looked out of place in a glossy design magazine. Hermione had to assume that the rusty, bent coat hanger that sat on the otherwise empty tabletop like a centrepiece was the Portkey that would return them to the Burrow. She sat, startled by the news that Kingsley had a sister and still shell-shocked from her experience of the fight.

"We've got fifteen minutes," said Kingsley as he pulled two mugs from a cupboard under the counter.

Fifteen minutes didn't seem like long enough to make and drink a pot of tea, but Hermione hadn't factored in that Kingsley would conjure the water, boil it instantly, use a teabag and then apply a cooling charm so that the drink was immediately drinkable.

"Teabags?" she queried, momentarily distracted. She didn't think she'd ever seen teabags used by a wizard before.

"Sorry," Kingsley grimaced. "I got used to them at Downing Street. Not that the Prime Minister ever uses teabags mind you, but several of the other staff do. Drink up," he added, pushing one of the mugs into her hands.

No. Into Harry's hands. Hermione gulped a mouthful of the tea. "Kingsley," she asked, "why did he suddenly disappear?" She didn't need to specify who "he" was.

Kingsley sat down opposite her, with the Portkey between them. He looked grim. "I don't know. It's possible he realised you weren't Harry? Though I have no idea how." He paused, and if anything, his expression became fiercer. "Someone betrayed us."

"Do you think the others are okay?"

"We'll know soon enough," was the bleak reply.

Both Hermione and Kingsley looked at the Portkey before them. For a moment, Hermione thought she might be fainting, as Kingsley's bright, crisp kitchen blurred horrifically. Then she realised that the Polyjuice was wearing off. She pulled off Harry's glasses, and the room snapped back into focus. She ran a hand reassuringly along the long plait of her hair.

"I tried to kill someone," she said, her own voice sounding funny after her time as Harry.

The fierce edge of Kingsley's scowl faded. "They were trying to kill you, Hermione. You did nothing wrong. In fact, you performed remarkably well under pressure."

"Still . . ."

"Did you succeed?" Kingsley interrupted her.

"I stunned someone and they fell, but someone else flew after them."

"Pity," responded Kingsley with a shrug. "Levitation Charm, Summoning Charm, Cushioning Charm . . . there are myriad ways to save someone in that situation. We have to assume that you didn't succeed. I definitely Stunned one when we first burst into their circle. I hope he died; the only good Death Eater is a dead Death Eater."

Hermione stared into her tea. "I didn't know he could fly," she said suddenly. "I didn't know that was possible."

"Me neither," replied Kingsley. He glanced at his watch and drained his mug. "Listen, Hermione," he began, "I know that Harry has some task to do, with help from you and Ron. I'm not bothered by the fact that it has to be kept secret...even from me. That suggests exactly how important it is that Voldemort not know what you're up to, and now that we know there's a traitor in our midst, secrecy is more important than ever. I want you to know that we'll do our best to keep You-Know-Who's attention focussed elsewhere. But if there's anything that you need...anything that I can do for you or that the Order can do...I want you to contact us immediately. Just because knowledge of what you're doing is classified, doesn't mean that you're alone. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded without breaking eye contact. She found Kingsley's words as reassuring as he'd intended them to be.

"All you need to do is send a Patronus; cast the spell, then hold your wand to your throat and dictate the message. Now, finish your tea quickly and take hold of the Portkey. Let's see if we can find out what in Merlin's name went wrong."

Snape had sliced off George's ear. Snape had *sliced off* George's ear. Snape had sliced off George's *ear*. Hermione could not stop thinking about it, and it made her sick. Moody was dead, but that thought left her feeling empty and blank. Without a body, she couldn't help hoping that he would clomp his way through the door at some later stage; it didn't quite seem real. But George's ear...and the horrifically visible evidence of its absence...affected her terribly.

No matter how many times she turned the cool side of her pillow against her face and resolutely closed her eyes, sleep remained elusive *What was he thinking?* While Hermione had an elevated assessment of Snape's talents, not even she could imagine him capable of controlling Sectumsempra from a moving broom; he had come so close to killing George.

Unsurprisingly, George himself had taken his injury in his stride. Though the wound had proved resistant to all attempts to transfigure a replacement ear, Fred and George had been experimenting with a range of glamours. As a consequence, one or both of them could frequently be seen sporting various humanoid or animal ears. The Weasleys had, on the whole, found this amusing; it just made Hermione sick.

For the most part, she was taking out her irritation on Ron and Harry. *Not that they don't deserve it*, she thought grumpily. The best suggestion Ron had had towards the looming Horcrux search was that she steal the remainder of Mad-Eye's Polyjuice, and he'd left the details to her. As it turned out, Mad-Eye had been left with so little of the potion that she'd had to supplement his stock with her own supply to ensure that Harry could transform for the wedding, but at least she now had an alibi for where she'd come by what she already had.

Hermione was also astounded that Ron and Harry had swallowed her lie about the Horcrux books. Leaving aside the fact that the pitch of her voice had risen dramatically when she had proffered the completely fabricated explanation of how she'd obtained them, the lie itself was among the worst she had ever come up with. Firstly, Accio just didn't work like that, and if the boys had ever bothered to pay attention during the more theoretical parts of Flitwick's classes, they would have noticed that at once. Plus, they weren't exactly "Horcrux books"...they were just books that mentioned Horcruxes. *But there you go, Harry and Ron didn't even blink*

Thinking about the Horcrux books brought her right back to thinking about Snape. She rolled over, pushing him from her mind yet again.

In the dim light of the Burrow bedroom, her eyes found Ginny's sleeping form. The younger girl was trying hard to not take out her anger at being left behind on Hermione, although Ron had been less fortunate. Especially after he'd barged in on her birthday kiss with Harry.

That kiss.

They'd looked so . . . passionate. Hermione had felt guilty when Ron interrupted them, but also jealous. And, oddly, the memory of Ginny and Harry's kiss also reminded her of Snape.

Enough. Hermione gave sleep up as a lost cause and sat herself upright, propping her pillows against the headboard. Nonverbally, she conjured a screen to shield Ginny from her light and, for good measure, cast a Silencing Charm. Hermione pulled her beaded bag from under her pillow...these days, it was never far away...and extracted her Arithmancy notes. With the amount of work Molly had asked of them in conjunction with tomorrow's wedding, she'd had little time to devote to the calculations: all the more reason to make use of her sleepless night.

Forty-five minutes later, Hermione gave up on her equations, too. No matter how she ran the numbers, she couldn't get Godric's Hollow to figure as anything but an unmitigated disaster, though the numbers still showed Snape as working for the Order, which had to count for something. With a heavy sigh, she pushed the calculations back into the beaded bag and pulled out *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* instead. Perhaps if she read through "Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump" carefully, she'd work out Dumbledore's secret message.

Only an unyielding effort to block out all of Molly and Fleur's gossiping about the wedding had allowed Hermione to remain ignorant of Viktor's arrival, and the sight of him was a pleasant surprise. Ron's flare of jealousy was also rather pleasant...though it probably wasn't very admirable to have thought so...and it was fun to find Ron suddenly

ready to dance rather than sulk about at the edge of the dance floor as he had been wont to do at each and every Hogwarts' ball they'd ever attended.

Hermione had slipped inside for just a few moments to use the toilet when Viktor managed to catch her alone. He graced her with a wicked smile.

"I see that your friend Ronald has finally managed to notice vot vas right under his nose," he teased, leaning over her to whisper into her ear.

"Are you disappointed?" she asked, blushing.

"I was hopeful, of course, but I am happy for your sake." Gallantly, he caught at her hand and pressed a soft kiss to the inside of her wrist. It sent a shiver down her spine. "I would be a poor friend to resent your happiness. After all, I have not been . . ."

"Faithful?" she teased as he tailed off. "I would hope not!"

"Go on," he urged, gesturing indulgently towards the dance floor. "You'd better to be making much of his dancing. If you want me to make him jealous later, just let me know." Viktor punctuated his offer with a nonchalant shrug.

Hermione grinned, reassured that her friendship with Viktor was still as easy as ever. She caught hold of his hand and turned it, mirroring his gesture and pressing her lips against the soft skin of his wrist. "Thanks, I won't hesitate to ask if the need arises."

With the social niceties out of the way, she wanted to ask him about his work for the Order. "Hey," she added "about the Ministry..."

Viktor silenced her with one warning finger.

"Excuse me? Is this the queue for the toilet?"

"Ah, no," she replied, slightly flustered as she turned towards the new arrival. "I've just finished, go on in."

A rather heavy-set matronly woman, with a bosom large enough to balance a three course meal on, squeezed past Hermione and Viktor and navigated her way into the narrow bathroom.

Oops, she reflected. That was close.

"Later," mouthed Krum, giving her a gentle push back in the direction of the stairs. With a rueful grin, she continued on her way.

Not long afterwards, she passed Viktor in conversation with Arthur Weasley. Viktor was expounding on cultural differences between his own country and the UK.

". . . yes, in particular I am impressed with the mix of cultures that you have here," she heard. "There are a number of Muggle-born guests, no?"

As she walked away, Arthur...obligingly...began pointing them out.

Hermione managed to wring several more dances from Ron before her own enthusiasm waned. As she danced, she watched Krum talk to a number of different people; often he exchanged business cards. He worked the room smoothly, except, that is, until he came to talking with Mr Lovegood. She couldn't fault Viktor on that, really. The man was even more infuriating than his daughter could be.

Sending her red-headed paramour in search of refreshment, she grasped the opportunity to sink down into a seat beside Harry, sliding off one of her strappy heels and prodding gingerly at the beginnings of a blister.

"I simply can't dance anymore," she groaned. "Ron's gone looking to find more butterbeers. It's a bit odd, I've just seen Viktor storming away from Luna's father, it looked like they'd been arguing..." Hermione broke off as she noticed the odd look on Harry's face. "Harry," she asked with concern, "are you okay?"

Any answer he might have made was interrupted by a familiar silver streak of light. Hermione gasped as she recognised Kingsley's silver lynx Patronus and gripped reflexively at her beaded bag. She shoved her sore foot back into her shoe; this couldn't be anything other than bad news.

When it opened its mouth and spoke in Kingsley's sure, deep voice, her fears were confirmed: *The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming*

Both Harry and Hermione had their wands out before the Patronus had finished speaking, and Hermione cast around for some glimpse of Ron. She and Harry leapt away from the table, towards the bar where the drinks had been placed. She grabbed a handful of Harry's robes, but the movement of the crowd twisted her hold loose within seconds.

"Ron!" she shouted desperately. "Ron, where are you?"

Hooded, masked figures were popping into existence all around her...*at least that means there are no anti-Apparation wards in place*...she rationalised...while her cries for Ron became more frantic.

When Harry's hand seized hers, she sobbed with relief. Moments later, Ron shouldered himself between two panicked guests and grabbed her other arm. Hermione twisted her fingers into the nearest piece of Ron's robes and felt her beaded bag knock reassuringly against her wrist. She tightened her grip on both of her boys and then turned into nothingness. She Apparated to the first place she thought of: Tottenham Court Road.

Less than twenty minutes later, though, they'd been found once more.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" shrieked Hermione as the explosion of the table she'd hidden behind gave her a clear shot of the remaining Death Eater. He fell with a sickening, yet reassuring thud, face first into the debris of the fight.

The silence afterwards was heavy with danger. *How the hell did they find us?* Hermione was more frightened by the sudden appearance of Death Eaters in Muggle London than she had been by their mass arrival at the wedding. *How the hell did they find us?*

She crawled out from the wreckage of the luncheon booth, her frilly, flirty party dress in ruins. Her hands were trembling so violently that her first attempt to cut Ron free from his bindings sliced into his leg by mistake. *How the hell did they find us?* Her mind was a stuck record, and only Ron querying the necessity to kill their attackers brought her back into the conversation.

"We just need to wipe their memories," responded Harry, to Hermione's inordinate relief. "It's better like that, it'll throw them off the scent. If we killed them it'd be obvious we were here."

"You're the boss," quipped Ron, the sag of his shoulders and his suddenly more cheerful tone of voice signalling that he was every bit as relieved as Hermione. "But I've never done a Memory Charm."

"Nor have I," chimed in Hermione, "but I know the theory." She realised she'd fucked up the moment the words left her mouth. Harry didn't seem to have noticed, but Ron was giving her a strange, considering look.

As Harry turned away towards the window, Ron's fingers closed around her upper arm. "Who Obliviated your parents, then?" he hissed.

Hermione rolled her eyes aggressively. "Honestly, Ron," she hissed back. "I didn't Oblivate them, I modified their memories." She pulled her arm from his grip and turned her gaze towards the Death Eater sprawled at her feet. It was Dolohov, and convulsively, Hermione rubbed at the top of her scar. Luckily, Ron seemed convinced by her explanation and had stepped away. Taking a deep breath, Hermione engaged her Occlumetic shields and created an internal oasis of calm. It wouldn't last long, but it was enough to pull off the new spell without a hitch. "*Obliviate*," she exclaimed in a clear voice, swirling her wand with flawless technique.

From the suddenly dazed and dreamy look on Dolohov's face, the spell had worked.

"Brilliant!" Harry clapped her on the back with approval. "Take care of the other one and the waitress while Ron and I clear up."

"Clear up?" asked Ron, glancing around blankly. "Why?"

Hermione rolled her eyes for real this time and left the boys to it, feeling her way through the darkened café to the bench where the body of Thorfinn Rowle lay. With the magic at their disposal, it took a very short time to put everything back in order and for Hermione to Oblivate the memories of Rowle and the waitress, but Hermione felt breathless the entire time. If two Death Eaters had found them so quickly, then where were the others? What was to stop more turning up any second. Hermione felt like a butterfly, pinned out on a specimen board, horrifically exposed.

Harry and Ron clearly also felt on edge. Anxiety swirled through and around the conversation of where to go and the consideration of what had led the Death Eaters to them so quickly. They'd begun to bicker when Harry managed to stop the conversation cold.

"Grimmauld Place," he said firmly, raising his chin defiantly at the shocked looks on Hermione and Ron's faces.

Hermione recovered first. "Don't be silly, Harry, Snape can get in there!" *"Snape sliced off George's ear."* She should have considered more carefully the possibility that he was a traitor. *No. Yes. No.* Hermione was torn. Instinctively, she was convinced Snape was on their side, Arithmetically, she was convinced of it, too, but still, he had sliced off George's ear. Going to Grimmauld Place seemed foolish in the extreme. *If I was wrong about Snape . . .* The thought was too horrific to finish. *Maybe he cares less about hurting someone than about keeping his cover. After all, he managed to kill Dumbledore.* That thought, too, left her nauseous.

"Ron's dad said they've put up jinxes against him...and even if they haven't worked, so what? I swear, I'd like nothing better than to meet Snape!" Harry looked fierce.

"But..."

"Hermione, where else is there?" interrupted Harry. "It's the best chance we've got. Snape's only one Death Eater. If I've still got the Trace on me, we'll have whole crowds of them on us wherever else we go."

There were a million objections that sprang to mind, but Hermione bit them back. To be completely honest, there was nothing she wanted more than to meet Snape herself; he had a lot to answer for. Despite his latest behaviour, she couldn't help the conviction that he did have some explanation...she just wished she knew what it was.

A/N : I just wanted to shout with glee and let you all know that the moment above, marked with a double asterisk, **, was one of the odd inconsistencies of canon that propelled this story into being. *Why on earth hadn't Hermione used Obliviate before, I wondered, didn't she claim to have Obliviated her parents?*

The Headmaster of Hogwarts

Chapter 7 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Seven : The Headmaster of Hogwarts

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.

Please thank both of my completely brilliant betas...LAXo and WriterMerrin...they do much for this story that makes it better.

When his misplaced spell sliced into friendly flesh, the shock caused Severus to lose altitude. Moments later, he urged his broom higher once again, desperately keeping pace with Lupin and subtly deflecting several nasty hexes which threatened to topple the two Order members from their broom. Blood was everywhere; it covered the face of the Potter decoy.

Assuming it was a decoy.

Severus was desperately, cravenly afraid that he'd hit Hermione. He was terrified that she'd die.

The moment that Lupin and his unknown companion crossed the boundary and disappeared behind the resilient shield of multiple protective wards, Severus turned his broom towards the ground and fled, mindless of Voldemort's probable reaction. He knew of only one place where Death Eaters were unable to follow and Order members were unlikely to show up: Grimmauld Place, and as soon as his feet touched down, he Apparated to London.

The familiar square looked ominous in the infrequent light of the municipal streetlights. While his behaviour thus far qualified as reckless by almost any measure, Severus retained his instinct for self-preservation, pressing his back against an undernourished tree and scanning the area for any sign of movement. He saw no-one. Severus took the opportunity to indulge in several deep breaths, forcing away the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him.

Let Granger be alright, he thought, pressing his eyes shut for an instant. *Let it not have been her.*

Glancing around once again, Severus made his way up the stairs of number twelve and tapped his wand against the door. He heard the metallic crunch as the tumblers of

several locks clicked open and a chain withdrew, then the door swung open. He stepped quickly inside, pulling the door shut behind him and pausing for a moment on the threshold. In the flickering light of the Black house's gas lamps, everything looked as it always had. The row of decapitated house-elf heads were as cobwebbed as ever; the troll's leg umbrella stand stood to one side, sporting a long, purple umbrella that was highly reminiscent of Dumbledore's taste in accessories.

"*Homenum revelio*," he muttered. Nothing. Emboldened, he took a step forward.

"*Severus Snape?*"

Severus recognised the hatred in Mad-Eye's voice, and for a second he almost believed the scarred man present before the curse passed over him like a chill breeze and his tongue rolled back into his mouth. *A Tongue-Tying Curse*. The sensation was unpleasant, but also one he'd endured previously: it would be twenty-four hours before he could speak again, and if he was not mistaken, his ability to speak about the location of Grimmauld Place would be permanently affected. All in all, that might work in his favour.

He took another step forwards. As his foot struck the ground, a shadowy puddle at the far end of the hall flew upwards, resolving into a gaunt, grey figure. An awful echo of Albus Dumbledore swept towards him, wand held out menacingly. Though Severus couldn't speak, he slashed out with his wand. His magic was erratic, yet effective, and the spectre blew into a million shards, which gradually drifted down towards the floor. Severus swallowed heavily and forced himself to step forward and examine the remains of the spell, prodding it with his wand. *Fools*. Whomever had laid the jinx had keyed it not only to Dumbledore's form but also to his desire for revenge. Had they used anyone else as model, he would not have survived so easily.

Straightening up, he aimed a vicious kick at the troll's leg umbrella stand. The crash woke Mrs Black, who began to shriek...until she caught Severus' glare, whereupon she snapped her curtains closed and fell blessedly silent. Severus strode up the stairs and into the drawing room. It looked like the Order had left in a hurry; most of the contents remained untouched. He quickly located a bottle of Firewhisky and drank a generous mouthful straight from the bottle. He almost choked as it hit the back of his throat, but quickly caught on to the trick of swallowing with the shrunken stub of his tongue. He decided to carry the bottle with him.

Let Granger be alright. The sick dread that had motivated his flight remained unabated. For a moment, he was tempted to hurl the Firewhisky bottle he was holding at the wall, but a strong desire for the oblivion it promised held him back. Instead, he swept a row of dusty ornaments from the mantle piece; they made a satisfying crash as they broke against the hearth. Severus took another swig of burning alcohol as he stalked towards the door. He could search the whole house: the memories would satisfactorily explain his time away to Voldemort, and the rough energy thus expended might soothe his guilty conscience and frazzled nerves.

Let Granger be alright, his heart recited once again. Severus did his best to push the thought away, but it seemed to have moulded itself to his heartbeat, echoing on through his body despite his efforts to the contrary.

Several floors up, a swath of destruction trailing in his wake, Severus entered the room that he remembered had been Granger's and the Weasley girl's. The twin beds were neatly made, the few personal items that remained were lined up precisely on the shelves.

The movement of a wizarding photo caught his attention, and he picked up the frame. Potter, Weasley and Granger stood at the side of the Hogwarts' lake, their arms thrown around each other in the awkwardly excessive intimacy typical of photos, intermittently smiling and waving at the camera.

Concentrating carefully, he balanced his whisky bottle on the mantle piece. He was drunk enough that he needed to concentrate, not so drunk that he was in real danger of knocking it over. He took a few minutes to extricate the photo from the frame. With his tongue shrivelled back into his mouth, even his nonverbal magic was less controlled than he liked, and he didn't want to damage the object of his attentions. Once the photo was safely out, he gave Potter a rather vicious poke with his index finger, causing the boy to scowl and shake his fist. Severus ignored him, turning his attention to Granger, and sank down onto the nearest bed.

Let Granger be alright. In his mind's eye, he saw her with her face slashed open, blood streaming down her neck. *Let Granger be alright*. He saw her dead body stretched out in the Weasleys' living room. He saw her as an adult, many years from now, turning towards him. The side of her head was hideously scarred, and the gaze she turned on him was full of reproach. *Let Granger be alright*.

Photographic Potter and his sidekick had noticed the attention Severus was paying Granger, and they'd each slung a protective arm around her, glaring at their Potions professor for all they were worth. Sniffing back an unbidden tear, Severus scowled back at them, giving Potter another poke for good measure. Watching the image duck out of reach and then leap back towards Granger, Severus was struck by an idea. He balanced the photo on his leg and used all eight of his fingertips to shepherd Potter and Weasley off to one side, leaving Granger on the other. Her fifteen-year-old self looked up at him with some apprehension, her chin raised in a gesture that was achingly familiar. Then, holding Potter and Weasley at bay with the edge of his left hand, he tore the photo cleanly down the middle and dropped the half with the two boys onto the floor. He ran the tip of one finger lightly over Granger's frizzy hair. Tentatively, the girl in the picture smiled at him; his heart clenched painfully. *Please, please, please, let Granger be alright*.

Severus was going to take the photo with him. He looked up, scanning the neat room with a new purpose. He had to cover his tracks. He had to search the whole house. There must be no reason for anyone to suspect that he had found something important in this room. Tucking the photograph tenderly into an inside pocket for safekeeping, he pulled the sheets and covers roughly from the two beds. He threw the contents of the shelves onto the floor. For good measure, he picked up the handful of abandoned textbooks...Ginevra Weasley's he noted; Granger probably kept all of hers closer to hand...and shook them out violently. Then he scooped up his bottle of whisky and continued upstairs.

By the time he reached the top floor, his Dark Mark was hurting. Not with the agonising pain of years past, but with a dull ache that communicated Voldemort's desire to see him at his earliest convenience while indicating that Severus had retained his position among the favoured. There wasn't much point going until he'd regained his power of speech, so Severus ignored it, drinking more Firewhisky in an attempt to numb his senses even further.

Regulus' room brought back a host of maudlin memories: he'd been such a sweet, good-hearted boy, much better behaved than his troublemaking brother. His nonchalant Black-family good looks and submissive behaviour had made him a firm favourite of the Dark Lord, who, in his earlier, much more humanoid and handsome incarnation, had sucked in Regulus...hook, line and sinker. As Severus understood it, Regulus had killed himself at the distressing realisation that there was more to being a Death Eater than Pureblood rhetoric and wild sadomasochistic sex parties.

Indeed, this time round there hadn't been anything of the sort. Severus was hugely relieved that Voldemort's sex drive had perished along with his original human form.

By this point, Severus was unequivocally drunk. The cocky, Gryffindor bravado of Sirius' room stirred a deep-seated store of adolescent resentment, and he set at the contents with wild abandon. Only the shock of recognising Lily's handwriting stilled his rage. Sinking to his knees, Severus collected the pages of the letter and the accompanying photo with trembling fingers. The letter was addressed to Black, and Severus read it from start to finish, though the words themselves meant almost nothing to him. Even after so many years, the familiar strokes of her handwriting brought back his guilt and the pain of their fractured relationship with almost frightening intensity.

She wrote this from the safe house, thought Severus, *only months before she died*. Tears ran down his face, dripping off the end of his long nose. *I wish I'd managed to save you, Lily*, he mourned as he turned to the photo. He stroked one finger tip against her hair as he had with Granger's picture. *Please, please, please let Granger be alright*. In the first war, he'd as good as killed the woman he had loved; in this one, he might just have been the one to commit the deed itself.

What a way to have betrayed her parents' trust.

Severus threw the first page of the letter onto the floor. He had no desire to hold onto the comments about Potter's precocious broomstick skills, and he couldn't bear to re-read the mention of Wormtail knowing that the vermin had gone on to betray her, but Lily's signature and her loving words of farewell were another matter; those he would keep. Tearing the photo in half, he let the infant Harry flutter to the floor. Then he tucked Lily and the second page of her letter in beside Granger. *Let Granger be alright. Let her be alright, and this time...I swear it...I will make sure she survives this war. If it's the last thing I do.*

Severus rubbed at his eyes with his sleeve and glanced around him. The room was a disaster. He picked up the very-nearly-empty bottle of Firewhisky and shakily got to his feet. Moving with the careful focus of the drunk, he navigated downstairs to the drawing room, where he stretched out on the couch to sleep it off. Before his eyes closed, he pulled out the two half photographs from his pocket and examined them, then tucked them safely back away. He fell asleep with one hand pressed against his heart, the pocket and its contents sandwiched between his palm and his chest.

By the time Severus regained the use of his tongue, the worst of his hangover had passed, although his entire arm ached from the pain of his Dark Mark and he still felt like arse. Grimacing, he concealed himself among the sparse foliage of the square at Grimmauld Place and pressed his wand on the throbbing tattoo. He Disapparated, unsurprised to find himself outside the gates of Malfoy Manor.

He ran into Lucius on the walk up through the grounds. His eyes stood out prominently, the whites showing more than usual, and it caught at Severus' attention.

"Severus," exclaimed Lucius. His name came out in a rush, as if Lucius had been holding his breath.

"Lucius," he replied.

Lucius stepped close and took hold of Severus' upper arm. The pressure of his hand magnified the pain in the arm, and Severus flinched, attempting to pull away. Lucius seemed not to notice and stepped closer still.

"He broke my wand," he whispered urgently.

Severus froze, the pain momentarily eclipsed by surprise. "Who? The Dark Lord?"

"No. Potter."

"How?" Severus was genuinely shocked.

"He . . . I . . . truly, I don't know." Lucius paused, his heartbreak evident. "The Dark Lord was not pleased."

Severus drew in a sharp breath through his nose, his nostrils flaring. "Ollivander?"

"He'll live, but only barely." Lucius stared off over Severus' shoulder for a long second before continuing. "The Dark Lord made Draco do it."

Severus pulled a small felt roll from one of the side pockets of his robes and extricated several medicinal phials. The movement reawakened the pain in his arm, and he momentarily pressed his eyelids shut. He thrust the bottles into Lucius' chest. "Healing potions," he explained. "With you wandless, you've an unassailable incentive to keep Ollivander alive."

Lucius grasped the proffered bounty like a drowning man clutches a lifebuoy. He nodded vigorously.

"We also need to talk to Runcorn...it's possible we might be able to get you a replacement." Severus clapped Lucius on the arm reassuringly. "Slytherins look out for their own," he commented. "Once school goes back, Draco will have some measure of distance."

Lucius nodded again, and Severus turned to go.

"Thank you," called Lucius belatedly.

Severus waved him away. *With so few friends*, he mused as he approached the steps of the manor, *protecting those I have has become something of a priority*

When Severus entered the drawing room where the Dark Lord sat, the pain in his arm finally eased. It was with a sigh of relief that he dropped to one knee in greeting.

"Severusss!" exclaimed Voldemort. "Where have you been?"

"Once the Potter clone I was pursuing crossed the security wards into the safe house, my Lord, I went immediately to the Order headquarters in the hope that I would find someone or some information as to where the irritating boy was headed." Severus looked up into Voldemort's eyes, carefully underscoring the truth of his account. "Unfortunately, the building had been jinxed, and I was struck by a Tongue-Tying Curse." Severus punctuated his story with an eloquent shrug. "I utilised the time I spent otherwise incapacitated to search the premises thoroughly, although I uncovered nothing of interest to your cause."

Voldemort looked mollified. "Sit, Severus," he commanded, waving at an adjacent chair. "You did well. Although now, even once we kill the Secret Keeper you won't be able to reveal the location." He paused, looking pensive. "Not to matter. It's a shame Dumbledore wasn't the Secret Keeper."

"Had Dumbledore been the Keeper," replied Severus in a neutral tone, "I would have been able to tell you the location as soon as I'd killed him."

"I know, I know," sighed Voldemort. "I am very happy with you, Severus," he added in a different tone. "You alone managed to injure one of the decoy Potters. None of my other worthless Death Eaters were capable enough to rise to the task."

This was news to Severus and he allowed himself to look surprised, raising one eyebrow. "Surely, you, my Lord . . . ?" He let the question linger.

"Oh, yes. I killed Moody, and Rastaban and Bellatrix enjoyed his remains. But the others all escaped...Potter included."

Mad-Eye, dead. Please, please, please let Granger be alright

And if she wasn't, it would be entirely his fault.

"Lucius continues to irritate me," remarked Voldemort, leaning forwards and lifting a silver dish cover from a decorative side table as he spoke. Lying on the platter beneath was a white rabbit, completely dead, though still intact. He lifted the dead animal and placed it on his lap. "Bellatrix tells me he adopted a Mudblood bastard."

From the hallway came the slithering sounds of Nagini's approach. Her long body undulated through the narrow gap where the door was ajar and approached Voldemort's chair like an eager dog.

"It's true; I filed the paperwork myself." Severus tried not to wince as Voldemort tore the rabbit's body in two with his bare hands. Blood spurted out over the Dark Lord's lap and onto the floor. Nagini's forked tongue flickered out and dipped into the viscous red liquid. "He would have been the first to kill her had she turned out to be a Muggle. But it seems that the Malfoy code of honour includes legitimising the family's claim to the child if the alternative is to send her to Azkaban."

Voldemort held out a bloodied morsel of meat, crooning to his familiar as she opened her mouth wide, almost horizontal in fact, and waited for the treat to be lowered into the gaping cavity.

"The child is clever, a half-blood, a Slytherin." Severus didn't want to push his luck.

"Hmm." Voldemort hummed an acknowledgement of Severus' words as he fed the other half of the rabbit to Nagini and rubbed the less-scaly flaps of skin under her chin. "Do you think she's really his?"

"Her hair is a particularly distinctive shade of blonde, my Lord."

Voldemort smiled, a nasty grimace that pulled his lips back from his teeth. The room stunk of the slightly fetid smell of the mutilated rabbit. "Do you think he cares for her, Severus?" he hissed.

Severus shrugged. "I don't think he's ever met her."

"Hmm." Voldemort sounded disappointed.

"To be honest, my Lord. I think her continued presence in his life will be punishment enough. Admitting his predilection for Muggle women to Bellatrix and Narcissa can't have been pleasant. And that way the girl will finish her education."

"True."

Nagini, her cylindrical shape distorted by the two large lumps of rabbit she'd consumed, slithered up an onto Voldemort's lap, winding herself into a tight knot of curled-up snake. The Dark Lord patted her head fondly.

"Once again, your advice is sound, Severus. She will be much more useful to me as an adult."

Severus curled his lips up at both sides and tried to relax back into his chair. He forced himself not to think about Draco and Jocelyn, who, once again, were spending the day at Spinner's End. He tried not to think about Granger and the gaping wound that might now be draining her of her life's blood.

The first time Severus walked into the headmaster's office as the designated headmaster, the portraits applauded. He froze with surprise. His initial fear of an attack faded quickly and was replaced with a hard, tight concern that he was being mocked. Albus Dumbledore was on his feet, beaming with pride; Phineas Nigellus Black was practically capering with glee and several times shouted, "Slytherin!" over the noise.

"Enough," said Severus, raising one hand. The portraits fell silent at once. "Thank you," he added politely, a slight uncertainty undercutting his words. Abruptly, he strode towards the desk, standing behind it and running one hand across the blotter.

"I am very proud of you, Severus," said Albus quietly from behind him. "You have played your part admirably."

For a long moment, Severus said nothing. Then he raised his head. "Phineas," he said, his voice back under his rigid control, "there is something you can do for me."

Phineas sat forward on the edge of his chair, his eagerness was palpable. "Anything!" he exclaimed.

"I want you to keep an eye on Grimmauld Place. Let me know if anyone turns up there and what they want."

"The brats are there right now," replied Phineas. "Making a noise and complaining about the mess you left it in."

At his words, Severus gripped the surface of the desk, his knuckles gleaming white. "Am I to understand, Phineas, that you have seen Miss Granger? And Potter and Weasley?"

"That's right," Phineas confirmed, pursing his lips as if the presence of the trio in his family home pained him.

"How do they look?" asked Severus urgently. "Their faces? Their heads?"

Phineas looked at him askance, his eyebrows pulled together with surprise. "They look no better groomed than they have on previous occasions," he replied. "What are you getting at, Severus?"

"It was George," interpolated Dumbledore gently. Severus span towards him. "He lost an ear, but he's otherwise fine."

Severus' shoulders slumped forward with relief, and he ran one hand roughly down his face. "It was an accident," he offered weakly *She's alright*. The rush of relief threatened to undo him, and his throat tightened with unshed tears.

"You did well, Severus," replied Dumbledore. "You maintained your cover."

It took a moment for Severus to recover himself, but eventually he stood upright once more, his face familiarly impassive. He turned back towards Phineas. "Keep careful tabs on Miss Granger, Phineas," he instructed. "Anything you can glean may prove vitally important."

Phineas was delighted to comply.

"As for the rest of you," continued Severus, "I will need you to communicate on my behalf with the other portraits of the castle. It is imperative that I know as much as possible about the movements of the Carrows and of any students likely to endanger themselves. At the same time, the portraits must not know of my interest...there are far too many of them who cannot be trusted to keep my participation secret."

Privately, Severus was dreading the first staff meeting. Thus far, he had managed to avoid all of his previous colleagues, but with school starting back tomorrow, that was no longer an option.

Severus threw the staffroom door open with a satisfying bang. The Carrows sat to one side, isolated from the others, but his eyes were drawn unerringly to Minerva. She stood to her full height, with her arms crossed over her chest. Her face blazed with anger, and her lips were pressed thin with disapproval. She looked magnificent. Hooch stood just behind and to the side of her, and like Minerva, her arms were crossed. Poppy sat not far away; her face was grim.

Severus had expected the sight of his friends to cut like a knife. It did. He hadn't expected to feel cheered by their defiance. In a room of wary faces, where body language screamed awkward deference and fear, Minerva's rage burned like a beacon. He could do this: arguing with Minerva was one of his favourite pastimes, and with their ruthless interaction as focal point, he could keep the rest of the staff distracted.

"Minerva," he drawled, "what a pleasure to see you."

Minerva scowled. "It would be my pleasure to see you in Azkaban, Snape," she replied.

"And yet that seems so unlikely; how disappointing!" Snape smirked. His gaze swept around the room, noting how few of his colleagues met his eye. "I see that you've taken the opportunity to become friendly with the newest members of our teaching staff: Alecto and Amycus Carrow, who will be teaching Muggle Studies and Defence Against the Dark Arts."

The Carrows waved cheerfully, and Amycus giggled.

"I don't think much of your choice of staff, Snape," spat Minerva. "Given their marks at school, I would count the Carrows as severely under qualified."

"Oy! Shut it!" snarled Amycus, rising out of his chair.

Severus gestured to Amycus to be still with a leisurely upraised hand. "Why, Minerva," he needed, "it's not like you to be so squeamish about the teaching staff...after all," he paused for effect, "there has been a Death Eater teaching here for the last sixteen years."

Hooch gripped Minerva's upper arm warningly, although the flying mistress seemed to restrain herself only barely. Severus smirked and turned away, beginning the staff meeting in earnest. He had little desire to stretch the proceedings out and managed to summarize the changes to the syllabus far more quickly than Dumbledore would have. As he drew to a close, he graced his audience with a vicious smile. "If you have any concerns or questions, you shouldn't hesitate to come and talk with me. You will find me in the headmaster's office; my door is always open."

He knew such an outrageous claim would wring some commentary from Minerva, and he was not to be disappointed.

"Nonsense," she snorted.

"I beg your pardon?" he inquired, a model of urbanity.

"The office wouldn't open for Umbridge, Snape, and it won't open for you." Minerva had a vindictive look in her eye.

"Would you like to put that claim to the test?" he inquired, waving towards the staff room door with the entirety of his left arm.

"Absolutely!" she replied, her eyes snapping.

Snape sketched a mocking bow as she swept past him towards the door. Hooch and Poppy went with her, and after exchanging several uncertain looks, the rest of the staff followed. Severus waved them through the doorway and stalked along behind. Flitwick gave him an apprehensive glance over his shoulder, his short legs hurrying to keep well ahead.

The group clustered awkwardly in the hallway in front of the headmaster's gargoyle. Most of the assembled teachers tried to give Severus and the Carrows a wide berth yet simultaneously give the impression that they weren't trying to do so. Minerva stood by the statue, her arms still crossed, with Hooch and Poppy flanking her like security guards.

Severus shouldered his way to the front. "Stand aside for the rightful headmaster of Hogwarts," he instructed the gargoyle, who leapt aside obligingly. He turned and raised an eyebrow at Minerva, who, for the first time, looked defeated. *Come on, Minerva*, he urged silently, *fight back*. Severus rubbed his chin in mock contemplation. "I should set a new password," he mused aloud, "something easy . . . so that everyone will remember. Perhaps . . . ah, yes: Dumbledore."

Minerva looked as if he'd physically slapped her. He heard Alecto and Amycus laughing almost hysterically.

"You arsehole," muttered Hooch, rocking back on her heels slightly.

Severus saw what was coming with just enough time to twist his head slightly, so that Hooch's fist slammed into his cheekbone and the side of his eye socket, rather than his nose.

"No!" screamed Poppy, leaping forwards and throwing her arms around Hooch, wrestling her back a pace, away from Snape.

Severus had his wand out in an instant, but he trained it at the Carrows, not at Hooch. "Put it away," he hissed at them. Reluctantly, they tucked away their own wands, though they both scowled. "I can fight my own battles," he warned. Then he turned towards Hooch. She still had one fist up, but she was no longer struggling against Poppy, and the knuckles of the hand with which she'd hit him were red and swollen. Minerva had a restraining hand on one shoulder. All three women looked flushed and frazzled, their breathing was slightly laboured.

Severus touched his cheek gently with the fingertips of his left hand. His eye was already swollen to a slit, but he was pretty sure nothing was broken. He let his gaze trail over Hooch's body, from head to toe. "I hit a man, once," he remarked.

Poppy flinched, Minerva gasped, Hooch remained impassive. Severus was pretty sure that all of those present knew of the event to which he referred. Poppy, of course, had testified at his manslaughter trial. Poppy and Hooch exchanged a long look without speaking. Eventually, Hooch acquiesced to the other woman, lowering her head slightly and relaxing her fisted hand. Poppy, in turn, let go of her lover and pulled out her wand.

"Severus," she said, her mouth twisting slightly as his name passed her lips, "let me heal that."

Severus sneered at her. "I don't need your help, Poppy."

The matron stiffened. "Fine," she replied and turned towards Hooch, moving her wand towards the other woman's battered knuckles.

Hooch twitched her hand away. "No thanks, Poppy," she stated, her eyes on Severus. "I'd rather hold onto the reminder of that rather satisfying moment."

"My, my," he drawled, "what an admirably Muggle sentiment."

Hooch looked coolly back. "I'm no more or less Muggle than you are, Snape."

Snape merely smiled, which seemed to unnerve the audience of other staff members even more successfully than a sarcastic comment might have. "I look forward to your company at dinner," he commented in his best impression of Malfoy manners. "Don't forget, my door is always open."

At that, he turned and swept away. Like Hooch, he chose not to heal his injuries, though he did conjure an icepack once he was up the staircase and out of sight. Over the following week, the visible bruises had the useful effect of distracting and unsettling the other members of the staff, as well as the students, and the ache was an unexpected balm to his guilty, guilty conscience.

"Severus!" shouted Phineas in excitement as he bounded into his Hogwarts portrait.

Severus looked up from a pile of paperwork and peered at Phineas through the swollen slit of his black eye.

"She put my portrait into her handbag!"

A rush of triumph flushed through his body, and Severus flopped back into his chair for a moment and stared up at the ceiling *Good work, Granger*.

"Brilliant, Phineas," he replied. "Keep up the good work. She may try and send a message; if so, make sure you're around to receive it."

"Severus?" inquired Dumbledore pointedly, the twinkly old man completely absent. "What exactly does Miss Granger know about you?"

Severus sighed. He'd been avoiding this question. "She knows only what she figured out for herself."

"You told her," stated Dumbledore flatly. "I thought we'd agreed that you wouldn't."

Severus span in his chair and stared at his irritating taskmaster. "I told her nothing of the sort: what she knows she worked out for herself. Miss Granger is far from stupid."

"What did you tell her, then?" persisted Dumbledore. "You must have told her something."

Severus let out a long breath through his nose. "I told her," he acknowledged finally, "how to destroy Horcruxes." He looked at Dumbledore challengingly. The old man was shocked into silence by his response, and with a wry grimace, Severus turned back to the unending paperwork of the new academic year.

The Muggle-born Registration Commission

Chapter 8 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Eight : The Muggle-born Registration Commission

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

As always, I want to go down on bended knee and thank my fabulous betas, LAxo and WriterMerrin, who devote their precious time and energy to point out my rather idiotic mistakes.

That evening, Hermione went to bed even later than the boys did, though they had all stayed up going over the plans for the morrow. Once Harry and Ron crashed, she pulled out her Arithmancy calculations and ran them through again. The odds were surprisingly good that the three of them were going to make it into the Ministry, and Hermione turned next to the set of equations dealing with Godric's Hollow. The probabilities there, however, remained as dismal as ever.

A further twenty minutes spent frowning over the knowledge distribution curve left her even more frustrated. No matter how she ran the numbers, her calculations told her that Harry alone had to figure out solutions to the various puzzles and problems that lay in their future. Hermione found herself unable to suppress a surge of jealousy. It was *her* job to solve problems. It was Harry's job to rush in to danger without a firm plan, and it was Ron's job to follow along and secure an escape route...the Chamber of Secrets provided the perfect exemplar. Hermione let out a heavy sigh of annoyance. Apparently now Harry was to be both hero and brain; she was merely to keep him alive.

Trying unsuccessfully not to take it personally, Hermione pushed her Arithmancy equations back into her beaded bag. Before zipping the bag closed, she pulled out the half photo of Harry and Ron that she'd found in her room. Not for the first time, she wondered where the other half was: it was torn so cleanly down the middle. The most logical possibility swirled around inside her. She wanted it to be true so badly that she skittered away from actually voicing it to herself, unable to bear the disappointment if she was later proved wrong. She'd looked long and hard for the other piece, but not even an Accio aimed at the bags of rubbish that she and Kreacher had amassed in the cleanup had turned it up. *Don't be an idiot, Granger*, she berated herself, stuffing the torn photograph back into her bag. *There's no reason for Snape to want a photo of you.*

In the month since escaping from Death Eaters at Bill and Fleur's wedding, Hermione's opinion of her grumpy, prickly, brilliant, yet inscrutable ex-Professor had swung from doubt to faith and back again more times than she wanted to acknowledge. Yet eventually, the persistent presence of Death Eaters in the square outside Grimmauld Place, and their evident inability to see the building or get inside, had solidified her thoughts: she had to trust him. Besides, no matter how many logical reasons she marshalled against him, deep down she knew that the swirl of doubts and fears was indicative of the situation she and her boys were in, not him, not really. So, she'd doubted him; so what? She still trusted him more than Minerva McGonagall or Kingsley Shacklebolt. If Snape told her to leap, she'd jump first and ask questions later. Right now, she doubted everyone, even herself. And she would until Voldemort was dead and everything back to normal.

God, what she wouldn't give to be worrying about NEWTs right now instead of their crazy plan to break into the Ministry of Magic and steal a Horcrux from a highly placed and dangerous official!

Before she closed her beaded bag, a flicker of movement in its depths caught her attention. Hermione froze, her ears straining for any sound of the boys in the old house. Acting on an impulse that she found impossible to resist, she cast a silencing charm on the room and magically locked the door. Then she pulled Phineas' portrait from her bag and propped it up on the chair beside her.

"Phineas?" she called softly. "Phineas Nigellus? Are you there?"

"Why, if it isn't Miss Granger herself," he replied snidely, slipping into the frame and leaning nonchalantly against one edge. "A significant number of people are looking for you, you know." His eyes flickered around the room, noting the details of where they were. "Where's Mr Potter?"

"He's not here," replied Hermione firmly. "It's just me."

"All alone?" he mocked.

"Yes," she responded tartly, crossing her arms.

"Very well, then, I have a message for you."

"From Professor Snape?" Hermione felt breathless.

"From Headmaster Snape," snapped Phineas reprovingly. Hermione gestured for him to hurry up and he glared at her. "Be very careful not to say the Dark Lord's name."

Hermione looked at the portrait blankly for a moment. "What?" she asked. "But, why? Dumbledore always said..."

"Why, why, why?" echoed Phineas, interrupting her in an outraged tone. "The problem with adolescents is that they have no respect. You've been given an important piece of information. Use it. You don't need to know why!"

Hermione bit back several retorts.

"Do you have a message for Headmaster Snape?" demanded Phineas.

"I..." Hermione broke off as she thought of all the things she wanted to say to Snape and then imagined transmitting them through the irritable and rude picture of Phineas Nigellus Black. "No," she replied finally, "nothing."

"Fine," snapped Phineas and swept from the frame, leaving behind nothing but a bare, muddy backdrop.

Hermione felt sadly bereft and sat staring at the empty square of canvas for several minutes before stuffing it back into her bag and cancelling the charms she'd set up. She threaded one wrist through the strap of the beaded bag and set off upstairs to the room she once shared with Ginny and now shared with Ron.

Harry, for his part, had decided to sleep up in Sirius' old bedroom. Ever since he'd had to acknowledge that he continued to share mental space with Voldemort, Harry had been prickly and a little standoffish, although still, Hermione found the decision to sleep alone difficult to understand. The creaky, creepy old house got on her nerves.

Eventually, after several hours of prevaricating and an embarrassing first evening, Hermione and Ron had settled into the twin beds of what had been the girls' room, finding that the comfort of company far outweighed the awkwardness of navigating each other's privacy. As a consequence, after brushing her teeth and staring at the ceiling for awhile thinking about Snape, it was to the soft sound of Ron's snores that Hermione finally fell asleep. At least the proposed Ministry break-in was far from her mind.

Hermione's calculations had not been wrong, and she, Ron and Harry had made it through the various defences of the Ministry of Magic without major incident. Getting out alive, however, was beginning to look more precarious. Hermione had not anticipated that Ron...thoroughly disguised as Reg Cattermole...would be forced to repair broken Ministry weather charms, let alone jeopardising the life of an innocent woman in the process. Thus, when the lift doors clanked open on level one, Hermione was still focused on Ron and his plight, one floor above. The sight of Umbridge took her completely by surprise.

"Ah, Mafalda!" exclaimed Umbridge in her distinctively girlish voice. "Travers sent you, did he?"

Realising belatedly that she was, to all intents and purposes, Mafalda Hopkirk, Hermione managed to stammer a reply. "Y-yes." She nodded for good measure.

"Good, you'll do perfectly well." Umbridge turned and spoke to the man beside her. Hermione recognised him from the *Daily Prophet* as Pius Thicknesse, the new Minister for Magic. "That's that problem solved, Minister, if Mafalda can be spared for record-keeping we shall be able to start straightaway. Ten people today," she declared, assuming a sanctimonious expression, "and one of them the wife of a Ministry employee! Tut, tut . . . even here, in the heart of the Ministry!"

Hermione was now panicking not only about Ron, who was stuck doing Reg Cattermole's job (undoubtedly quite badly), and about Reg's as-yet-unnamed wife who was about to be dragged before the Commission, but also about the possibility of being caught out by Umbridge herself and the now-likely prospect that she would be separated from Harry. At the same time, she wondered if there were really so few Muggle-borns that it was unusual for a Ministry employee to be married to one and hoped Harry would realise his opportunity to search Umbridge's office unimpeded. She glanced upward as Umbridge and two unfamiliar wizards stepped into the lift and caught Harry's eye. She tried to communicate everything she was thinking in a single gaze, but felt pretty sure that Harry remained completely unaware of the finer details of her thought processes.

"We'll go straight down, Mafalda," added Umbridge, drawing Hermione's attention from Harry. "You'll find everything you need in the courtroom." Umbridge gave Harry an odd look. "Good morning, Albert," she simpered, "aren't you getting out?"

"Yes, of course," replied Harry in Runcorn's much deeper tones.

As he stepped out, the golden grilles of the lift door slammed shut behind him. Hermione caught a last glimpse of his face, blank with shock, as she sank from view.

Hermione hadn't been into the depths of the Ministry since the night the DA had been ambushed in the Hall of Prophecy. Exiting the lift on the lowest level, that night came back in a rush.

The wizards who had taken the lift down with Umbridge and Hermione headed straight for the sinister black doorway of the Department of Mysteries. Thankfully, Umbridge turned left, rather than right, taking a flight of stairs down to an even lower level. The relief Hermione felt at having left the horrifically familiar scenery of the previous floor behind faded quickly. The further down the staircase she went, the greater her feelings of despair and misery grew.

Only when Umbridge shouted, "*Expecto patronum!*" did Hermione realise there were Dementors in the hallway below. The unnatural aspects of Hermione's sense of horror faded immediately, although the sight that met her eyes was disturbing enough on its own merits. The hall was crowded with the looming forms of the hooded Dementors. The unfortunate Muggle-borns called in to face Umbridge's inquisition were corralled into several clusters, and they sat huddled on uncomfortable-looking wooden benches. Their despair was palpable. Umbridge was carving a path through the crowd, and Hermione took care to stick close to the horrid woman so as not to lose the benefit of her Patronus.

I really don't want to know what makes Umbridge happy enough to cast a Patronus thought Hermione, staring at the fluffy silver cat as it sashayed through the crowded corridor. It took tiny little steps, its rear end wobbling much the same way as Umbridge's did. They also shared the same squashed, smug-looking expression. *I'd like to see Crookshanks take you on*, thought Hermione savagely. As the Patronus passed the captive Muggle-borns, they raised their faces, turning towards it with their eyes like sunflowers following the sun.

Hermione throbbed with a cold, furious anger. Hearing about the Muggle-born Registration Committee from Lupin and reading about it in the *Daily Prophet* had been upsetting, but also unimaginably distant. Seeing it in action, however, filled her with a rage unlike anything she had previously experienced. These were wizards and witches like her, and their wands had been confiscated. They risked a term in Azkaban, or worse, based on their ancestry. This was racism. This was genocide.

Harry has to win, she thought with renewed conviction. Only then would this travesty of government be brought to task *Harry has to win. And once he has, I'm going to make sure Umbridge pays and that something like this never happens ever again.* Hermione remembered the published list of those who had failed to present themselves for interrogation...her name had appeared there, as had that of Professor Vector and of most of Hermione's Muggle-born classmates. Wherever they were, she hoped they were safe. Her relief that they'd so far managed to evade this particular nightmare was so strong that she could taste it on her tongue.

"Come on, Mafalda," trilled Umbridge, interrupting Hermione's reverie to gesture her through an open doorway.

Hermione stepped into the room. It was clearly a courtroom, although the ceiling was disproportionally high, and the space seemed oddly truncated. There was a long bench across one side, furnished with several chairs and raised up on an imposing platform. The seat on the far right of the bench was taken by a tall, dark haired man.

"Dolores, darling," he drawled, with an unpleasantly sinister smile.

Death Eater, noted Hermione, repressing a shiver. She recognised his picture from the papers.

"Why, Mr Yaxley, it's a pleasure to work with you, as always!" simpered Umbridge, punctuating her greeting with a high-pitched giggle. She gestured towards the chair on the far left. "Mafalda, the files are over there; you've got a few minutes to get organised before we begin."

Hermione hurried over to the bench. On the way, she passed a single seat, isolated in the centre of the room. The arms were hung with heavy chains that wriggled almost longingly at her.

After Umbridge and Hermione entered, two Dementors had drifted into the courtroom, and they floated over to stand sentinel in the far corners of the room. Umbridge had set her Patronus to patrol the edge of the platform, so Hermione couldn't feel them, though they still gave her the willies.

Hermione offered a polite greeting to Yaxley, who she knew to be the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, then quickly paged through the documents she was required to deal with. There were a number of named files, ordered alphabetically. Most contained questionnaires, along with birth certificates, Hogwarts results, marriage certificates, house deeds and other personal documentation. She also uncovered a sheaf of forms that were clearly there to record the trials of the Commission. There was ink, but no quills, and Hermione immediately conjured one. She tried to set up her work area so that Umbridge wouldn't have a clear view of the notes she would have to take...Polyjuice had no effect on handwriting, and it was imperative that Umbridge not notice something was up. After all, she had graded Hermione's papers for an

entire academic year.

Once they started, the trials were every bit as horrific as Hermione had anticipated. The process was almost laughably biased, and Hermione was forced to subsume her emotions below her Occlumentic shields in order to function smoothly. Each time Umbridge tittered or belittled someone or lied outrageously about the transmission of magical potential, Hermione swore her silent revenge. She committed each and every detail to memory with a vicious intensity. *One day, she vowed, you'll be sitting on that seat, Umbridge, wrapped in chains, and I'll recite the list of your crimes. Just you wait.* On the outside, she smiled as prettily as Mafalda Hopkirk could and responded to each of Umbridge's demands with alacrity.

Hermione was so focussed on her dreams of revenge that Harry's arrival startled her. Caught up in the horror of the Commission's trials, the search for the locket had slipped her mind. *Shit*, she thought as she glanced at her watch and calculated the time they'd spent transformed. They had less than twenty-five minutes to get out before the Polyjuice wore off.

As if Harry's unseen presence had lured the locket into the open, it swung forward when Umbridge leaned over to gloat over Mary Cattermole. *Bingo*, thought Hermione irreverently. "That's...that's pretty, Dolores," she offered, pointing at the locket.

"What?" Umbridge was annoyed to have her attention dragged from contemplation of the weeping witch in front of her. "Oh yes," she continued in a more friendly tone as she realised the object of Hermione's interest, "an old family heirloom. The S stands for Selwyn . . ."

Hermione tuned out the rest of the lie, her attention caught by a flicker of movement as Harry's wand appeared in her peripheral vision. *What is he...*

The thought was answered, though her anxiety far from appeased, as Harry shouted, *'Stupefy!'* and a flash of red light smacked into the back of Umbridge's shoulder. Hermione took some satisfaction in the crunch of Umbridge's head against the balustrade of the platform, but her attention was on Yaxley. Using the bulk of Umbridge's body as a screen, she drew her own wand, although Harry felled him before she needed to use it.

"Harry!" she exclaimed, exasperated and relieved in equal parts. She let his answer wash over him as she checked that Umbridge and Yaxley were well-and-truly out for the count. It was when she turned that she caught sight of the Dementors. "Harry!" she shrieked. "Mrs Cattermole!"

Hermione had her wand out, but couldn't manage to conjure up a happy thought. *Expecto patronum!* she cried ineffectively. Nothing happened. Hermione tried to call up the feeling of laughing with Harry and Ron, but the sight of the Dementors looming over Mrs Cattermole, one scaly hand twisting back her head, killed any flash of joy.

When Harry's stag leapt past her, Hermione almost sobbed with relief. Real pleasure flushed her face.

"Get the Horcrux," instructed Harry as he pulled off his cloak and ran towards Mrs Cattermole.

Hermione reached down between Umbridge's collar and her neck, grimacing as she touched against the horrid woman's puffy skin. She found the clasp and made short work of the fastening, but then had to levitate Umbridge's body to get the locket itself out from underneath. The heavy, egg-sized weight of it swung from her hand, and she frowned at it.

"Hermione?" called Harry. "How do I get rid of these chains?"

"Wait, I'm trying something up here..."

"Hermione, we're surrounded by Dementors!" Harry sounded a little frantic.

"I know that, Harry," she replied distractedly, "but if she wakes up and the locket's gone...I need to duplicate it. *Geminio!* There . . . That should fool her . . ." Hermione fastened the false locket securely around Umbridge's neck and let the woman's body fall back onto the desk with no regard for her comfort. She stuffed the Horcrux into the pocket of her robe, spelling the pocket shut for good measure. Harry was pulling manually at the chains that bound Mrs Cattermole to the chair. "Let's see," said Hermione, pushing his hands out of the way. *'Relashio!'* she tried and was pleased when the chains slithered away.

Mrs Cattermole looked rightly terrified. Harry-as-Runcorn was trying to calm her down.

"How are we going to get out of here with all those Dementors outside the door?" asked Hermione. The sheer quantity of them made her nervous.

"Patronuses," replied Harry as if the answer was evident. *Easy for him to say.* "As many as we can muster: do yours, Hermione."

Hermione grit her teeth with determination. *'Expecto...Expecto patronum!'* As before, nothing happened.

"It's the only spell she ever has trouble with," remarked Harry to Mrs Cattermole, amusement tinting his unnaturally deep voice. "Bit unfortunate, really . . . Come on, Hermione. . . ."

It's not the only spell, thought Hermione miserably, rocked by her own inadequacy. *I had trouble with wards, too, and Defence in general* The thought of wards made her think of Snape, and she pictured his relaxed persona in the Room of Requirement: his t-shirted chest, his arms crossed. She heard the smug satisfaction in his voice as he pointed out the differences between charmwork and warding.

'Expecto patronum!' she cried again, with more certainty. This time, her silver otter leapt out from her wand and swam out across the room, where it tumble-turned a loop around Harry's stag.

Firming her resolve, Hermione followed Harry and Mrs Cattermole out into the corridor. At the appearance of the two Patronuses, the accused Muggle-borns and their families surged forwards, instinctively pushing themselves towards the silver puddles of good feeling and away from the Dementors. The Dementors fell back, disappearing into the far reaches of the corridors.

While Harry was making a speech, Hermione busied herself urging forward hesitant individuals. "Once you get out, run for it. Leave the country. Contact Torvik Murk by owl, he will help you." She reiterated the instructions into ear after ear, hoping that they would listen and obey. When the lift clanked open and ejected a dripping Ron-as-Reg, her heart leapt. *Maybe we are going to make it* She glanced at her watch: ten minutes.

"Harry," said Ron urgently, "they know there are intruders inside the Ministry, something about a hole in Umbridge's office door, I reckon we've got five minutes if that..."

The hope in Hermione's heart dissipated instantaneously, and her Patronus disappeared. "Harry, if we're trapped here..."

"We won't be if we move fast," replied Harry. "Who's got wands?" he asked, addressing the question at the terrified group around them.

No more than half noted Hermione.

"Okay," he continued in the deep and commanding tones of his Polyjuiced form, "all of you who haven't got wands need to attach yourself to somebody who has. We'll need to be fast before they stop us. Come on..."

Hermione crammed into the lift with Ron...who had conjured his Jack Russell Patronus...and about half of the crowd of escapees. Harry, with his stag, took another. The Atrium, once they got there, was in chaos. Ministry officials were hurriedly sealing the fireplaces, and the space was filling up with traffic that would have otherwise been

flowing through.

Harry, it became immediately clear, was impersonating someone important, and furthermore, he had realised it himself. He began to bluff and bluster, distracting the officials to the extent where several stopped their frenzied attempts to close the fire connections and engaged him in conversation.

"Let's go!" urged Hermione, turning towards the panicked Muggle-borns and their families. She hurried them over to the nearest open fireplaces and started shepherding them through as fast as she could. "Remember: Torvik Murk, flee the country," she repeated over and over again.

"Mary!"

"Shit," swore Ron, causing Hermione to spin around. The real Reg Cattermole was running towards them, throwing his wife into visible confusion. They might still have made it out unharmed, had Yaxley not burst from the lift at that point.

"Seal the exit! SEAL IT!" he shrieked.

The confusion in the Atrium reached the point of pure pandemonium. Harry punched the balding Ministry official with whom he'd been arguing, shouting out contradictory statements at the top of his voice. Ron grabbed Mrs Cattermole and wrestled her into the nearest fireplace. Glancing around, Hermione saw that all of the Muggle-borns had disappeared...hopefully to safety.

"My wife!" screamed the real Reg in a panic. "Who was that with my wife? What's going on?"

A brighter-than-average Ministry official tried to grab hold of Hermione, but she stunned him and twisted between two bystanders to reach Harry's side.

"Come on!" shouted Harry as he grabbed her hand. The two of them leapt into a fireplace and shot upwards. Hermione heard a curse smack into the mantel as they spun away.

Seconds later, they burst out of a toilet bowl in the public facilities that served as portal to the Ministry. Harry wrenched open the cubicle door. Ron-as-Reg was trying to extricate himself from the anxious grip of Mrs Cattermole, who was still convinced that Ron was her husband.

"Accio Ron!" cried Hermione. The spell ripped Ron out of Mrs Cattermole's reach, and Harry grabbed him as soon as he got close enough, seizing hold of Hermione's hand at the same time. Hermione heard a noise behind her and twisted over her shoulder to see Yaxley explode out of the toilet behind her.

"LET'S GO!" shouted Harry and turned into nothingness.

Hermione was twisted along with him, but she felt no relief. At the moment of departure, an unwelcome hand closed uncomfortably hard around her shoulder: Yaxley was along for the ride. Hermione could feel the pressure of his fingers even as the compression of Apparation squeezed her from all sides. He was strong, and Hermione had to struggle to keep hold of Harry's hand. She didn't want to know what would happen if Yaxley managed to pull her away and she lost her grip on Harry somewhere in the magical interstice of Apparation.

As soon as her feet touched the stoop at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Hermione blasted Yaxley with a Revulsion Jinx. The relief in her shoulder was immediate. "Hold on!" she shouted, though she wasn't sure either of her friends would hear. She had to trust that Harry had a firm grip of Ron, and she twisted away into nothing once again, this time headed for the first place that came to mind.

Hermione lay on her bunk, staring at the slats of the bed above her, thoroughly swamped by waves of self-recrimination. *Useless. Unattractive. Stupid.* A hot tear leaked from the corner of one eye and hovered on her cheekbone for several seconds before sliding sideways and trickling down into her ear.

No-one cares that it's your birthday

Annoyed, Hermione rubbed at her wet face roughly with the heel of her hand.

At the sudden movement, the Horcrux, which had been sitting atop her pyjamas, slipped from her chest and came to rest in the crook of her neck, the heavy metal cold and clammy against her skin. Disgusted, Hermione pulled it sharply away from her body, twisting the locket sideways so that it lay on the pillow beside her head. *Merlin, Granger*, she swore at herself, *can't you keep still?*

Glancing at her watch, she calculated the time until she could pass on the Horcrux: one hour, forty-seven minutes. Hermione sighed.

What's worse? she wondered, *wearing it myself or trying to put up with Ron while he wears it?* Ron plus Horcrux was a very bad combination. Hermione tried to picture it as a third-order integrated equation where the derivative of the curve would represent the change in his behaviour and the definite integral the array of the effects on others. *In that case*, she theorised, *I'd just have to work out the right noumenal integration, and I could return him to normal. . . Oh, shut up, Granger. Not even I can bear to listen to you.*

Swivelling her eyes sideways, she returned her attention to the Horcrux. She hated it. There was something foreboding about it, something malicious. With a quick glance in the direction of the tent door, where Harry sat, unseen as he kept watch, Hermione eased the chain over her neck. The relief was immediate. She couldn't understand why Harry insisted that they wear the thing. *Who does he think he is? Frodo Baggins?* Guiltily, she wrapped the chain around one finger. There. That was practically the same as wearing it. . . wasn't it?

Hermione could still feel the insidious, throbbing presence of the Horcrux as it lay beside her, but she could think more clearly. *We have to destroy it.* They'd spent endless days discussing how to find the other Horcruxes...with no luck...but much less time contemplating the destruction of the one they had. *It's almost like the locket won't let us think about that for too long; we're too distracted.*

As if in confirmation of her thought, her brain skittered sideways once again. *Ron certainly can't seem to think about anything but food. I swear, the next time I go on the run, I'm taking a boy who can cook. . .* The memory of Snape's seafood stew curled across the back of her mouth, and she swallowed instinctively. *No!* Hermione folded up the memory and tucked it forcefully away. She would not think of Snape while she was wearing the Horcrux, not even when it was but wrapped around the tip of one finger. She felt sure the Horcrux was spying on her. Its weight was an unbearable heaviness of the brain. It felt like pure evil.

Gradually, eventually, the endless minutes of her shift with the locket wore down. Precisely twelve hours after she'd put it on, Hermione shook Ron awake and dropped the Horcrux into his palm.

"What?" he asked blearily, rubbing at his eyes with his other hand. He squinted up at her in the dim light which soaked through the fabric walls of the tent. "Where're you going?"

"To get firewood," she replied, turning away.

"In your running clothes?"

Hermione ignored him.

"Back in less than an hour," she informed Harry as she passed him, sitting by the front door.

"Okay."

Hermione felt clunky at the start of her run...an uncoordinated bundle of arms and legs and lungs and hair...but after twenty minutes, she found her rhythm. Her breath came more evenly, and her body seemed to stretch, each joint loosening and her stride lengthening. As her body relaxed, her anxiety evaporated. For the first time since they'd stolen the Horcrux, she felt content.

Attentive to the lessons she had learned from Snape, she unfolded the memories she had tucked away. To leave them concealed for long periods inside her head would risk permanent damage, and out here, away from the Horcrux, she had no need to hide her memories of Snape. Distance had tempered the desperate and illogical concern that the locket was eavesdropping on her thoughts, that she might inadvertently betray Snape to this horribly severed part of Voldemort's horrible soul.

I have to find the time to run every day she decided. And I have to find a more successful method of protecting myself from the Horcrux.

Hermione ran almost all of the way back to the tent, stopping in a clearing to stretch and collect some wood before her return. The run had helped her make some decisions. Firstly, she was going to keep her Occlumency shields up whenever she was near the Horcrux. Unlike Snape, she wasn't dealing with Voldemort himself, and she had no need to fool the Horcrux into thinking she couldn't Occlude. There was no reason for her to be using the more subtle forms of Occlumency when straightforward defences would do.

Second, she was going to be very careful about using the so-called Dark Lord's name. Despite the advice she'd received via Phineas' portrait, Hermione had come very close to using his name several times. Mostly, she'd caught herself half-way through, but on one occasion, it was only Ron's sudden paranoia that had prevented her slip. *I wish Phineas had just told me why*, she thought, her brows creased. *It would make it easier to remember.*

Third, she was going to try to be nicer to Harry and Ron. If she was finding the Horcrux hard, they surely were too. And the most important thing of all was for them to stick together. Harry needed both her and Ron, otherwise the Arithmantic probabilities of success didn't bear thinking about.

Hermione wandered back towards where she knew the tent to be, one hand guiding a bundle of kindling that she'd levitated to waist height. Though the tent itself was concealed behind her wards, Hermione had discovered that if she squinted and leaned her awareness towards the magical barriers, she could sense the barriers themselves quite easily. She had even begun to differentiate between those she'd cast herself and those Harry had made. Concentrating now, she leant forwards, reaching with her mind and groping gently with her wand hand. There. The force of her own ward hummed slightly under her palm; its protective energy comforted and reassured her.

Smiling to herself, she stepped through. Ron sat where Harry had been at her departure, his knees drawn up to his chest and a black scowl plastered across his face. The glint of the locket's chain was visible around his neck.

"Good morning, Ron."

"Is it?"

Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I'm going to make a cup of tea, you want one?"

"Suppose."

There was a pause as Hermione laid the wood and conjured bluebell flames to get it started. She was surprised when Ron broke the silence.

"I thought he had more of a plan. What the hell are we doing out here?"

Hermione froze. "Where is he now?" she asked.

"Sleeping." Ron waved a hand dismissively in the direction of the tent.

"I thought he had more of a plan, too," she said. Her tone was conciliatory, but she meant what she said wholeheartedly. "I thought Dumbledore would have given him more to go on, but even so, I would still have come. We have to help him; he needs us."

"He needs a good smack in the ear," muttered Ron.

It was going to be another difficult day.

The Idiot Boy

Chapter 9 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. ****DH SPOILERS****

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Nine : The Idiot Boy

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.

As always, my betas, LAxo and WriterMerrin, did an inordinate amount of work for this chapter; they have my gratitude.

"The idiot boy Splinched himself," remarked Phineas casually, having sauntered back into his frame and checked that the headmaster was the only person present.

"Which one?" asked Severus absently, not looking up from the paperwork he was sorting through.

"The idiot one, not the insolent one," replied Phineas.

"And the girl?" If anything, Severus sounded bored, as if he couldn't care less.

"Stressed, guilty." Phineas shrugged. "They've left Grimmauld Place because Yaxley caught up with them somehow, grabbed hold of her while she was Disapparating, and ended up inside the Fidelius boundary."

Severus looked up abruptly. "I think you'd better start at the beginning, Phineas. Where were they that Yaxley was anywhere near them?"

"I really couldn't say with any certainty . . . I only heard what I did because Potter left the bag open between summoning Dittany...for Weasley's injury...and summoning a tent. He did mention something about 'Umbridge's office,' by which I can only suppose they went to the Ministry."

What in the seven levels of Hell were they doing at the Ministry? Severus took a long breath through his nose. "Where are they now?" he asked.

"No idea," replied Phineas, punctuating his reply with another shrug.

"Then you had better go back to the bag and skulk about until you find out." Severus raised an authoritative eyebrow and glared at Phineas until, with a resigned sigh, Hogwarts' only other Slytherin headmaster turned on his heel and disappeared from sight.

Severus was down in the Slytherin common room when he registered that intruders had broken into his office. Sweeping his eyes around the room once as he left, he noted Draco and his newly recognised "half-sister" seated over by the fireplace; he hurried on his way.

Narcissa had been more than willing to repay the debt she owed Severus...even though it required her to acknowledge as her own a child who was no more the fruit of Lucius' loins than the Weasley twins were. She, in turn, had convinced Lucius.

Wand in hand, and his senses tingling with magical input from the office wards, Severus raced through the castle as fast as he could. He encountered the would-be thieves on the moving stairs and disarmed them easily.

"NO!" shouted Longbottom. Though wandless, he lunged wildly at Severus with the sword of Gryffindor itself.

With a snarl, Severus directed his wand at the irritating boy once again, propelling him back against the wall. The sword fell from Longbottom's grip with the force of the impact and bounced down several stairs to fall at Severus' feet. Skipping nimbly to one side to ensure that the blade avoided his toes, Severus conjured thick ropes to bind all three of his underage opponents. For good measure, he gagged them. The whole struggle was over so quickly that Lovegood and the Weasley girl, both of whom had been further up the staircase behind Longbottom, had barely moved.

Severus had been so angry with these particular students for so long that he had to take several deep breaths and force several unnecessarily aggressive ideas for retribution away into the recesses of his mind.

"Miss Lovegood, Miss Weasley, Mr Longbottom," he managed eventually, his voice dripping with his customary sarcasm. "How unsurprising that the three of you might bungle a simple burglary." He sneered at them, then gestured back up towards his office with a jerk of his head. "Shall we?" he asked.

Since the three miscreants could neither move nor speak, it was a fatuous question, and Severus ignored their furious grimaces as he levitated their bodies back up into his study, Gryffindor's sword held casually in his left hand.

He left his captives hanging in the air before his desk as he turned to survey the mess they'd made breaking the glass cabinet. With a sigh and a wave of his wand, he repaired the damage, placing the sword back into the cabinet to reinforce the futility of the trio's gesture. That done, he strolled to his chair, where he settled himself leisurely, propping his elbows on the arms of his chair and steeping his hands. He regarded the bound students in front of him with a deliberately pensive expression. He saw their eyes flickering from him to Dumbledore's portrait and back.

Goddamn Gryffindor pigheadedness.

Severus had no intention of handing them over to the Carrows, but since they didn't...and couldn't...know that, he took a vicious pleasure in prolonging their obvious discomfort while he ruminated on their future. When he finally spoke, they looked almost relieved.

"I can only assume that the Cruciatus to which you have all been subjected has begun to show lasting effects," he sneered. "I would have thought that you in particular, Longbottom, who has such a small stash of intelligence to begin with, might take care to conserve the little you have." At his words, Longbottom struggled convulsively against his bonds; Severus regarded him with a mild sneer. *What would it take for the little prick to grasp the very real danger his ridiculous heroics involve?*

"As for you, Lovegood," he continued, turning his attention to his next victim, "I must advise you to reconsider the company you keep. I had hoped for better from a Ravenclaw, and you would do well to pass that message on to your father, too. If he doesn't learn to control himself, there will be consequences for the both of you." Severus had little hope that anyone would heed his warnings, but he was doomed to try, like Sisyphus, endlessly pushing his boulder up the hill. He graced the third offender with a particularly nasty smile.

"Dear me, Miss Weasley, are you still trying to absolve yourself for your actions in first year? One's past can be such a painful burden. I would have thought, however, that you would behave with more concern for your family's feelings: they seemed so upset to lose part of their son, think how unhappy losing their only daughter will make them.

"Since endless detention and physical pain seem to act as no deterrent, I shall have to think of something more creative . . . the Forbidden Forest, perhaps?" It would, of course, have to be a punishment of which the Carrows approved. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, as if he were pondering the possibilities. Then, with a languorous wave of his wand, he removed their bindings and let them drop the short distance to the floor. They stumbled on landing, but none of them fell. "For now," he snarled, "get out!"

Get out they did, too taken aback at their sudden freedom to protest. Once they were gone, Severus dropped his head onto the desk. He was so tired.

"This will not remain secret, Severus," remarked Dumbledore. "The children will talk. You will have to hide the sword before Voldemort decides to place it somewhere safer." Severus neither moved nor replied. "As long as you perform the spell adequately, a simple Geminio should suffice; in combination with a Notice-Me-Not Charm it should fool all but the most expert eyes. You can hide the original in the secret cavity behind my portrait."

The secret cavity behind your portrait? Severus raised his head at last. *What else are you keeping hidden, Albus?* he wondered. Obedient, however, as ever to his master, he did as he was bid.

Severus chose to report the attempted theft of the sword himself, rather than have Voldemort find out from someone else.

"You did well to come to me, Severus." Voldemort stared into the middle distance, his red eyes glazed in thought, one hand idly rubbing the back of Nagini's head. "If Hogwarts is no longer a safe place for the sword, I shall have to place it in Gringotts. I shall inform Bellatrix later tonight." He smiled at Severus then, stretching the taught skin of his face obscenely over his cheekbones, and changed the topic. "You look tired, Severus."

"I . . . I am, my Lord."

"The Muggle-Born Registration Committee is doing extremely well, Severus, despite the slight setback in early September."

The apparent non-sequitur took Severus by surprise.

"Indeed, my Lord. I'm delighted to hear it."

"Large numbers of Mudbloods have been rounded up and sent to Azkaban." Voldemort paused. "I want to reward you, Severus," he explained, reaching out with his near hand to cover Severus' own where it lay on the arm of his chair. "You desired a Mudblood once, I thought perhaps you might like one now."

Severus felt nauseous. "That was a long time ago, my Lord! I was young. There have been other women since, purer women . . . more worthy . . ." he trailed off, swallowing heavily, uncertain whether his Occlumency shields had been strong enough to hide his reaction from the Dark Lord's slit-eyed gaze.

The Dark Lord hummed softly. "I have been thinking about half-bloods, Severus. After all, you and I have a lot in common...for one thing, we both killed our fathers."

Severus wasn't sure whether Voldemort had actually changed the topic; his nerves were completely on edge.

"So many of my pureblood servants have let me down, Severus. But not you."

"My Lord, you hon..." Severus broke off immediately at the sight of Voldemort's raised hand.

"It seems logical to recruit several more half-bloods."

Voldemort paused, his long fingers stroked lightly against the back of Severus' hand. The silence went on so long that Severus decided he had to speak; it was on the tip of his tongue to mention that Dumbledore, too, had been a half-blood, when the Dark Lord spoke again.

"Thus, I will ask you once more: are you sure, Severus? There is no-one...no Mudblood...that you desire?" Voldemort sounded disappointed, as if Severus' refusal had denied him a special treat.

Ye Gods, what might I have become?

Threaded through with disgust, an awful, powerful idea insinuated itself into Severus' thoughts. *Dare I?* He let some of his nervousness show on his face. "Well," he began, then broke off.

"Yes?" The Dark Lord sounded keen, terrifyingly eager. The weight of his hand pressed down on Severus' own.

"There is one . . . but I wouldn't dare to presume . . ."

"Go on, Severus!"

Severus wet his lips before he spoke. "Hermione Granger."

"Potter's Mudblood?" Voldemort sounded both astounded and delighted. "You desire her?"

Severus shrugged and, involuntarily, coloured slightly. "The girl is quite intelligent," he replied defensively. "She could be of use to me in and out of the bedroom."

"Wonderful!" gasped Voldemort, throwing back his head and laughing with slightly deranged delight. "Once again you plan to be my means of retribution!"

Clearing his throat awkwardly, Severus pushed away his intense nausea. "There is one other thing, my Lord," he ventured. Severus found himself the focus of Voldemort's intense gaze. "I am not the kind of man who takes kindly to other men's leftovers. I would want her delivered to me . . . unharmed."

Voldemort nodded his head in acquiescence. "A reasonable request, Severus. I will see that it is done."

Severus smiled and thanked Voldemort graciously; he gave no indication of how sick at heart he felt.

Phineas skidded into his portrait. "Thank Merlin!" he cried. "I can see again!"

Severus looked up from an endless pile of administrative paperwork. In an attempt to keep students out of the Carrow's hands, he had re-instated several of Umbridge's educational decrees. The other teachers, however, had seized on the policy changes as an opportunity to waste his time. They were referring every single decision that they could dredge up from their daily lives to be approved by the headmaster before they could act.

"That wretched girl dared to blindfold me! Me! . . . But, but that's not what I had to say, Severus: the idiot boy has left!"

"He what?" Severus was honestly astounded. Shock, anger and despair flooded through him in quick succession. "Why? They need him."

"They had an argument." Phineas shrugged. "Adolescents."

Albus sighed. "I feared this might happen," he remarked, shaking his head gently.

Severus shot him an irritated glance. "Start at the beginning, Phineas," he snapped. He had risen to his feet, his paperwork discarded, and was pacing back and forth.

"Well," Phineas took a deep breath, "it was the Mudblood who..."

"Don't use that word!" snarled Severus, spinning on his heel and looming menacingly towards the frame where Phineas hung.

Phineas looked taken aback. "Fine, no need to be so rude . . . the girl, then . . ." The portrait furrowed his brows distractedly for a moment and then regained the thread of his story. "It was the girl who summoned me, quite rudely in fact, and then had the temerity to blindfold me."

Severus ground his teeth in frustration and resumed his pacing. *Get to the point, Phineas!* he wanted to shout.

"But I could tell all three of them were there. Somehow they'd heard about the small disciplinary incident concerning the sword of Gryffindor; they seemed concerned about their little friends."

"They fought about that?"

"In a sense. First they asked several unsubtle questions about the sword..."

Dumbledore interrupted, "Did they figure out why they need it?"

"I'm getting to that, but first someone (presumably the girl, she seems to do most of the work) stuffed me back into the bag...rather summarily, I might add..."

By this stage Severus couldn't have cared whether or not Granger had sliced Phineas' canvas into small strips with a steak knife; he just wanted the portrait to get on with his story.

"...and then *threw* the bag aside! If she had been more careful, though, the clasp would not have popped undone, and I would have heard nothing further."

"Sweet Salazar's Hufflepuff lovechild! Get to the point, Phineas!" exploded Severus, pushed beyond the limits of his endurance.

"Alright, alright!" Phineas crossed his arms in annoyance, but did as he was bade. "Potter and the girl were excited at the realisation that the sword could destroy the Horcruxes, but Weasley was worried about his sister, and, for some reason," Phineas' looked momentarily confused, "the other members of his family. The upshot was that he stormed out. He asked the girl to go with him, but she refused."

"She . . . Where did he go?"

"No idea."

Severus blinked at the portrait several times until a surge of fury overcame his feelings of blank disbelief. "Is the boy completely stupid? There are Snatchers ~~everywhere~~! If he is taken to the Dark Lord, or even sent back here, the consequences will be enormous!" He spun on his heel once more, stalking out across the room in one direction, only to spin quickly at the far wall, his robes billowing dramatically, and stride back; then the pattern repeated once more. For several minutes, no-one said anything. "Without Granger to keep him safe, he'll be caught within days. He might even have been captured already." He halted his pacing at the window, staring through his own reflection and out into the darkness. Then he spun back towards the room fired with sudden purpose. "I have to find him first."

How he might do so was still problematic. Several of the portraits around the room began to mutter, calling out possible suggestions for how to track the boy down.

Almost immediately, however, Dumbledore cleared his throat, and the room fell silent. "As long as Mr Weasley retains possession of the Deluminator, locating him will not be a problem."

Slowly, Severus raised his head and brought his eyes up to meet Dumbledore's gaze. The portrait had the grace to look a little discomforted. "Are you saying, Albus, that you have had the means to locate them this entire time and have only now decided to let me know?"

"The time was not yet right."

Anger was surging through Severus' body, and against his volition, the pitch and volume of his voice increased dramatically. "We could have given them the sword long ago!" he shouted.

"Until they realised what to do with it, there was no point giving it to them," replied Albus reasonably.

Severus threw his arms wide in frustration. "Well, now they have, and it's too late! Weasley has abandoned his friends, leaving us unable to locate them! Not only has he put himself in danger, he's deprived Potter of the tool he needs to complete his task. If you, Albus, had deigned to share this information earlier, we wouldn't be in this situation!"

"Enough, Severus! I have my reasons." The painting could manage only a fraction of the righteous anger that the man himself had been capable of, though it remained impressive. "Do you want to find Mr Weasley, or not?"

Severus took several shaky breaths, clenching and unclenching his fists. Not for the first time, he reminded himself that arguing with a portrait was beneath him. "Very well," he ground out eventually.

Albus beamed. "Luckily for us, I had the foresight to paint the Deluminator's twin into my portrait." As he spoke, the painting reached into the pocket of his robes and pulled out a small silvery cylinder, the size and shape of a cigarette lighter. His eyes twinkled merrily. "All I need is for you, Severus, to supply the magic." With the Deluminator held in his left hand, Dumbledore pressed the palm of his right hand against the picture plane, flattening it onto the surface of his painting as if it were a pane of glass. "Take out your wand, and put your other hand on mine," he instructed.

Severus did as he was told without comment, pressing his left hand flat against the canvas of Dumbledore's portrait and extending his wand in his other hand.

"Now, think very hard about Ronald Weasley. . . . Are you ready?"

When Severus nodded, Albus clicked the Deluminator he held in the portrait. Severus felt the surge of magical energy flow from his wand, through the point of contact with the canvas and through, into the painting. All the light in the room...the candles in the chandelier and the torches on the walls...flew from their sockets and condensed into a pulsing, bluish ball of light that hovered near the tip of Severus' wand. In colour, it was similar to an activated Portkey, and it cast a set of eerie shadows, throwing into sharp relief the tired lines of Severus' face.

Severus turned his gaze towards Albus, who nodded encouragingly. Slowly, almost apprehensively, he peeled his left hand from the canvas and reached out towards the light. He had expected it to transport him away, but instead, the light itself seemed to seep into his fingertips. He felt it flow up his arm and settle somewhere in his chest, leaving the room in near darkness, with the windows marked as patches of slightly lighter grey. With the light of the room lodged in his chest, Severus knew what to do. Somehow, he knew that he could Apparate to where Weasley was...not unlike the way that he could Apparate to where Voldemort was when the Dark Mark was active, although the sensation of that knowledge was different. The Deluminator's light felt literally light...both luminous and weightless. The Dark Mark ached; it was heavy with pain.

"*Lumos*," he whispered, and a new glow sprung from the tip of his wand. Severus began to step around the desk and move towards the door.

"Remember, Severus," called Albus in warning, "he mustn't see you or know that you have helped him! It is imperative that Harry not realise which side you are on."

"Never fear," replied Severus. "I'll work something out."

Severus moved quickly and surely through the corridors of Hogwarts, arriving at the Apparation point within moments. Once there, he took a few seconds to compose himself, then Apparated with precision, careful to make as little noise as possible.

He appeared in a forest somewhere. A nearby campfire threw the trees and shrubs into a flickering, golden relief. Severus Disillusioned himself immediately, not for the first time wishing it were possible to Apparate under the charm, then crept towards the fire.

His concern, it seemed, had been well founded: Weasley had stumbled straight into the hands of a band of Snatchers. Five of the thugs were visible around the fire. No other prisoners could be seen, though they might, Severus reasoned, have been stashed elsewhere. Weasley, for his part, had been disarmed, and a burly man had him by both arms. The two of them looked as if there'd been an altercation.

"Who'd you say you were, again?" asked one of the others. Severus noticed he had two wands out...presumably the spare was Weasley's.

"Stan Shunpike," replied Weasley belligerently. "I may look young to you, but I've been out of school for several years."

Severus rolled his eyes and edged around several other trees in order to get a clean shot at the man who was talking.

"Oh, yeah? It's just that red hair of your is pretty distinctive . . ." He trailed off as Severus' Confundus Charm smacked him on the shoulder. The man shook his head a little woozily, as if trying to shake water from his hair. "Shunpike, you say? There might be something in that."

Severus Confunded the man who had hold of Weasley's arms as well, then Levitated a small pebble and flicked it at one of two Snatchers who sat on the far side of the campfire.

"Oy!" exclaimed the man he struck, turning and belting his companion on the arm. "What was that for?" The two of them were soon wrestling on the ground, and the fifth man ran towards them in some concern. The two Confunded Snatchers wrinkled their foreheads in confusion and turned blearily towards the commotion.

At that moment, Weasley grabbed his chance. He elbowed his captor firmly in the stomach and wrenched his arms free. Grabbing the man's wand, he turned it on the one who had spoken, though he was currently too out of it to put up much of a fight.

"*Expelliarmus!*" shouted Weasley, pointing the stolen wand at the hand that held his own precious length of wood and unicorn hair. Obliging, it flew through the air and he caught it neatly. Without hesitation, Weasley Disapparated away.

Severus let out a silent breath of relief before promptly Stunning each of the five Snatchers; after that, it took very little time to Obliviate them. Severus checked quickly that the Snatchers had no other prisoners in need of liberation, then he, too, turned into the pressing darkness of Apparation.

"Quickly, Phineas," he called as he ran back into his office. "Check and see whether the idiot boy has returned."

It took Phineas several minutes, but the response he returned was negative.

"Very well," replied Severus grimly, moving to Dumbledore's portrait and pressing his hand up against the canvas, "again please, Albus."

Once again, the blue light of the Deluminator led him to a forest, although this time the only light was the thin beam of Weasley's Lumos. Even without the visual confirmation of Weasley's whereabouts, Severus would have known precisely where they boy could be found, as he maintained a near-constant stream of muttered profanities. Severus Disillusioned himself and carefully applied Silencing Charms to his boots. Even with such precautions, he would have to be careful because rustling leaves and cracking twigs would give his presence away.

Weasley was making his way along the banks of the river with some difficulty. After following him for half-an-hour or so, Severus realised that the boy must have injured his hand: he was carrying it cradled against his chest. Severus couldn't be sure in the dim light, but it seemed as if Weasley had bound it with a handkerchief.

Soon, it started to rain. Large, heavy raindrops turned the ground slippery and treacherous. Severus didn't dare to risk a shield charm and was quickly soaked through. His hair hung down limp and wet beside his face. Still, despite the discomfort, he was glad of the weather. The silvery glow of Weasley's shield made him easier to follow, and the noise of the rain pattering against the leaves and thudding onto the surface of the river admirably covered the noise of Severus' own passage through the underbrush.

The grey, miserably wet dawn had passed, though the sun did little to penetrate the heavy blanket of clouds, before Weasley reached his destination. It was clear to both him and to Severus that Granger and Potter had already departed. The trampled patch of earth indicated exactly where the tent had been, though the rising water of the river would soon erase all signs of their camp.

At the apparent lack of tent, Weasley's shield charm faltered, and he sunk to his knees in the mud. The boy looked genuinely upset, though Severus, who had paused under the branches of the nearest tree to observe him, could muster very little sympathy. After several minutes with his head bowed, his shoulders shaking with heavy sobs, Weasley rose to his feet. He wiped the back of his hand roughly across his face, and pushed his wet hair back from his forehead. Then he Disapparated.

This, thought Severus irritably, *is not the most efficient way to track somebody's movements* With a sigh, he Apparated to Hogwarts yet again and repeated the procedure...pausing only long enough to dry his clothes with a quick Warming Charm.

When he popped into existence after the third of his Delumniator-led Apparations, he knew a moment's panic. Severus had appeared on the top of a windswept cliff in broad daylight; the open terrain meant that his arrival might have been noted by anyone. He Disillusioned himself immediately and dropped flat. Then he waited, lifting his head to look around, his heart pounding almost painfully. To his initial surprise, he could see no-one and no place where Weasley might have hidden himself. It took several minutes until he realised what had happened: *the Fidelius charm*.

Severus conjured a sheet of parchment, then raised himself up onto one knee, placing the parchment on the ground. Scooping up a handful of dirt, he sprinkled it carefully over the parchment in a thin layer. Placing his wand against one corner, he sent a complicated variant of the Point Me Charm vibrating through the paper. The grains of dirt trembled and skittered across the surface, resolving themselves into a series of numbers, spelling out the longitude and latitude of his current location. Next, he conjured a quill and copied the co-ordinates down. Thus informed, he Disapparated back to Hogwarts.

Within minutes of his return to the office, Severus had checked the co-ordinates in a battered magical atlas that had once belonged to Albus: Shell Cottage, just outside Tinworth, currently home to William and Fleur Weasley.

In the Bleak Midwinter

Chapter 10 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Ten : In the Bleak Midwinter

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

My brilliant, beautiful, bravissime betas have turned my nonsense into coherence once again! Thank you, LAxo and WriterMerrin.

The Occlumency Hermione deployed against the Horcrux was useless against the black depression that engulfed her once Ron left. Back at Hogwarts...which now felt so distant that it seemed more like a past life than her own lived history...Hermione would have turned to the seductive logic and subtle pleasure of Arithmantic calculations to cheer herself up. With Ron gone, however, the results of the matrix Vector had started were so unpromising that the mere thought of Arithmancy left Hermione feeling worse than ever. She forced herself to check the calculations once a day, hoping against hope that something in the external world would effect the results enough to show her a way forward; the rest of the time she sought another distraction.

She'd taken to reading *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* obsessively. She went through the stories with a fine tooth comb, painstakingly checking the translation of each rune in her syllabary...even those she knew well...hoping to discover some hidden secret meaning, but so far her attempts had been useless.

Hermione and Harry's attempts to deduce the whereabouts of Gryffindor's sword had been similarly fruitless. The initial rush of excitement...fuelled by the realisation that the sword had imbibed the Basilisk venom and thus could destroy the Horcruxes...hadn't lasted the evening. Indeed, a couple of times Hermione had wondered whether Ron's rather abrupt departure had been stage managed by the Horcrux itself. She had often suspected that it might be responsible for the trouble they'd had thinking about how to destroy it, and Ron had been wearing the Horcrux when they finally found an answer. He had very nearly walked out with the Horcrux on, and perhaps that had been the hideous locket's goal.

Yet, regardless of why he had left, he had. And the fact of his absence made everything bad, worse.

As each interminable, frustrating day passed, Hermione's thoughts about Albus Dumbledore became increasingly bitter. How dare he leave them with so little information to work with? It wasn't as if he didn't know his death was fast approaching. He could have told them, for example, what to do with their bequests, rather than trusting that they'd work things out for themselves.

He'd always been a little too fond of leaving them hints and clues...Hermione couldn't help but remember the incident with the Time-Turner from her third year. Dumbledore had merely suggested that with enough time, two innocent lives could be saved that night. In the moment, she'd felt thrilled at her ability to parse his meaning; in retrospect, she wished her younger self had told him there and then to be more forthright in the future.

Hermione developed the habit of pulling Phineas' portrait out from her bag on a regular basis and propping it up on one of the dining chairs. It was almost like having an extra person around, although what she really wanted (more than she liked to admit) was to see Snape.

That in itself was an extraordinary unlikely possibility...if she were to see him, it would undoubtedly mean they'd been captured by Death Eaters...but talking to Phineas was an almost bearable substitute. He was happy to talk at length about Snape's activities...as long as Harry could hold his tongue and not say something offensive...and knowing that he was still alive, that neither the Aurors nor the Death Eaters had taken him hostage, was the only spark of hope in Hermione's rather miserable existence.

While Phineas spoke of Snape's activities in glowing terms, emphasising his own delight that another Slytherin had obtained the coveted position of headmaster, he also conveyed subtler hints regarding the difficulties and stresses his tenure entailed. On the one hand, there was a part of Hermione's psyche that thrilled to the knowledge that students were resisting the Death Eater regime, but she was equal parts concerned that her friends might place themselves in danger and worried about the consequences of their actions for Snape and his double role.

The morning that the Arithmantic probabilities of doing nothing sunk so low that going to Godric's Hollow proved a safer option was the same day that she finally found something of note in the Beedle Bard book.

"Harry," she asked, the tiniest flicker of excitement curling her stomach and shortening her breath, "could you help me with something?" She spun around her copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and pushed it towards him. "Look at that symbol," she directed, pointing to a small triangle, overlaid with a circle and bisected by a vertical line.

"I never took Ancient Runes, Hermione," he protested, but obediently looked where her finger was pointing.

"I know that,"...*Honestly, did he think I had forgotten?..*"but it isn't a rune and it's not in the syllabary, either. All along I thought it was a picture of an eye, but I don't think it is! It's been inked in, look, somebody's drawn it there, it isn't really part of the book. Think, have you ever seen it before?"

Harry leaned in closer, his brow furrowing almost comically as he concentrated on the odd symbol. "No . . . No, wait a moment." Excitement caught at Hermione's throat and she forgot to breathe. "Isn't it the same symbol Luna's dad was wearing round his neck?"

Hermione let out her breath all at once and grinned for the first time in weeks. "Well, that's what I thought too!" she exclaimed.

"Then it's Grindelwald's mark."

"What?"

Even after Harry had elaborated the details of the story Krum had told him at the wedding...about Grindelwald carving the mark in the Durmstrang wall and about other students who copied it in a twisted form of emulation...Hermione found it difficult to believe that the mark of one of the worst Dark wizards in the twentieth century had passed by the Ministry censors without being noticed. The gifts Dumbledore had left them had been checked repeatedly before Scrimgeour had grudgingly passed them on.

"Hermione?" asked Harry, breaking into her reverie.

"Hmm?"

"I've been thinking. I...I want to go to Godric's Hollow."

Hermione raised her eyes from the strange symbol and took in Harry's nervous-yet-determined expression.

"Yes," she replied. "Yes, I've been wondering that too. I really think we'll have to."

Harry had wanted to rush off to Godric's Hollow the very next day, but Hermione was not prepared to countenance such risky behaviour. Godric's Hollow was dangerous...that much was evident from the travesty that was once her Arithmantic projections. Honestly, if she didn't get some more information about what was happening in the outside world soon, all of her calculations would be next to useless.

Hermione had insisted that they practice Disapparating and Apparating while under the Invisibility Cloak and that they obtain some hair from a couple of strangers, and thus take Polyjuice too. Harry had thought her paranoid. He went along with her elaborate preparations only to humour her; he was so keen to visit his family home that he would have agreed to dying his hair or painting his toenails to keep Hermione committed to the plan. Yet, as the aching wonder inspired by the sight of the Potters' half-destroyed house dissolved into anxiety, the naïveté of Hermione's careful precautions became pressingly apparent. The old woman knew exactly who they were, Hermione was sure of it. She shouldn't have been able to see them at all, but she was staring right at them.

Instinctively, Hermione moved closer to Harry...the damaged house, the kissing-gate, and the plaque with its wreath of graffitied encouragement momentarily forgotten. The woman was tiny, hunched over and shrunken with age; her movements were clunky and awkward. It took her two attempts to free a hand from the folds of her coat, and she gestured for them to approach.

"How does she know?" breathed Hermione, but Harry merely shook his head.

The woman motioned once again.

"Are you Bathilda?" asked Harry suddenly, his voice loud in the snow-muffled silence of the outskirts of town.

The tiny, old woman nodded jerkily and beckoned to them once again. Hermione felt panicked, but at Harry's apprehensive glance, she nodded minutely. They'd come here to meet with Bathilda Bagshot, and here she was. It wouldn't do to run away now.

The moment she and Harry stepped forward, Bathilda turned and staggered off along the path by which they'd come. Hermione and Harry followed, slipping slightly on the compacted ice. Though the old woman looked unsteady on her feet, she moved surprisingly quickly.

Harry and Hermione had spent so long on the run that walking into the town of Godric's Hollow unencumbered by the Invisibility Cloak had felt reckless. Hermione had been ready for Death Eaters to swoop down any second, as if their presence were a flashing beacon. The feeling had faded somewhat in the sheltered graveyard behind the church. Illogically, the brightly coloured light that spilled across the snowy gravestones from the church's stained-glass windows and the sound of the parishioners carolling had given the scene a sense of serenity and security. She'd been reminded of the choir she'd sung with as a young girl, and of Christmases with her parents at the local church.

In contrast with how she felt now, however, Hermione's earlier dread felt like a whispered premonition: she was terrified *How on earth can this woman see us? How does she know who we are?*

The strange old woman led them through a gate of one of the nearby houses and up the garden path. The garden was overgrown, almost as badly as the house that had once been Harry's home, and the building was in desperate need of repair. It also stank. Hermione wrinkled her nose at the fetid air as she and Harry sidled past Bathilda and into the corridor. Perhaps it was the old woman who stank, rather than the house?

Once inside, Harry pulled off the Cloak and took the opportunity to stare down into the old woman's face. Hermione glanced around the hall. All the available horizontal surfaces, including the floor, were covered in a thick layer of dust. It didn't look as if Bathilda got out much, and their arrival was stirring up clouds of filth.

"Bathilda?" asked Harry again, the unfamiliar voice of his Polyjuiced form adding to the weirdness of the situation.

The old woman just nodded in reply, then turned away. As she headed into what was presumably a sitting room, she shouldered Hermione out of her path. Hermione flinched away from her touch: there was something oddly squishy and slightly repulsive about the way the old woman's body felt. The smell alone turned Hermione's stomach.

"Harry," she whispered as Bathilda disappeared through the door. "I'm not sure about this."

"Look at the size of her," he protested *sotto voce*. "I think we could overpower her if we had to." He saw that Hermione still looked apprehensive. "Listen, I should have told you, I knew she wasn't all there. Muriel called her 'gaga.'"

A radiator hissed suddenly in the adjacent room, and the unexpected sound made Hermione jump. Instinctively, she clutched at Harry's arm.

"It's okay," he said, gently prying her fingers from his arm and leading the way into the room behind Bathilda.

The old woman was busy lighting candles. Small stubs were balanced in all sorts of precarious places, secured by puddles of wax to dresser tops and cracked saucers. She was lucky she hadn't burned herself to death long ago. Hermione rubbed at the top of her arms in an attempt to stop a shivering that was not entirely based on the cold.

This woman should have been put into a home long ago, she thought, with a sudden rush of pity. She knew nursing homes could be pretty soulless places, but Bathilda clearly needed care. She wasn't coping.

"Let me do that," said Harry, crossing the room to where Bathilda stood and taking the matches.

Hermione bent to light a fire in the grate. The place was so filthy that, before she could do so, she had to clean up an inordinate pile of ash, sending a cleaning spell up the chimney for good measure.

"Mrs...Miss...Bagshot?" asked Harry suddenly. His voice shook slightly, and Hermione twisted on her heel to see what had affected him so. "Who is this?"

Hermione's bluebell flames caught on the dry wood she'd conjured, and golden light spilled across the room as Harry asked again.

"Miss Bagshot? Who is this person?"

He was holding out a framed photograph, and the old woman squinted down at it obligingly, but said nothing.

"Do you know who this is?" asked Harry, enunciating each word clearly and distinctly. "This man? Do you know him? What's he called?" Still Bathilda made no reply. "Who is this man?" repeated Harry, his frustration evident.

"Harry, what are you doing?" Hermione reached tentatively for his arm.

"This picture, Hermione, it's the thief, the thief who stole from Gregorovitch!" He swivelled back towards Bathilda, staring her in the face and willing her to respond. "Please!" he begged. "Who is this?"

Her continued silence was creepy. *Why won't she talk? Is there something wrong with her?* Why did you ask us to come with you, Mrs...Miss...Bagshot?" asked Hermione nervously. "Was there something you wanted to tell us?"

The old woman ignored Hermione completely. She was fixated on Harry's face, her head twisted up at an odd angle in order to compensate for her hunched posture. Gazing at him intently, she jerked her head towards the door.

"You want us to leave?" asked Harry in surprise. Hermione was similarly taken aback. They'd just got there. "Oh, right . . ." Comprehension dawned on Harry as Bathilda jerked her head again, this time pointing at his chest, then at herself, then at the ceiling. "Hermione," said Harry, "I think she wants me to go upstairs with her."

"All right, let's go." Hermione wanted to hang around in this house about as much as she wanted to stab herself through the foot with a Basilisk fang, but they'd come here for a purpose. They needed to find the sword of Gyffindor.

Bathilda, however, clearly had no desire for Hermione's company either. She shook her head almost violently and pointed at Harry again, and then herself. She did not point at Hermione.

"She wants me to go with her, alone," remarked Harry unnecessarily.

"Why?" Anxiety pounded through Hermione. She absolutely didn't want to be separated from Harry.

"Maybe Dumbledore told her to give the sword to me, and only to me?" Harry sounded so hopeful.

"Do you really think she knows who you are?" *This whole thing could be a red herring. This woman is clearly out of her mind; why on earth should we trust her?*

"Yes," replied Harry, glancing back at Bathilda's face. "I think she does."

Against her better judgement, Hermione complied. "Well, okay then, but be quick, Harry."

Harry shot her a quick smile before turning back towards Bathilda. "Lead the way," said Harry gallantly and gestured towards the door. The old woman trundled off immediately, with Harry close behind; Hermione was left all alone.

Instinctively, her arms closed protectively around her upper body as she glanced around the dank, smelly room. Harry had found *and stolen*, she noted...that picture of the wand thief; it was more than likely that something else here would solve the mystery.

To Hermione's mind, the bookshelf presented itself as the most likely possibility...and besides, though Bathilda Bagshot might be well past her prime, she was once a formidable historian. There might even be books that would help them in their Horcrux search, perhaps something listing objects that could be traced back to the founders of Hogwarts.

"*Lumos*," she muttered as she crossed the room, pointing her wand to illuminate the shadowed cavities of the bookshelf. The sputtering candles offered very little assistance.

Most of the books were shrouded in dust that lay too thickly for Hermione to make out their titles. It was the exception that caught at her attention *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* by Rita Skeeter. The book had been roughly shoved into the bookshelf and lay across the top of several other titles. When she pulled it out to examine the cover, Hermione noticed the copy was brand new, the binding tight. It probably had never been opened.

A single sheet of note paper had been slipped inside the cover, and Hermione recognised the familiar curves and acid green colour of Rita's handwriting.

Dear Batty, she read, Thanks for your help. Here's a copy of the book, hope you like it. You said everything, even if you don't remember it. Rita.

For thirty endless seconds, Hermione stared down at the picture of Dumbledore that graced the cover. His image pulled his glasses down with one hand and regarded her curiously over the tops of the lenses. She knew...from the moment her hand closed around the book...what she was going to do, but it still took several moments to assuage her guilt about stealing from a senile old lady.

It's not like she's capable of reading it, she reasoned with herself. Besides, this book might be just what Harry and I need! Perhaps it contains an essential clue about Dumbledore's personality that will help us solve the mysteries! The word "Lies," isolated in the book's title, seemed to flicker before her eyes. She suddenly heard an echo of Snape and Jocelyn, calling her out on her moral choices. *Be honest, Granger, she lectured herself, you want to read this book because you're angry at Dumbledore, nothing more, nothing less.* Acknowledging the truth helped. *Doesn't mean I'm not going to take it, but at least I can admit why.* Glancing over her shoulder to check that neither Harry nor Bathilda had reappeared, Hermione pulled her beaded bag from the inside pocket of her coat and slipped in Rita's book. It was only as she returned the bag to the safety of her pocket that she heard the crash from upstairs.

"Harry?" she shouted, already moving towards the corridor as the question left her lips. She navigated around the coffee table and pushed through the doorway. She pounded up the stairs.

Halfway across the tiny landing, she saw their attacker. An enormous snake..*Nagini!* she realised...was poised to strike, its powerful body towered above her in an obscene display of strength, and wicked fangs gleamed in the light from her wand. Instincts kicked in, honed by hours spent training under Severus Snape, and she fired off a blasting curse as she dove out of the way, her body automatically curving to cushion her fall, her knees tucking under as she rolled and regained her footing.

She bashed her ankle against the dresser as she landed, but she ignored the pain. Her curse, unfortunately, missed the snake, smashing into the window and showering her with shards of broken glass. Several sunk into her arm and she cried out in pain.

The snake was unprepared for Hermione's fast evasive action, and Nagini's fangs had sunk into the doorframe near where Hermione had previously been. With a terrifying hissing sound, Nagini tore herself free. As she twisted around to find Hermione, her tail lashed out and struck Hermione on her already tender ankle.

Hermione fell backwards, crashing into a spindly chair, which snapped under her weight. The snake reared above her. Wrenching her wand arm upward, she fired a stunning spell directly into the head of the snake. With a loud bang and a flash of red light, the snake was blown back across the room. Hermione drew a gasping breath and pushed herself to her feet. She hadn't heard anything from Harry, but she refused to consider the possibility that she might have been too late. To her inordinate relief, he shouted out at just that moment.

"He's coming! *Hermione, he's coming!*" From the panic in Harry's voice, it was evident who "he" was: Voldemort.

Though Hermione had managed to hit the snake, it was far from stunned. As it thudded back onto the floor, it hissed madly. Harry dove across the bed, grabbing Hermione bodily and dragging her back with him. She shrieked as a piece of the splintered chair punctured the flesh on her hip. Though the middle-aged man Harry had transformed into was surely weaker than Harry himself, he managed to hoist the tiny figure Hermione had chosen and staggered towards the window. The snake reared up once again, lunging towards them.

"*Confringo!*" shouted Hermione. Firing curses while being physically lugged across a springy mattress by your best friend is a tricky task, and the spell went wide, ricocheting wildly around the room.

Harry jumped from the bed to the dressing table and then leapt from the window. Hermione screamed as a piece of glass slashed open her calf. Her fingers closed tightly around Harry's shoulder, and as they fell, the practice drills on which Snape had insisted paid off once again: distancing herself from her own pain, Hermione twisted them into nothingness.

They botched the landing terribly, thudding into a snowy hillside. It took Hermione several seconds to realise that it wasn't her screaming any more: it was Harry. She untangled her limbs from his...no easy task, as he was writhing on the ground...and pushed herself to her knees. The first thing she saw was Harry's broken wand, clutched in his hand; the second thing was the deep puncture marks of the snake bite on his forearm. Dread clutched at her heart.

For several seconds, Hermione knelt there, frozen with shock. She couldn't process what she needed to do first.

The wards. She realised suddenly. They couldn't afford for Voldemort or his Death Eaters to find them now. She sprang to her feet, staggering at the pain in her legs, and cast the protective spells that would keep their location hidden. The process took less than a minute, and at the same time, she managed to pull out her beaded bag with her other hand.

"*Accio antivenom!*" she shouted, with her hand thrust inside the opening. Nothing had ever looked as beautiful as that tiny phial of green potion. With trembling hands, Hermione cracked the wax seal and unstopped the bottle. *Topically or orally,* she remembered.

Harry had yet to stop screaming, ruling out oral administration. Wincing at the necessity, Hermione Silenced him; the sudden quiet was a balm to her ears. Immobilising him with a spell, she poured half of the dose she had into each of the two holes in his arm. The antivenom was absorbed so quickly that had she blinked, she might have imagined it to have disappeared.

That done, Hermione let out a long breath. She Summoned and erected the tent, and levitating Harry's body, she moved him inside, laying him on one of the lower bunks. She placed his broken wand on the floor beside the bed. Next, she treated the site of his snakebite with dittany, trusting that Snape would have mentioned it were it likely to interact poorly with the venom's antidote. By the time she was done, the Polyjuice had worn off, and the achingly familiar contours of Harry's face appeared, stretched and pinched with pain.

Once she was certain that she had arranged enough pillows to buffer his head against the solid internal tent walls and the bedposts, Hermione removed the Immobilisation Charm. Thus liberated, Harry began to writhe once more, his hands clutching at his neck and his face contorted by his now-silent screams.

The Horcrux. Fired by a new panic, Hermione tore at Harry's clothes, pulling them open to reveal the locket, which pulsed ominously against his chest. After only seconds

of trying to grasp hold of the Horcrux, Hermione immobilised Harry once again. The chain lifted easily enough, but with a growing sense of horror, she realised that the locket itself was fused to his skin. Looping the chain out from under his head, Hermione threw her weight against it. It wouldn't budge.

*What do I do? What do I do?*The Horcrux was obviously hurting Harry, and what's more, the idea of it stuck to him...joined to him...freaked Hermione out.*I have to get it off*

Closing her eyes, she pressed both palms against the warm flesh of Harry's chest.*Get a grip, Granger*, she instructed, forcing herself to take several deep breaths.*I am calm*, she told herself. When she opened her eyes, her hands had stopped shaking, and Hermione performed a complicated Severing Charm, slicing away the top layer of Harry's skin. When the Horcrux finally lifted free in her hand, relief washed over her. She stashed the Horcrux inside the beaded bag. As long as she could help it, no-one was wearing that again.

She applied more dittany to the wound she'd created. Almost certainly Harry would bear the scar for the rest of his life...although, she comforted herself morosely*At least he will have a life.*

Before Hermione removed the Silencing Spell and the Immobilisation Charm for the second time, she checked over the rest of Harry's body. He had several large bruises and a couple of small glass cuts. The cuts were easy enough to heal, and the bruises just needed time. Only then did she remove the charms, holding her breath hopefully that Harry would be calm and quiet.

With the Horcrux gone, he was no longer writhing to the same extent, but he was far from restful. His body twitched nervously, and his brow was feverish. As she watched, he muttered unintelligibly and twisted his head against the pillow. His eyes were screwed shut.

Hermione wasn't sure what to do next; she didn't know how to help him. As she sunk back on her heels, despair prickling with tears at the back of her eyes, the aches and pains of her own body clamoured for attention. Keeping most of her attention on Harry, she catalogued her injuries: there were a number of glass cuts...the worst of them the gash on her leg...a scraped ankle, a gouged hip and a number of other miscellaneous cuts and bruises.

The careful application of dittany dealt with most of her problems, and, ironically, she used one of the charms gleaned from her intimate perusal of Molly's copy of *The Healer's Helpmate* to mend her ankle. *Take that, Ginny Weasley*, she commented, but the attempted levity fell so flat she wished she hadn't bothered.

Even after Hermione had healed her own wounds, Harry was still delirious and feverish. Hermione pulled a shallow bowl from her beaded bag and filled it with water. Summoning a flannel, she began to mop down his face.

"Come on, Harry," she muttered as she worked. "Open your eyes, talk to me."

She was washing his right arm when his fingers twisted in hers and gripped gently onto her hand. Her eyes flew to his face, delighted to see him staring back at her.

"Harry!" she exclaimed.

"Hermione," he replied wonderingly. He gazed around, a bemused crease between his eyes. "Where are we?" he asked.

Relief drained away as quickly as it had blossomed. "We're," she broke off and had to swallow before she could continue. "We're in the tent, Harry. You were attacked by You-Know-Who's snake."

"Ah," Harry nodded wisely. "That makes sense." His brow cleared.

Involuntarily, the most pressing of Hermione's many questions tumbled from her lips. "How did he know we were there, Harry?" she asked, not expecting a coherent answer.

Harry looked back at her beseeching face with a sympathetic expression. "He and the snake," he said slowly, reaching towards his temple with his free hand, "can talk to each other with their minds."

"They can?" demanded Hermione, sitting straighter in surprise. "Well that proves the snake is..." she broke off, horrified. Speechless, she watched as Harry's eyes rolled back in his head, leaving him unconscious once more. *That proves the snake is a Horcrux*, she'd been going to say, but the logical corollary of that premise had gripped her gut like ice and frozen the words in her mouth.

The only other living thing that can talk to Voldemort with his mind . . . is Harry

The rest of that long, horrific vigil, Hermione sat beside her unwell best friend. She held his hand while he screamed, she bathed his fevered forehead, she held his body down when he thrashed around and threatened to injure himself. Every now and again, she wept. Throughout it all, Hermione fixated on her realisation, turning it over and over in her mind. She wanted to doubt her intuition, but logic told her she was correct: it made too much sense of things that had always been strange.

She would just have to work out a way to deal with it...a way that kept Harry alive . . . without giving Voldemort another escape route from death.

A / N : I have two quick thing to say. Firstly, one of my readers pointed out that by shifting the Fidelius Charm earlier on Shell Cottage, I contradicted the book. Now, I thought it was going to be fine because Ron would have been able to tell them about the house despite the charm, they just wouldn't have been able to see or find it until they knew the secret (think about the DEs outside Grimmauld Place, they clearly "knew" the house was there, they just couldn't see it). I remembered Harry seeing people run towards him once he arrived at Shell Cottage with Dobby, which would have worked fine, but when I checked back, JKR does actually mention that he sees a cottage in the distance. So, SORRY!!! I failed in my attempt not to contradict canon, but it is only minor and I hope that you'll forgive me. :) Because really, why wasn't the house already secret kept?? Did Bill have no qualms about leaving his young wife alone while he was off at work, even though the Ministry was controlled by Death Eaters??? Okay, enough of that.

Secondly, guess what comes next week in the story?? I'll give you a hint: the chapter, written from Snape's perspective, will be called "Special Delivery"!!

Special Delivery

Chapter 11 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

LXo and WriterMerrin rock my world. Seriously.

"Enough, Alecto," sneered Severus, forcing up the Muggle Studies teacher's wand with a languorous wave of his own. "Evidently the boy's dearest wish is to follow in the footsteps of his far-from-illustrious parents; you would punish him more acutely by denying him the opportunity."

From where he lay, sprawled on the floor, Neville Longbottom gave Severus Snape a glare of unadulterated hatred.

"What?" squawked Alecto. "Not punish him at all?"

"I suggest you give him lines," replied Severus dryly. "It's hard to feel like a hero writing lines."

"Not as much fun for me, but," grumbled Alecto sourly.

"Nor for him...which is, I believe, the point." Severus punctuated his sentence with a raised eyebrow. Stepping over Longbottom's still prone-body, he swept away. "You'd best send him to the Hospital Wing, first," he called back over his shoulder. "Otherwise he'll leave bloodstains on the pages."

Severus was counting the hours until the Hogwarts Express left for Christmas, and he glanced at his watch: eighteen hours, forty-three minutes and fifteen seconds. It wouldn't come a moment too soon.

Predictably enough, the Dark Lord summoned Severus the evening that the students left. And while Severus held out little hope of a festive, enjoyable encounter, the meeting proved worse than anticipated.

To begin with, Lucius waylaid him moments after he entered the manor.

"A word, Severus," he remarked from a shadowed doorway, beckoning autocratically.

"Lucius," responded Severus, stepping through into what proved to be a narrow passage.

Lucius shut the door firmly behind them, cutting off all source of light. In the darkness, he stood very close to Severus and reached out to grip his upper arm tightly.

Severus sighed through his nose and pulled out his wand. *Lumos*," he said softly.

In the shadowy light of his wandbeam, Lucius' white-blond hair gleamed eerily, and his scowl carved dark lines down his face.

"How did you know she was mine?"

Jocelyn. Severus' stomach clenched. "She's not," he replied curtly.

"What in Salazar's sweet name are you up to, Severus?"

"Slytherins," replied Severus in an apparent non sequitur, "look out for their own."

"That is not much of an explanation."

"Last year a blonde, Muggle-born witch was sorted into Slytherin. Before the Muggle-born legislation took effect, I decided she needed a new identity. She also needed a new wand, and Runcorn needed convincing." Severus shrugged.

"So, you told him she was my bastard."

"Lucius, I merely commented on the colour of her hair."

"She looks like me." It was a statement, not a question. Severus realised that Jocelyn's arrival that afternoon on the Hogwarts Express was the first time Lucius had met her.

"She is blonde, Lucius, nothing more."

"She could be mine." Lucius sounded unexpectedly belligerent. "What's the mother like?" he queried urgently. "Did you meet the supposed father? I'm serious, Severus, she *could* be mine."

The back of Severus' throat was dry. What had he done? He should have sent her off to Krum with the other Muggle-borns. He was a fool.

"I want to take a paternity test," insisted Lucius.

"If you do," replied Severus, "the results will be automatically sent to the Ministry. If she's not yours . . ." He let the unfinished sentence hang in the air.

She's not yours! She couldn't be Lucius' daughter; it wouldn't be fair.

"Afterwards," responded Lucius after a long moment, conceding he would wait.

Would Draco be as spoilt were he not an only child? wondered Severus. Unwillingly, he nodded his agreement to Lucius' suggestion. *After what, though? That was the question.*

"I will take care of her, Severus," promised Lucius, but the words provided Severus with no comfort.

"Where is she now?"

"In the nursery, with several house-elves. I didn't want her to attract the Dark Lord's attention."

"Very good."

After several seconds of Lucius' careful scrutiny, Severus was permitted to leave. He walked away feeling unexpectedly bereft; despite his intentions, he felt as if he'd just betrayed Jocelyn.

When he swept into the drawing room where the Dark Lord waited, the bound figure of Luna Lovegood hit him like a sharp slap. With a mild sneer, he lifted his robes fastidiously and stepped over her, walking directly towards Voldemort and dropping to one knee.

"Good evening, my Lord," he said, ignoring not only Lovegood but also the handful of Death Eaters in attendance.

"Ah, Severus, my dear boy. How lovely to see you . . . No need to introduce you to our guest, of course. Bellatrix was just trying to decide which piece of the poor girl to send as a warning to Lovegood senior."

Bellatrix giggled nastily. "And such a pleasant decision! Perhaps a finger?"

Severus rolled his eyes as he rose to his full height. "You never did have a grasp of subtleties, Bella. A handful of hair would be far more effective."

"You're soft, Snape," snarled Bellatrix, jabbing her wand viciously to punctuate her sentence. Green sparks flew from the end, missing Severus by mere millimetres.

Severus raised a disparaging eyebrow. "If you maintain the illusion that he might receive the girl back unharmed, he's far more likely to comply with good grace. Push him to the point where he fears her dead already, you run the risk of outright defiance."

Voldemort laughed at the spasm of rage that marred Bellatrix's once pretty face. "Sseverus is the consssumate Ssslytherin," he hissed. "Hair it shhhal be."

"Please, my Lord," remarked Severus, affecting a look of faint distaste and waving one hand in the vague direction of the trussed Ravenclaw, "I see enough of the little blighters during term time . . . I had hoped to be spared this evening."

Voldemort laughed a second time. "Draco!" he ordered. "Put her in with the other one. Tonight," he continued, turning to the assembled crowd, "we have much to celebrate: the New Year beckons, and this year, this year victory will be mine!"

"Headmaster!" cried Phineas, skidding into his portrait. "They are camping in the Forest of Dean! The Mudblood..."

"Do not use that word!" snarled Severus, interrupting Phineas even as he pushed up from his chair in response to the information the portrait had delivered.

"...the Granger girl, then, mentioned the place as she opened her bag and I heard her!"

Good work, Granger.

"Good. Very good!" exclaimed Dumbledore excitedly. He, too, was up out of his chair. "Now, Severus, the sword! Do not forget that it must be taken under conditions of need and valour...and he must not know that you give it! If Voldemort should read Harry's mind and see you acting for him..."

"I know," responded Severus irritably, silencing Dumbledore by grasping hold of the frame of his portrait and swinging it open. Reaching inside the hidden cavity, he pulled out the sword of Gryffindor and hefted it in his hand. He pushed Dumbledore's portrait back into place with an audible click.

"And, Severus, be very careful,"...Dumbledore continued to shower Severus with instructions as he collected his broom and crossed the room towards the door..."they may not take kindly to your appearance after George Weasley's mishap..."

"Don't worry, Dumbledore," he replied from the threshold. "I have a plan . . ."

One that doesn't involve showing myself to Potter, he added irritably as he ran down the stairs.

The Forest of Dean covers 110 square kilometres of Crown land in the western part of Gloucestershire, a circumstance that makes stumbling upon a small, magically concealed tent rather difficult. Luckily for Severus, he did, indeed, have a plan...although how exactly Dumbledore had imagined he might find the fugitives was to remain a mystery.

Broomstick and sword in hand, Severus Apparated as close to the middle of the forest as possible. He arrived, Disillusioned himself, cast a quick *Homenum Revelio* to ensure he was alone, then put his broom to immediate use, sweeping a small patch of ground free of snow. With a carefully controlled *Gouging Spell*, he scraped a small amount of dirt from the frozen earth.

That done, Severus took great care to extract two pieces of paper from an inside pocket: a photograph, torn neatly along one edge, and a short, handwritten note on a piece of folded parchment. Severus put the photograph of Hermione Granger and the note...signed with her own name and in her own hand...on the ground, one either side of the small pile of dirt. Had he also owned a piece of her hair or a drop of her saliva, Severus could have tracked her anywhere. With only two of the three necessary ingredients, the spell would be far less effective, but hopefully still strong enough that the entire forest would fit within its geographical limits.

Severus leant over the odd arrangement of things and let a long string of saliva drop from his mouth onto the small pile of dirt, stirring the two together into a thick paste with the tip of his wand. After all, he'd kissed her...once...and that might be enough to tip the magic in his favour. Once the mud he'd made was smooth, he used it to trace the rune for protection on the ground above her photo, and the rune for questing above her note. In the middle, he wrote the rune for answer.

"*Ostendo mihi via*," he declaimed. He felt the tug on his wand almost immediately. Scooping up his photograph and letter, he tucked them back inside his robes. Conjuring a broad leather belt, he buckled it on and hooked the blade of the sword through it, supported by the crosspiece. Then he mounted his broom.

The night air was crisp and clear, and above the treetops the stars shone brightly. Severus let his wand steer, holding it pressed flat against the handle of his broom so that the tug it felt towards Granger pulled him in the right direction.

This year, his opportunities to fly had been few and far between, and Severus revelled in the clean air that filled his lungs, the rush of wind through his hair, the joyful rightness of acting against Voldemort.

After twenty minutes or so, his speed dropped slightly before his broom settled into a tight, looping circle over a small clearing. Looking down, Severus saw no sign of the tent, but that was only to be expected. Pulling his wand free from the handle of his broom, he turned away, landing at a distance of around 400 metres, where the unavoidable noises of his arrival would pass unnoticed.

Granger's presence continued to register as a compulsive tug on the end of his wand, and Severus let it guide his footsteps, creeping back towards the tiny clearing. With his senses on high alert, Severus felt the wards before he triggered them. Gently, ever so gently, he pressed a hand flat against the defensive magical barrier. The familiar sizzle of Granger's magic swept over him; he felt like an addict under the first rush of a long-denied drug.

Only with great effort did he manage to wrench his eyelids open and to pull his hand away. *Don't be a fool, Snivellus*, he rebuked himself. Resolutely turning his back, Snape set to work searching for a place to hide the sword.

A short distance from the tent, he found the perfect set up: a deep pond, covered in a thin layer of ice, and several positions from which he could keep an eye on unfolding events without being seen. It took very little time to stash his broomstick behind a tree, to crack the icy surface of the pond with the sword of Gryffindor, and to let the heavy sword slip below the ice. He charmed the pond to repel all attempts to retrieve the sword by magic and then removed all traces of his footprints. Taking up his position behind the tree, he cast his *Patronus*.

The silver doe burst from his wand with a flourish. She turned to look at him over her shoulder, blinking her large eyes. Then, she was gone, bounding away through the

trees. Severus shut his eyes and pressed his forehead against the nearest tree. The silver glow of his Patronus lingered on his retina. *Please*, he urged the universe, *let Granger be the one who gets the message*.

It was a good ten minutes before the silver glow of the doe's return was visible between the trees, and by then, Severus was tense with anticipation. Her delicate movements became closer and clearer, but still the luminescence of her form blocked the figure who followed behind. Only when she reached the pool and turned around could Severus make out Potter's pale face and his shock of unruly hair.

Disappointment tasted like dirt in his mouth, and his glowing, hopeful Patronus flickered and disappeared.

"*Lumos!*"* shouted Potter suddenly, fear evident in his voice.

Severus bit back the caustic comment that rose unbidden to his lips. The boy would have done better to Disillusion himself silently, rather than broadcast his position to whomever was watching. *Will the boy ever learn?*

Potter lifted his wand, peering around him nervously. As he caught sight of the sword, glimmering in the light of his wand, he twitched visibly and turned back for a better look. He peered down at the sword, then dropped to his knees beside the pool. For a long moment he hovered there, seemingly frozen, before raking the light from his wand around the perimeter of trees. Severus narrowed his eyes against the glare, unconcerned by the possibility that Potter would see through his Disillusionment charm.

"*Accio Sword!*"* muttered Potter. When he had no luck with the Summoning Charm, he pushed himself to his feet and began to pace around the lake.

How much longer? wondered Severus, allowing himself the luxury of rolling his eyes. A noise behind him caught at his attention, and he twisted his neck suddenly. After the bright light of Potter's wand, the darkness was impenetrable. Severus pressed his eyes closed and forced himself to count to fifteen, opening them only once his pupils had adjusted. There was someone else wandering around the forest, and a sudden panic gripped his stomach with an icy hand. *Granger?*

Severus glanced back towards Potter, who had stripped down to his underpants and was shivering indecisively on the edge of the pool. *Briefs...who knew?* noted Severus, smirking automatically. Visibly steeling himself, the boy jumped.

"NO! Wait!"

The shout...in a man's voice...came from about fifty metres away, and Severus' wand was pointed at the source within seconds. He wouldn't be responsible for Potter's death at this late stage of the game.

The shock of the cold water seemed to have diverted Potter's attention. For several seconds, his head was visible above the water, desperately gasping air. Though the shrubbery to his right was shaking as something or someone moved within it, Potter failed to notice. Instead, he ducked his head below the water.

Moments later, Ronald Weasley appeared, shouldering his way through a particularly dense patch of undergrowth with some difficulty. "You don't jump into a pool, you idiot!" he continued, clearly oblivious to the fact that Harry was in no state to hear him. "You could have broken your back!"

Severus could only assume that the Deluminator's mysterious secondary function had led the idiot boy here at such an opportune moment.

Weasley jogged across the clearing as he spoke. "Harry?" He was leaning over the pool. "Harry?" he asked more urgently. "What the hell are you doing?" By the time he'd asked his last question, he'd dropped his rucksack. "You're a complete nutcase!" he declared loudly as he stepped down on his own heel and levered his foot out of his boot. The second boot went the same way. Squatting first on the edge of the pool and placing his weight on his arms, Ronald Weasley lowered himself into the water.

Grudgingly, Severus tabled the possibility that Ronald Weasley was not as stupid as he had always believed.

For ten seconds, the clearing was eerily silent.

With an enormous splash and a gasping breath, Weasley broke through the surface of the pond. Grunting and spluttering, he levered Potter's body over the side. Sucking in another breath, Weasley disappeared once more. The second time was shorter, and within moments he was tossing the sword of Gryffindor onto the bank and pulling himself up behind it. Still on his knees, he shook Potter's shoulder. The boy-who-had-lived-once-before seemed to be choking.

"Come on, mate," Weasley urged through chattering teeth. Grabbing the sword, he levered the blade up awkwardly, sawing at whatever it was that Potter had managed to catch around his neck.

Severus held his breath.

"Thank fuck," swore Weasley as the sword did its job. Pushing himself to his feet, Weasley pulled on his boots, stamping and coughing in an attempt to warm himself. A severed piece of chain and a locket swung from one hand, the sword dangled from the other.

Hasn't he ever heard of Warming Charms? wondered Severus, studiously ignoring his own relief, as Potter retched into the snow.

Noting Potter's return to full consciousness, Weasley jabbed viciously at an offending piece of snow with the point of the sword.

"Are...you...*mental?*"* he demanded aggressively.

Time to make my move, decided Severus. Potter was alive, he had the sword, and Weasley had returned. The gruesome twosome would probably take longer than most to get over the shock of their reunion and search for their mystery benefactor, but it still behoved Severus to move now. *Besides, with those two accounted for . . .*

As Severus mounted his broom and pushed off, a crazy, foolish idea blossomed. Against all logic, against his better judgement, he flew back towards the tent. Soaring over the trees, he calculated that he had at least ten minutes' lead on the two boys.

He found the clearing easily. Pulling up his broom, he landed gently on a patch of exposed dirt and picked his way along a tree root to the edge of the wards, careful not to leave footprints. Then he leant up against the wards, letting the force of them hum gently against his skin.

You couldn't teach a person for six years, including one year of intensive private lessons, without knowing their magical signature intimately. He felt his way through the different layers of protection she'd used: none would stop a friend, though cumulatively, they hid the tent from view. Moving carefully, he grasped hold of the wards and slipped through.

One long stride was enough to move him from the root on which he had balanced to a trampled patch of earth near the door. There was no need to conceal his footprints here. At the door of the tent, Severus Snape hesitated: he was about to do something very stupid and very selfish. If Potter came back and caught him . . . Pushing aside the whisperings of his conscious...which sounded suspiciously like Albus Dumbledore...Severus ducked his head into the tent.

"Granger?" he asked softly. There was no response.

Severus shot a cautious glance back over his shoulder in the direction from which he'd come. No sign yet of Potter and Weasley. Throwing caution to the wind, he slipped inside.

The inside of the tent was deliciously warm and lit by a small basin of flickering blue-tinted flames. Severus spotted Granger almost immediately...fast asleep on a bunk bed

against the far wall...and crossed soundlessly to her side. Setting his broom to hover in the air, he squatted near her head, lowering his face to her level.

Hermione Granger slept on. Her hair was loose, covering the pillow with a riot of curls. Her lips were slightly parted, and there were dark shadows under her eyes, visible even in sleep. Severus flared his nostrils, taking in the sleepy, heady scent of her.

She looked so fragile, and it suddenly felt desperately important not to wake her. Severus didn't want to see her peaceful expression replaced with alarm. Reaching out...with infinite care...he brushed the fingers of one hand along her hair.

She didn't stir.

Emboldened, Severus pushed his fingers into the soft mass of curls, wrapping one around his finger and savouring the soft spring and slippery smoothness...so different from the feel of his own locks.

Her hair.

The idea caught in his throat. Dare he? Yes. Moving more quickly now, but still careful not to wake her, he extricated one curl from the cloud of its companions, choosing from the centre, where she wouldn't notice the loss. With a non verbal charm, it severed cleanly, and he tucked the abruptly shortened strands back in among the others. He rocked back on his heels.

I have to go. Still he crouched there, unwilling to leave. *Severus*, he warned himself. Reluctantly, he stood. His hand closed around the handle of his broom, Granger's curl cradled to his chest with his other hand. *Now, Severus, now!*

He left.

Once out of the tent, he took to the sky, careful to put enough distance between himself and all three Gryffindors such that the sound of his Apparation was heard only by the wild creatures of the Forest of Dean.

A / N : I know, I know!! So close, and yet so far! You can be sure to leave me a nice, long review telling me exactly how cruel that was. :)

Let me note that in this chapter I have deliberately and wilfully deviated from the letter of canon for the first and hopefully only time. This is what I've ignored (two lines of dialogue, from p.690 of the US edition of DH):

"And you still aren't going to tell me why it's so important to give Potter the sword?" said Snape as he swung a travelling cloak over his robes.

"No, I don't think so," said Dumbledore's portrait. "He will know what to do with it."

I am off to post a long diatribe on my livejournal account as to why; there's no need for me to put that all here. (username: grrangerous, with a double 'r')

On another, and equally important note, next week I begin a new job, and I really don't know how much free time I'm going to have. :(I should be set to keep the next couple of chapters coming weekly, but things might get tricky. I can only suggest that you leave me lots of encouraging reviews so that I feel obliged to satiate my readers rather than my employers. :)

Have a great week!

Logical Solutions

Chapter 12 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Twelve : Logical Solutions

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

As usual, thank you to my marvellous beta readers, LAXo and WriterMerrin, without whom this story would be even more of a grammatical mess than it currently is.

"Hermione?"

For a tense moment, she considered ignoring him, but after several seconds spent scowling at *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, Hermione pressed the tip of one finger against the page to mark her spot and looked up. Though she focussed her eyes on his freckled face, she was thinking of something else.

How could he be so close and not bother to talk to me?

"Yes, Ron?" she asked in an exasperated tone, staring at him and pointedly raising both eyebrows. She knew that she wasn't really playing fair, that she wasn't really even mad at her red-headed friend, but it didn't make it any easier to forgive him.

"Er, cup of tea?"

Hermione blinked. The larger, grumpy part wanted to say no on principle...but then she wouldn't get the tea. The longer she stared at him, the more nervous Ron looked.

"Fine," she ground out eventually, rolling her eyes at the relief that suffused Ron's face and returning immediately to her book. Rita Skeeter was a complete cow, there was no doubt about that, but the book was fascinating. Even knowing that at least half of the observations Rita wrung from her data were patently false, the whole she'd

compiled was a train wreck Hermione couldn't help but observe.

Take Dumbledore's sexuality, for example. Had Hermione ever thought about it (not that she had), it would have been obvious that the man was gay. Rita, however, was far wide of the mark if she seriously thought that there was something untoward in Dumbledore's relationship with Harry. The idea was laughable. Still, she was hopeful that Harry wouldn't read that chapter...particularly since Hermione had been reassuring him for months now that the blasted old man loved him. Harry hadn't really ever grasped the sensational untruths of Rita's prose style, nor the subtleties of love that would help him process the information contained therein.

Then there was the chapter about Snape; Hermione sighed at the thought. At just that moment, Ron returned with her cup of tea. He placed it on the table near her elbow and smiled tentatively.

"All right, Hermione?" he asked.

Hermione glared back.

Has he known how to find us this entire time?

Unexpectedly, she shut the book with a snap, banging it down on the table with slightly too much force. Her tea slopped dangerously close to the edge of the cup.

"You," she commanded, pointing imperiously at Ron, "sit."

He sat immediately, his knees folding and his body collapsing into a chair at the force of her command like an obedient dog. The resemblance was emphasised when he matched his expression to action, gazing at her with wide eyes and a hopeful-yet-anxious puppy dog stare.

"You're a fountain of news in your conversations with Harry," she commented a little petulantly. "I've a few questions of my own."

"Okay," replied Ron, apprehension winning out over hope.

"You can start with the Muggle-born Registration Committee: is it still running? How many people have been sent to Azkaban? What happened to those we helped escape?"

Ron cleared his throat and ran one hand nervously through his hair. "The Committee is still running," he began. In his willingness to please, his voice assumed the sing-song tone he'd developed for his OWL exams; Hermione had to smother a smirk. "Umbridge is still in charge, although there aren't so many trials any more. Most of the Muggle-borns that the Order knew about have disappeared. No-one's really sure where they are...Bill thinks that the Death Eaters don't even know."

"So they aren't in Azkaban?" Hermione took a large mouthful of her tea; the warmth of it helped to counter the shiver that thoughts of Azkaban invoked.

"Well . . . at first the Order thought they were, but Dad managed to get a look at some of the records. It doesn't look like they're keeping enough prisoners to account for everyone who's missing."

"How do they know they're not dead?" *Why was Voldemort keeping Mudbloods alive anyway? Why not save himself the trouble of storing and feeding them?*

"Sure, that's always a possibility." Ron looked concerned, but not as grim as the subject matter deserved. "But, unless they've found some way of circumventing the Official Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, it's not very likely."

Hermione felt sure that Ron was parroting conversation he'd heard from his older brother. When had Ron ever used the word "circumventing?"

"Bill says that corrupt Ministry officials and Death Eaters are always trying to get Gringotts to give them access to the vaults of convicted Muggle-borns and those listed as suspected or missing...the goblins always refuse, of course, they're staying neutral."

"Like Switzerland," commented Hermione, adding, "never mind," at the look of blank confusion on Ron's face. She swirled the last of her tea before tipping back her head and swallowing it down.

"Anyway," continued Ron, "from what Bill could make out, the second list was much longer than the first. Plus, the Ministry stopped publishing the list of suspected Muggle-borns who were wanted for questioning ages ago. Dad reckons it was getting embarrassingly long. The list still exists, of course, it's just not published in *The Daily Prophet* any more."

"Bill doesn't know where they all disappeared to?" asked Hermione thinking of Viktor. *Was Dumbledore really so paranoid? The right hand doesn't know what the left is doing?*

Ron grimaced and shook his head. "They could turn out to be in Azkaban after all, or held in some other prison somewhere."

"So, no-one in the Order was helping Muggle-borns escape?" In a way, the deliberate nonchalance with which Hermione phrased the question made it more offensive.

"Kingsley was!" replied Ron a little indignantly. "He was smuggling them through the Prime Minister's office and into Muggle society. But, as I said before, he was caught by the Taboo fairly early; he's on the run just like us."

"Hmm." Hermione crossed her arms. "And those we helped escape?"

"From what Bill knew, it seemed most of them got away." Ron paused awkwardly. "He wasn't very impressed that we'd gone to the Ministry, though."

Hermione pursed her lips and made no immediate reply. In retrospect, she thought it was a pretty stupid idea herself. If they'd dared to trust Arthur Weasley, he would have been able to discover...if not recover...the locket far more safely than they. There were several rather dangerous elements about Dumbledore's insistence that they do this alone. *What the hell was he thinking?* she wondered for the umpteenth time. *What is it that we're supposed to work out?*

Thoughts of Dumbledore pulled her eyes inevitably back towards Rita's book, and she reached out a hand to pull it towards her. "I'm going to read on the bed," she announced, not quite talking to Ron, but rather in his general direction. His shoulders drooped slightly at the realisation the conversation was over.

"Okay. I'll just wash up." Ron grabbed their empty mugs and headed for the kitchen.

Once settled on the bed, Hermione stared at the pages of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* unseeingly. Asking questions about events outside the thin walls of their tent had brought to mind thoughts of the one person she was trying to ignore: Snape.

How could he be so close and not speak to me?

Hot tears pricked at the back of her eyes. *Pull yourself together, Granger*, she berated herself ineffectually. *What did you expect him to do? Drop by for a cup of tea? Wake you up and kiss you full of Felix Felicis?* Hermione was ashamed at how selfish her desires were. Rolling onto her side, with her back to the main space of the tent and Rita's book propped in front of her face, Hermione let several self-pitying tears slide down into her pillow.

She wanted to speak to him more than she could have believed possible.

And last night he was so close Disappointment and loneliness tasted like acid across the back of Hermione's throat, and she bit her lip to hold back a sob. A litany of unanswerable questions pounded through her head: *What would Snape have done if I had seen his Patronus and followed it rather than Harry? How long had he been watching anyway? Days, or hours?*

Maybe he saw me earlier in the evening and deliberately avoided me.

Hermione struggled to keep the sounds of her crying quiet. Ron had come back into the room and, after several minutes fidgeting with his backpack, had settled himself close to the tent door...near enough that he could talk with Harry, who was nominally keeping watch. Ron was tapping on a wooden wizarding wireless and muttering to himself while the dial span; the radio emitted bursts of occasional music interspersed with fuzzy white noise. His penitent politeness still held, however, and he'd turned the volume to a minimum.

Snape is a spy, Hermione reminded herself angrily. *He was here for a reason, not for a social visit.* Fishing under her pillow, her hand closed around the handkerchief she'd taken from him, and she blew her nose fiercely. *Come on, Granger.* Using a clean corner, she wiped her eyes.

The Life and Lies had slipped closed at some point during her tears, and now Hermione gripped hold of it with a new determination. *Right, Granger*, she told herself firmly, *you're going to read a whole chapter without thinking once about Snape* She opened the book and flipped back through several pages, looking for the place she had stopped.

When the coloured reproductions of Rita's primary sources caught her eye, she paused. Hermione ran one finger thoughtfully down the picture of Dumbledore's letter. It was strange to imagine the imposing wizard she had first met, and the manipulative man she had grown to know, as a boy her own age. Odd to think of him in love with a young man who would grow into a monster. Weird to see his uncharacteristic opinions on Muggles spelled out in an angled script recognisably his own...though the loops of his letters were somehow softer and rounder than the writing he had used over one hundred years later. She paused with her finger on his signature, dwelling on the distinctive lines of his name: so similar to his adult signature, yet not-quite-right nevertheless.

Was it the slant? she wondered, tilting the book slightly. Recognition hit like an absence of oxygen. Shakily, desperately, she forced herself to breathe. *Again?* Hermione's heart began to beat faster in intellectual excitement. *Was the odd sign something else Grindelwald had borrowed from Dumbledore? Hang on, Granger.*

Her mind was racing as quickly as her heart; she had to think about this clearly. Conjuring a sheet of parchment and a pencil, Hermione listed the places the sign had shown up, attempting a chronological order.

1. *Ignotus Peverell's grave*
2. *Durmstrang wall (left by Grindelwald? Or at least, so Viktor believes)*
3. *Dumbledore's letter/signature*
4. *Beedle Bard book (? could have been written in at any point)*
5. *Xenophilius Lovegood's necklace*

After a moment's contemplation, Hermione used the tip of her wand to lift item number four up the page, reinserting it between items one and two. A little wrist flick at the end of the wand movement renumbered her list. *After all*, she rationalised, *the book is old and was in Dumbledore's possession. He might have learned about it from the book . . . which would mean that Grindelwald came by it separately.* She furrowed her brow in thought. *Does that mean the sign has something to do with "The Tale of the Three Brothers"?* *Might it*, she wondered, articulating burgeoning hope, *provide an answer to the question of how to destroy the Horcrux without destroying Harry?*

Hermione could think of only one solution. Picking up *The Life and Lies*, she climbed out from her bunk and strode towards the boys.

Ron froze immediately, his wand extended out over the radio. "If it's annoying you, I'll stop!" he exclaimed nervously.

Hermione ignored him. "We need to talk," she said firmly, addressing Harry, who still sat in the doorway of the tent.

"What?" he asked, his eyes fixed mistrustfully on the book in her hand.

"I want to go and see Xenophilius Lovegood," she replied.

Hermione gave herself a vigorous mental shake. She was so angry about Xenophilius' comments on her limited intelligence that she couldn't think straight; the infernal clatter of the printing machine didn't help. How dare that crazy old man call *her* limited? He was the one with a Class B Tradable Material pinned on his wall! He was the one prancing around in a filthy nightshirt and talking about Wrackspurt!

Lovegood senior had calmly sat and spun them a foolish tale, one that took fairy stories as truth, blending them in with a mishmash of recycled historical facts. The Deathly Hallows indeed!

Without her logic and her "limited" intelligence, Harry would never have got through Snape's wall of fire in his first year; he wouldn't have caught Quirrell, and Voldemort would have risen to power years earlier. It was logic and the use of the Time Turner...permitted only because of her "limited" intelligence...that had saved Sirius' life; logic and cold, clean Arithmancy skills that had recognised the dangers of Dumbledore's plan last year with Snape and rescued the possible future of the wizarding world; it was her logic and FAR FROM LIMITED intelligence that had kept Harry alive thus far!

And yet here she was, standing in Xenophilius' work room, her throat bitter with the taste of his hideous Gurdyroot infusion, arguing *otto voce* with Harry and Ron over which of the three Hallows was truly worth having. What was the point? They didn't even exist!

How could she have been stupid enough to hope that Loony Luna's loopy father might have an answer to her Horcrux dilemma?

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Harry disappear up the stairs to the next level. "Harry," she exclaimed, "what are you doing? I don't think you should look around when he's not here!"

Harry, however, ignored her. Shivering slightly, Hermione wrapped her arms around her torso, rubbing absentmindedly at the top of her scar with one hand. The Erumpent Horn gave her the creeps. Solicitously, Ron patted her between the shoulder blades. It was comforting, reminiscent of the easy rapport they'd had before the Horcrux had poisoned their interactions; Hermione sighed softly.

Harry came back down the stairs only seconds before Xenophilius arrived from the downstairs kitchen with several bowls balanced on a tray. Once look at Harry's face was enough to tell Hermione something was the matter.

"What's wrong?"

"Mr Lovegood, where's Luna?" asked Harry, speaking past her. Hermione spun around, eyes narrowing as she noticed the panicked expression on Xenophilius' face.

"I...I've already told you. She is down at Bottom Bridge, fishing for Plimpies."*

"So why have you only laid that tray for four?"*

Vaguely, Hermione wondered how many detective shows Harry had managed to watch during his various stays at the Dursleys'; his accusative questioning style reminded her of *The Bill*...and seemed to work just as effectively.

"I don't think Luna's been here for weeks," continued Harry. "Her clothes are gone, her bed hasn't been slept in. Where is she? And why do you keep looking out the window?"*

Hermione had her wand out in seconds and was pleased to note that the boys did too.*It's a trap.* Her heart was pounding in her chest, but her hand was steady. *Dumbledore was right; we can't trust anyone...not even those who loudly proclaim their support* Keeping her wand trained on their host, Hermione glanced towards the window; her line of sight, however, was interrupted by the printing press. As if noticing her attention, the machine convulsed visibly and fell silent with one last bang. Several issues of the magazine slipped out from under the edge of the covering blanket. *What*, she wondered with sudden anxiety, *had Xenophilius hoped to hide?* Hermione bent and retrieved the nearest issue: splashed across the familiar face of her best friend were the words "Undesirable Number One."

"Harry," she said into the echoing silence as she held out the issue out towards him, "look at this,"*

Harry strode over immediately and glanced at the magazine, his face twisting bitterly. *The Quibbler's* going for a new angle, then?" he asked rhetorically. "Is that what you were doing when you went into the garden, Mr. Lovegood? Sending an owl to the Ministry?"*

"They took my Luna; because of what I've been writing."* Xenophilius breathed, his face creased into lines of desperation so personal that Hermione wanted to turn away. "They took my Luna and I don't know where she is, what they've done to her. But they might give her back to me if I...if I..."*

"Hand over Harry?"* she concluded.

"No deal," responded Ron. "Get out of the way, we're leaving."* He pushed past Hermione and stepped threateningly towards Xenophilius.

"They will be here at any moment," the old man replied, throwing out his skinny arms to block the doorway. "I must save Luna. I cannot lose Luna. You must not leave."*

"Don't make us hurt you," warned Harry. "Get out of the way, Mr. Lovegood."*

Hermione turned again to glance outside. There she saw a sight that flooded her system with adrenalin: two figures on broomsticks swept past the window. "HARRY!"* she shrieked.

Automatically, Harry and Ron span towards her, and Xenophilius seized his chance. Hermione's belated attempt at a shield charm was derailed when Harry's body slammed into her, throwing her to the ground; Xenophilius' Stunning Spell shot directly through the place where Ron had been and struck the Erumpent horn where it hung on the wall.

The room exploded: noise, dust, debris and bodies were blown outward. Hermione screamed as her body twisted back and across, she skidded across a length of floor and thudded into the curve of the wall. Her head throbbed. Over her own shriek, she heard Ron shout out; Harry, frighteningly, made no sound at all.

Moving gingerly, Hermione pushed herself to her feet. White dust covered her entire body: hands, clothes, hair *Okay, everything still seems to work.* To her complete and utter relief, her wand was undamaged.

Stepping over several broken pieces of the printing press, Hermione saw that the stairway down to the kitchen was completely blocked by debris...and there, struggling out from under a mound of destroyed *Quibblers*, was Harry.

Perhaps we'll get out of here, yet, she thought, hope blossoming at the sight of him.

And with that, the blessed clarity of logic returned. Hermione glanced around, cataloguing their situation rapidly. When she caught Harry's eye, she gestured for him to be quiet. Ron must have seen her, too, as he stopped muttering imprecations at the furniture that held his prone body to the floor and froze.

Downstairs, the door was thrown open violently.

"Didn't I tell you there was no need to hurry, Travers?" growled an unfamiliar voice. "Didn't I tell you this nutter was just raving as usual?"*

The bangs and squeals that followed indicated that the two Death Eaters were being far from gentle with their host. As the sounds of Xenophilius suffering filtered up the stairs, Hermione crept towards Ron. She was thinking fast. *We can't leave yet: we need to know exactly what Xenophilius tells them. Assuming the Death Eaters don't believe him, we can wait until they've gone, overpower Xenophilius and Oblivate him, then leave. Worst case scenario, we're going to need to Oblivate all three of them.*

Hermione was halfway to Ron when the situation got worse: while the Death Eater she had categorised as stupid was labouring under the misapprehension that Xenophilius had lured them to his house in an attempt to kill them, the other one...the calm one...had cast *Homenum revelio*. *Dammit*, she swore silently. She froze in place, one foot awkwardly balanced in midair.

The sensation was peculiar, as if a thin strip of cold light scanned over her body.

"There's someone up there all right, Selwyn,"* noted the other Death Eater, a new excitement ruffling the calm edges of his voice.

"It's Potter, I tell you, it's Potter!"* wailed Xenophilius. "Please . . ." he begged, "please . . . give me Luna, just let me have Luna. . . ."*

Too lazy...and not entirely convinced it wasn't part of an ambush...the Death Eaters set Xenophilius to clear the stairwell. Hermione used the sounds of his panicked sobs and noisy efforts to cover her own movements as she scrambled quickly over the rubble towards Ron. One non-verbal Hover Charm later, his legs were freed.

"Come on," Harry urged in a whisper, pulling Ron to his feet, "we've got to get out of here."*

Hermione was hunting around in her beaded bag and sighed with relief as she pulled out Harry's Invisibility Cloak. "All right."* She glanced over her shoulder at the top of the stairs. The remainder of the printing press was balanced across the opening. As she watched, it began to wobble: Xenophilius was nearly through.

"Do you trust me, Harry?"* she asked urgently. Her eyes were wide and round, emphasised by the white powder that lay over her lashes and across her cheeks.

He nodded, reaching out to take the Cloak. Hermione, however, didn't let go.

"Okay then."* Hermione's mind was still racing. "Give me the Invisibility Cloak," she instructed, gently pulling it back out of his grip. "Ron, you're going to put it on."*

"Me? But Harry..."*

"*Please, Ron!*"* Hermione was tempted to punctuate the rebuke with an uncharacteristic profanity, but she bit it back and raised one eyebrow instead *Hell, that works for Snape.* "Harry, hold on tightly to my hand, Ron, grab my shoulder."*

Obediently, the two boys did as they were told. Harry held out his left hand, clearly...and sensibly...unwilling to hold onto anything but his borrowed wand with his right, and after a second's thought, Hermione offered him her elbow. He took a firm grip. She could feel both of Ron's hands, hidden under the Cloak, close tightly around the upper part of her left arm.

"Hold tight," she muttered, focussed on the gap at the top of the stairs. The printing press was shaking violently. "Hold tight . . . any second . . ."

Harry shot her a worried look, but she shook her head minutely, her eyes didn't waver *There!*

The moment Xenophilius appeared, Hermione shouted, "*Obliviate!*" The spell hit him squarely in the face; he didn't stand a chance. Without hesitation, Hermione pointed her wand downwards. "*Deprimo!*" she cried.

Unfortunately, the hole she blew in the floor missed both Death Eaters, but did afford her a memorable...if fleeting...glimpse of their astonished faces as she, Ron and Harry dropped like stones.

Before Disapparating her friends to safety, a fleeting and ignoble thought crossed her mind: *Cool-headed reason just saved your life, Xenophilius; don't you forget it.*

Later that night, Hermione sat and stared out into the darkness, her insides churning with anger. After a completely unexpected series of events, she was now rather well-disposed towards Ron (his repeated comments regarding her genius and brilliance in the aftermath of their escape from the Lovegoods' had only helped to cement their rapprochement) and furious with Harry.

Harry.

Harry was giving her the creeps. Whenever he talked about raising the dead, an odd, disturbing light lit his eyes.

If the Hallows existed, Dumbledore would have told him, right?

Things were so complicated that Hermione was struggling to reason her way out. Was the story true? At one point, Harry had twisted the facts in such a way that she'd almost doubted her own sanity...but then he'd decided the so-called Resurrection Stone was hidden in the Snitch.

Bullshit. Just because the Snitch is small on the outside, doesn't mean it's small on the inside. There could be anything in there.

Surely Dumbledore could perform an Undetectable Extension Charm at least as well as she could. That thought alone was comforting.

There must have been a reason Dumbledore didn't tell Harry about the Hallows . . . was he worried that he'd get distracted by them? Worried he might give up on the quest to find the Horcruxes?

Hermione was chewing mercilessly on her lower lip.

So, why then did he give me the book? Did he want me to find the sign?

The answer, when it came to her, was obvious:

He gave me the book precisely so we'd know it was nothing but a fairytale! Dumbledore knew...just like he knew Ron might leave...that Harry would find the Hallows seductive. He had to make sure that I'd know the truth, to make sure I could keep him focussed on the Horcruxes. After all, that's my job: to keep Harry alive!

The comfort of that realisation was short lived, however, for thoughts of keeping Harry alive returned her attention to her other, seemingly insurmountable problem: how to destroy the Horcrux inside Harry without killing him in the process. By the terms of the assignment she'd accepted from Dumbledore, Hermione knew it to be her task...hers, and hers alone.

Distance and Magnitude

Chapter 13 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Thirteen : Distance and Magnitude

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 LAxo and WriterMerrin for their sterling work beta-ing this chapter.

The day after Severus delivered the sword to the trio and two days after Christmas, he was summoned by Voldemort.

"You alone, Severus, of all my Death Eaters, have yet to fail me . . ." Voldemort trailed off, one hand stroking Nagini between the eyes. The snake hissed gently and butted her head up into his palm.

"You honour me, my Lord."

Variants of this conversation were becoming typical.

For several minutes, neither man spoke. Twirling the stem of his glass absently in one hand, Severus stared into the fire and savoured a mouthful of one of Lucius' finer vintages. *Patience*, he reminded himself, *is a virtue*.

"The Potions master you studied under in Germany, Severus, where is he now?"

"Theophrastus Zelenogorski?" queried Severus, startled; the question was unexpected. "He retired some time ago. I understand that he returned to his native Bulgaria. I haven't heard from him in years."

"But you could find him?"

"I have his address somewhere." Severus regarded the Dark Lord curiously. *Where is this going?* he wondered.

Voldemort sighed. "There is something I need you to do, Severus: go to Bulgaria and find your elderly Potions master." Reaching into his robes, the Dark Lord drew out a framed photograph and passed it to Severus. "I need to know who this is. Zelenogorski is old enough and well-connected enough that he should know. Above all, Severus, you must be discreet."

Severus examined the laughing young man displayed in the photo. He stood in the sunshine, blond hair flung back over his shoulder, his hands on his hips. With a tap of his wand, Severus duplicated the image, passing the original back to Voldemort and tucking the copy safely inside his robes.

"Very good, my Lord," he conceded, draining his wine and rising to his feet. He gave Voldemort a low bow. "I shall leave this evening."

"Excellent." Voldemort waved a languorous hand in dismissal. "Make yourself a Portkey. I'll have Runcorn overlook the infraction at this end; since Bulgaria is notoriously lax, you should have no difficulties there."

Severus bowed again, turned on his heel and strode to the door.

Zelenogorski lived in a tiny town, far up in the Rila mountains, beside the ominously named Ledeno ezero, or "Icy Lake." Severus donned his warmest robes and a heavy travelling cloak in preparation. Once he'd checked the co-ordinates of Zelenogorski's address in Dumbledore's battered atlas, a Portkey was simple enough to produce.

The headmaster's portrait, for its part, had been uncharacteristically mum on the subject of Severus' newly assigned task. Severus took it as a blessing.

"Be careful," Dumbledore remarked at last as Severus fastened the last of his many buttons and firmly gripped the letter opener he'd transformed into a Portkey.

"As always, Albus," replied Severus and pressed the tip of his wand to the strip of ivory held in his other hand. *Portus.*"

With a flash of blue light, a sharp, tugging sensation behind his navel, and an uncomfortably extended rush of movement, Severus was transported from the warmth of his office into the middle of a blizzard. A bitter wind lashed his face with snow, and he struggled to maintain his footing. Where he thought to have found a house, Severus could make out little at all. Certainly, there was no welcome splash of light, no lit windows, no promise of a roaring fire.

Struggling forward against the elements, Severus realised that there was a building present only when the bulk of it blocked the wind and he stumbled forward, suddenly free to move with less difficulty.

"*Lumos*," he muttered, illuminating a curtain of snowflakes. Behind him, the snow was driven almost horizontal by the force of the wind; in front, it drifted gently into a sheltered courtyard. The house, just visible despite its proximity, was clearly abandoned. The nearest window was boarded closed, and the deep drifts of snow testified that no-one had been in or out in the recent past. Severus sucked in an irritated breath and let it hiss from between his front teeth.

Rotating slowly, he scanned his limited field of vision through narrowed eyes. From what he had seen on the map, the village itself was not far away. In this weather, however, a kilometre or so on foot might be the death of him. Taking his bearings carefully from the lay of the house, he struck out for the road and was disproportionately relieved when he found it only minutes later.

At some point earlier that day, the road had been ploughed, and both sides were lined with mounds of displaced snow almost as tall as Severus was himself. The drifts provided some protection from the wind, and the snow on the roadway itself was less than a foot high. Reassured, Severus set off for the town.

Twenty minutes...and innumerable Warming Charms...later, the lights came into view through the snow. Severus could not read Bulgarian, but even he could parse the creaking old-fashioned tavern sign and recognise it...with delight...for what it was.

"*Nox*," he whispered, tucking his wand into his sleeve and out of sight. Pushing open the heavy door, he stepped into a tiny antechamber where he stomped the snow from his boots and brushed the worst of it off his shoulders. Only then did he pull open the internal door and step into the blessed, welcoming warmth of the well-lit pub.

The barman greeted him with something completely incomprehensible.

"Entschuldigung bitte?" replied Severus.

"I said, it's a nice night for a walk," repeated the barman laconically, this time in German.

A hard snort of laughter escaped Severus unexpectedly. "Well said," he responded, squinting slightly as his eyes adjusted to the bright light and walking towards the bar.

The tavern was almost empty: two older men sat off in one corner, playing dominoes on a weathered wooden table, and a dark-haired woman sat at the bar with her back to the door. The barman was the only other occupant, and as Severus approached, he pulled a shot glass out from under the counter.

"This will warm you," he informed Severus, filling the glass with a crystalline liquid and pushing it towards him.

Gratefully, his fingers closed around the glass. Out of habit, Severus blew lightly across the surface of the liquid, checking it for poisons with a non-verbal charm, then he swallowed it down. The alcohol burned a trail to his stomach like a mouthful of molten steel; seconds later, warmth blossomed in his belly and spread, like tingling, crackling fire, to the tips of his extremities. His toes curled in appreciation.

"Another?" asked the barman, the bottle held out towards him.

"Ja!" replied Severus, nodding curtly but vigorously.

The barman looked perplexed for a moment and then laughed as he filled the glass. Holding up one finger, he admonished Severus gently. "You are in Bulgaria now: you nod for 'no,' shake for 'yes.' Understood?"

Always a fast learner, Severus shook his head.

"Very good."

The second shot went down as nicely as the first had.

"Now," added the barman, "you should ask me your question. No-one comes to the Ledeno ezero in December without good reason."

"I'm looking for an old friend of mine," replied Severus, "Theophrastus Zelenogorski. I had an urgent research question that I thought he might be able to solve."

"Aye," sighed the barman, shaking his head. "The old man passed two years ago. You're too late, I'm afraid."

At the edge of his peripheral vision, Severus caught a whisper of movement as the dark-haired woman at the end of the bar turned towards him. He swivelled towards her automatically as she began to speak.

"Better late than never, Severus," she remarked, in English. Her accented voice marked his name in an all-too-recognisable way.

His wand was out before she'd finished, held below the bar and shielded by his body so that only she would have seen it. Disbelievingly, his eyes raked her familiar face. As always, she was smiling. "Vector," he stated, his invocation of her name not quite a greeting.

"Here, I'm known as Ana," she replied. "Ana Sedenova."

"Old friends?" asked the barman, still speaking in German.

Septima Vector, once Anastasia, now Ana, turned and spoke to him in Bulgarian. Still smiling, she spoke again to Severus, "Have a glass of wine."

Is this a trap? What is she doing here? Severus had pushed his left hand into his pocket, and it closed firmly around his Portkey. He could activate it and be out of there in seconds.

"Put your wand away," instructed Ana. "It's the height of bad manners to wave it around in a pub."

The barman had wandered off and returned with a clean glass and a bottle of wine. He poured Severus a generous measure and topped up Ana's glass. Severus didn't move.

"I know what you did," murmured Ana, "and I know why you did it."

Severus swallowed. His throat was unaccountably dry. "What are you talking about?" he managed, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

Unfurling her napkin, Ana spread it out on the counter. Pinching two fingers, she pressed them to the soft tissue paper and then spread them wide. The space she demarcated opened like a window, revealing the shifting strands of her graphical matrix. Poking and prodding with her index finger, she zoomed in and shifted the perspective until only two lines remained visible: one black, one the colour of the red wine that filled her glass. Sweeping into the frame from opposite directions, the two lines crossed and wrapped each other once in the centre, before spinning off, back the way they came.

"The matrix never lies," she replied, pushing the serviette along the bar so that he could see the image more clearly. "I have been expecting you for some time now."

For several long moments, Severus said and did nothing, his eyes fixed on the unexpected diagram. Then, imperceptibly, his shoulders relaxed. Pulling out the stool adjacent to Ana's, he sat down, tucking his wand back into his sleeve yet holding his arm poised on his knee so that the tip of it covered the spot where she sat. If need be, he could have it out in the blink of an eye.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"To talk." Vector...Ana...smiled. "I confess, with some slight embarrassment, that Hermione Granger was several steps ahead of me. I only worked what happened out after the event. At that stage, though, I put two and two together . . . and, as you might imagine, such simple arithmetic poses no problems for a mathematician such as myself."

Severus inclined his head in a gesture of acknowledgement that gave nothing away, and took a sip of his wine. It was rough, but maintained a certain rustic charm...a far cry from the smooth beverage he'd sipped beside Voldemort earlier that evening.

"What are you doing here?" he asked next. *Of all the gin joints, in all the world . . .* he thought wryly.

"Oh, I came here with Viktor. Once the children started arriving *en masse*, we thought the mountains safer than the suburbs of Sofia."

Krum. "Then,"...his heart beat quickened..."the students are with you?"

"Yes, indeed. Thirty-eight of them, along with a number of Muggle-born adult wizards. We had so many children here that it became easiest to start a school. That way they stay occupied. Of more importance right now, however," continued Ana, "is the matrix. I've calculated as much as I can on the information I've got. I was hoping that you would be able to help me rectify some of the omissions."

Provide information? Severus swirled the liquid in his glass and watched the ripples move across the surface. A small tendril of elation unfurled in the pit of his stomach. For months, he'd been isolated, with only the slightly-insane portraits of ex-headmasters for company. He'd been fighting with Minerva, sneering at students, and risking his life to drop hints of danger that everyone ignored. He'd had to pass hours in conversation with Death Eaters he despised. He'd been forced to watch his friends, wards and colleagues tortured and killed before his eyes. Now, for the first time since Dumbledore's death, he was faced with someone who was willing to learn from the information he'd so awfully and painfully collated. There was nothing he'd like more than to pass on what he knew.

"I suppose I can survive the interrogation," he sneered, "but I'll need another glass of wine."

Ana, to nobody's surprise, smiled.

It took an hour and a half for Severus to answer all the questions she could think of. He relayed everything he knew about the Death Eaters and their movements, Voldemort's plans, the situation at the Ministry, circumstances at Hogwarts, the inmates of Azkaban, the movements of surviving Order members, the Muggle-born Registration Committee and the broader British political scene. He even passed on all the details he had surmised about Harry Potter's task and his current movements; Ana knew more about most things than Severus had anticipated.

"If it proved necessary," she asked as the conversation wound to a close, "you could contact Hermione?"

The presence of Granger's hair, safely bottled and tucked inside his robes, weighed on Severus' conscience as he considered the question. Phineas' portrait and Dumbledore's Deluminator came to his mental defence. He nodded.

"Good. You saw her recently," stated Ana. "How did she seem?"

"She . . . she seemed well." Severus paused momentarily, then added, "She was asleep, however, so I cannot speak about her state of mind."

"Oh," Ana looked up from her notes...an indecipherable mixture of Greek letters, Arithmantic fragments, Arabian numerals and shorthand abbreviations. "That's a shame. I imagine she would have liked to talk to you. Anyway, thank you. You have been very helpful."

"Perhaps you can answer a question for me," replied Severus on sudden impulse, pulling Voldemort's framed photo from his robes. "Do you know who this is?"

Ana took the frame from his hand, tilting it towards her to view the picture clearly. Her eyebrows shot up. "I take it modern history is not your strong point," she remarked.

Severus scowled.

"Really, Severus," continued Ana, shaking her head in mock despair, "it's Gellert Grindelwald."

Grindelwald...Albus...the Elder Wand. Severus' synapses fired rapidly, and with a jolt, he realised the importance of the photo to his own life expectancy. *If the Dark Lord works out that Dumbledore ended up with the wand, my own life may be forfeit.* Despite several glasses of wine and two shots of burning liqueur, he managed to maintain a politely interested expression.

"Indeed?" he said dryly. "Thank you." He tucked the photograph back into his pocket and stood to leave.

"Seriously, Severus," said Ana, gesturing with her notebook, "thanks for all of this. It may prove invaluable. If anything else comes to mind, don't hesitate to write. Ana Sedenova...don't forget."

"I have money," he remarked, ignoring her thanks and reaching into his pocket for Eurogalleons.

"Leave it, it's my shout and I've more than enough Leva. Take care of yourself, Severus; this awful year is not yet over."

Meeting her gaze, Severus held it for a long moment. "Take care of the students," he replied finally.

Ana smiled.

Severus swept his travelling cloak around him and made his way out into the cold of the mountain night. The snow had stopped, but the wind was still bitter, and Severus shivered in the few seconds it took to take out his wand and Portkey. With one last glance through the window, where Ana was laughing as she settled up with the barman, he pressed his wand to the smooth ivory of his letter opener. "*Portus*," he muttered, and with a violent jerk in the centre of his torso, he was wrenched away.

The Dark Lord took the news of Zelenogorski's death with an unanticipated equanimity; Severus' good standing still held. As proof of that, he had to spend most of his last week of holidays observing the entertainment at Malfoy Manor. While he took a small and vicious comfort when Travers and Selwyn were punished for their inability to capture Potter, the experience as a whole was dreadful.

Lucius was sullen, Draco cowed, Bellatrix manic as ever. Jocelyn, he was pained to notice, was still the silent obedient child with watchful eyes that she'd been since the summer with her ex-mother. The friendly, cheeky girl he had known last year had been replaced by this newer model of Slytherin behaviour. And since her holiday presence at Malfoy Manor had been framed to impinge upon Voldemort's notice as little as possible, she was also gaining a thorough education in the most typical of pureblood childhoods: confined to the nursery and attended by house-elves.

Once, when Severus hadn't been there, the Dark Lord had demanded to meet the newest Malfoy. According to what Severus had heard from Draco, the meeting had been uneventful: Jocelyn had kept her eyes down and her mind closed, she had answered Voldemort's questions politely, and the Dark Lord himself had displayed vestiges of the charm he'd had in his earlier incarnation. Still, the very idea made Severus skin crawl; he wanted Jocelyn safely away from the manor and back at Hogwarts.

Yet Severus couldn't even feel properly happy when the school term began, for the Carrows returned to Hogwarts with a renewed sense of purpose and an unmitigated zeal towards the punishment of recalcitrant students. As if that wasn't bad enough, Rita Skeeter had sent him an unanticipated Christmas gift consisting of a copy of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, inscribed with a personal message.

Dear Snapey, she written on the flyleaf in virulent green ink, *I thought you'd particularly enjoy chapter eighteen!*

He flipped through the book quickly, searching for chapter eighteen, his gut and teeth clenched with fury and dread. There: "Politics or Pedagogy? The Case of Severus Snape."

Of course, the chapter began, *Dumbledore's penchant for troubled young men did not end with Grindelwald* . . .

She'd raked up the details of his manslaughter trial, of course, and every sordid detail of his young life that was available as a matter of public record: his father's abuse, his mother's depression, his own drunken behaviour and the blow that accidentally cut short his father's life. The trial, she implied, was rigged, with Severus' innocence in doubt and his pardon achieved only through Dumbledore's influence. She emphasised Slughorn's refusal to speak in his defence, listed every rumour of his dalliance with the Dark Arts and each of his connections to known members of Voldemort's circle. The whole was laced through with implications that Severus had spent much of his time on his knees, his mouth wrapped around Dumbledore's dick.

Severus was shaking by the time he reached the end of the chapter. Throwing the book roughly to the floor, he drew his wand to destroy it. Only then did he catch sight of the pictures. Two young, fresh faces stared up at him from where the book lay open on the floor: Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald.

Has the Dark Lord seen this? he wondered, frozen into a duelling position, his wand pointed at the book. *No, of course not.* The Dark Lord was busy in Eastern Europe seeking answers that, in truth, were to be found closer to home.

Severus bent and picked up the book, smoothing a hand reflexively across the damaged binding. He couldn't destroy every copy of Rita's book, which meant that sooner or later, the Dark Lord would come across the image. Better for the knowledge to come from Severus himself. That, in itself, might be enough to ensure his survival.

"Everything alright, Severus?" asked Dumbledore's portrait, roused from his slumber by the violence of Severus' actions.

Severus ignored him. *How long can I draw this out?*

"Severus?"

The concern in Albus' voice cut through Severus' ruminations, and he glanced up. "Nothing important, Albus, I was just expressing my appreciation for Rita's new book." He held up the cover so that Albus could read it.

The portrait's face fell. "Ah." The old man hesitated. "What does it say?" he asked, trying and failing to achieve a nonchalant tone.

"Why, Albus," replied Severus, aiming for and achieving deliberate nastiness, "if you're interested, I could always read it to you."

Funnily enough, he did. The book was over nine hundred pages long, and the task took him most of the term. The hour or so each evening spent reading to Dumbledore quickly became the most restful period of his day. Since the majority of his time was spent struggling to maintain control of the Carrows...who had decreed themselves responsible for the punishment of all students...the "best" part of his day was purely relative.

To his surprise, the shared experience of Rita's book led to several revealing conversations. Dumbledore denied nothing, contradicting only Rita's conclusions and not the facts she based them on. By the end of "Dumbledore's Childhood," Severus felt that he knew his wacky old mentor far better than he ever had before. They'd shared discussions about the lure of power, talked about Dumbledore's mistakes (who knew that he'd even made any!), and bonded over a discussion of Ariana's blocking.

"So that's why you behaved so strangely when you heard about Jocelyn?"

Albus bowed his head in agreement.

"To be honest," replied Severus, for the two men were being far more honest with each other than they had during Albus' life, "I thought you were displaying signs of senility."

Albus graced him with a wry smile. "Who can blame you?" he asked. "There was no other obvious explanation."

To himself, Severus admitted that his talks with Dumbledore were made more precious by his knowledge of impending death: there was only so long he could put off informing Voldemort of the identity of the laughing thief. The only other silver lining to that ominous dark cloud was his certainty that Voldemort would finger Severus as the threat. As long as Severus kept his mouth and mind closed, the Dark Lord would never suspect Draco, and thus, even in death, Severus would fulfil the promises he had made to Albus and Narcissa.

Restoring Order

Chapter 14 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. ****DH SPOILERS****

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Fourteen : Restoring Order

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Once again my betas threw themselves into the breach for your sakes: thank you, LAXo and WriterMerrin, you're both wonderful!

Hermione was bothered by the fact that no-one but her, Snape and Vector seemed to know about Viktor Krum's involvement in the fight against Voldemort. In the greater scheme of things, it was one of the less important loose ends, yet as January drew to a close and she, Ron and Harry were no closer to any of their other goals, it weighed on her mind.

Her biggest worry, though, was Harry: the Boy-Who-Lived did little but mope around with a distant-yet-fanatical look in his eyes as he dwelt on the Deathly Hallows; to all intents and purposes, he'd given up on the Horcrux search. The new Harry was faintly disturbing, and Hermione couldn't help wondering how much of his interest in the Hallows was fuelled by his own personality and how much was driven by the bit of him that was actually a part of Voldemort. Her Harry wasn't the sort to ignore all of Dumbledore's advice.

Ron, on the other hand, was a champion. Without a piece of the Dark Lord hanging around his neck, Ronald Weasley was a new man *And fair enough, too*, acknowledged Hermione, *he has neither Harry's familiarity with Voldemort's soul nor my skill with Occlumency to protect him*.

Since his return, Ron had been resolutely cheerful, untiringly working through a list of wizarding settlements around the country and visiting each in turn. They'd had no luck, and secretly, Hermione could admit that they weren't likely to. If the cave and the lake were anything to go by, Voldemort had hidden his Horcruxes well...three teenagers were not about to stumble on them. They weren't going to find the golden cup of Helga Hufflepuff mounted on a plinth somewhere, no matter how much they wanted to.

A further concern was the state of her Arithmancy calculations. Hermione had been cut off from the world outside her tent for so long that many of her equations refused to solve; she was lacking so much of the necessary information that the possibility predictions she could calculate were so vague as to be next to useless. Without them, she felt lost. She desperately wished she could visit Vector's office, drink a tiny cup of her bitter Greek coffee, and plot out the necessary steps in this interminable war.

Thinking of Vector, of course, got her back to thinking about Viktor, which circled back around to the fact that no-one in the Order seemed to know what the others were doing. Hermione wasn't convinced it was the best situation. Over and over again, she brooded on the scant handful of information that Ron had brought back with him.

Kingsley...with his teabags, his work at Downing Street, and his super-shiny modern kitchen...had been helping Muggle-borns. He was also the most understanding about Hermione's position. According to Ron, though, he was on the run . . . whatever that meant. Did she dare contact him? It was a question she pondered long and hard. Assuming that he, like them, was continually on the move, she couldn't send an owl. And even if she'd had the materials necessary to cast a Tracing Spell, that wouldn't work particularly well either...it would give her actions a dangerous predictability and possibly lead others to Kingsley along with herself. A Patronus, however, was a distinct possibility.

A Patronus could neither be fooled nor faked...plus he'd told her to send one if she ever needed his help. She just had to find a way of doing so without Harry or Ron noticing what she was up to; Harry, in his current, brooding state, would be less likely than ever to condone a connection to any of the older Order members.

"I'm going for a run," she announced to the tent at large, one rainy morning during the last days of January.

"Better you than me," replied Ron, looking doubtful as to her sanity. "It's bloody miserable out there."

Hermione zipped up her jacket with a sharp tug and made no reply. Scowling slightly to herself, she stepped outside.

It was, indeed, miserable: a persistent drizzle had turned the fields around their current location slippery, and Hermione picked her way across the nearest paddock to an ill-kept gravel path. She ran along it only far enough that the boys were unlikely to catch her up, then chose a particularly bushy piece of hedgerow for the small shelter it offered.

She'd kept her wand out while she ran, and once she had stopped, she put it to use: casting all of the protective wards she had learnt from Snape. With another wave of her wand, she deflected even more of the rain and dried out her running clothes for good measure.

Alright, Granger. Get it over with Brandishing her wand, she exclaimed loudly, *'Expecto Patronum!'*

A tiny, insubstantial wisp of smoke drifted out of the tip of her wand and disappeared. Hermione bit her lower lip in frustration *Why is this so hard for me?* she wondered. *Think happy thoughts*. Squeezing her eyes shut in concentration, she cast about for a happy memory.

Nothing came immediately to mind, and Hermione began to feel a little desperate. She heard Harry's voice resound inside her head, *It's the only spell she ever has trouble with . . . Bit unfortunate, really . . .* "Self pity threatened to overwhelm her.

But wait! I managed it then, I managed it in the Ministry even though I had the Horcrux in my pocket! What on earth did I think of? The answer came with a sudden rush: Snape. She'd thought about Snape.

Fine, then.

Upset because he hadn't spoken with her, Hermione had been avoiding all thought of her sarcastic mentor. Now, however, frowning at her own stupidity, she thought about him as hard as she could. She thought about their lessons in his office and those in the Room of Requirement. She thought about the moment he'd taught her to cast wards, about his help modifying her parents' memories, about the apology he'd sworn to her after their awful fight. She thought about the Felix Felicis kiss.

Not all of them were happy memories, exactly. But they were . . . strong. Concentrating on them, she felt tough and fierce, protected and powerful. She leant into the feeling.

"Expecto patronum!" she shouted, and a huge silver force barrelled from her wand. Squinting at the brightness of it, it seemed at first as if her silver otter had been replaced by some grander animal. When her eyes adjusted, however, she realised it was just bigger and more luminous than it had ever been before. She reached out to touch it, and it rolled over in the air, displaying its long furry tummy.

An unexpected gurgle of laughter escaped her as she rubbed her Patronus.

"Can you take a message?" she asked.

The otter twisted back upright and circled her with a lazy somersault. It looked at her attentively.

"I need you to find Kingsley Shacklebolt and give him the following message: *This is Hermione Granger. All three of us are fine. I have information that I think you could use. If you know of a better way to communicate or somewhere safe we can meet, let me know. Please reply within the next half an hour, otherwise wait for another message.*"

Her Patronus seemed to know she was finished. After one last loop, wrapping low around her ankles, it shot off into the distance. Hermione conjured herself a chair and sat down to wait.

She wasn't left hanging for long. Less than fifteen minutes later, a silver streak flew down from the grey clouds of the January, Devonshire sky and resolved itself into Kingsley's lynx.

It spoke to her in Kingsley's distinctive tones, *"The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix can be found at twelve, Grimmauld Place"*.

Hermione was startled and opened her mouth to protest, but the Patronus wasn't finished.

"Before you panic, Hermione, let me reassure you that we have placed a new Fidelius Charm on the building with myself as Secret Keeper. The house is as safe as ever. Come any time...though I advise you to Apparate to the back door, as Death Eaters frequently stand watch in the square." As it finished speaking, the lynx faded away.

For several moments, Hermione sat motionless, her mouth still ajar from her earlier impulse to interrupt.

The Patronus was genuine, of that she was certain. Which meant, without question, that Kingsley had received her message and he himself had responded. So, really, that left only one issue: did she trust him enough to revisit Grimmauld Place?

Did she? Yes. Fired with certainty, she cast a second Patronus; this one was easier. "Tell Kingsley that I'll come tomorrow or the day after, at about this time."

Her otter performed a flashy back flip and zoomed off into the distance. Only slightly anxious, Hermione removed her wards and jogged back to the tent through the drizzling rain.

The next morning, Hermione took another "run." This time, she was careful to put a little more distance between herself and the tent before she stopped. She wanted to be absolutely sure that neither Ron nor Harry would overhear the telltale sound of her Apparation. After a short pause to catch her breath, Hermione turned into nothing, rematerialising on the back step of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

The dingy yard looked the same as it always had, and the back door opened...as per usual...at the touch of her wand. Steeling herself, she pushed it open and stepped into the kitchen. She hadn't ruled out the possibility this might be a trap.

Kingsley was there, as were half a dozen other people she didn't recognise. They were sitting at the kitchen table, and one young man was washing dishes at the sink, both hands submerged to his elbows in suds. At her arrival everyone looked up.

"Hermione!" exclaimed Kingsley with real warmth, rising to his feet.

Hermione had her wand trained upon him, however, and failed to respond in kind.

"Nobody move!" she instructed. "Quickly, Kingsley, what joke did you make before we rode together on the Thestral?"

Momentarily, Kingsley's brow furrowed in concentration, then the corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. "If I remember correctly," he drawled, "I commented on my appreciation of your rather masculine physique."

Hermione relaxed slightly, but didn't lower her wand. "Cast a Patronus," she commanded.

Kingsley obliged, sending his graceful lynx careening around the room. "As a member of the Order, Hermione," he commented wryly, "I commend you on your thoroughness. As your friend, however, I think it's time you gave me a hug."

He held out his arms, and with a small grin at his unruffled good humour, Hermione walked across the room into his embrace.

A soft rumble of talk and laughter started up as those around them relaxed and began to talk.

"Everything alright?" he asked quietly, wrapping her tightly in his burly grip.

"I...yeah. Everything's fine." Hermione let out an enormous sigh.

"Hard year?"

"Yeah, you could say that." She laughed and stepped back, running her free hand through her hair.

"Okay, people," remarked Kingsley, gesturing at the other occupants of the room and then waving towards the door, "make yourselves scarce; Hermione and I have only limited time."

The three women and two men tramped out obediently. Several cast curious glances at Hermione, and the young man from the sink insisted on shaking her hand in an

enthusiastic and very wet handshake.

"Miss Granger," he enthused, "I'm very, very proud to make your acquaintance!"

"Cup of tea?" asked Kingsley once the two of them were finally alone. "I'll make a pot."

"Thanks." Hermione sat herself at the table and took a look around. Apart from the unexpected company, the room was little changed from when she had seen it last, even down to the pile of papers that littered one end of the table. While she and the boys had used that space to keep their notes on the Ministry, however, it was now stacked with a variety of other documents.

"Who were those people?" she asked curiously as Kingsley pulled mugs out from a kitchen cupboard.

"Muggle-borns, mostly. Since we re-occupied Grimmauld Place and re-did the Fidelius Charm, we've been using this as our headquarters once again."

"What happened with the house?" she asked. "We left because Yaxley managed to hitch a ride through the protective charms by grabbing my arm as I Disapparated."

Kingsley chuckled. "Unfortunately for him," he replied, spooning tea leaves into the warmed pot, "Yaxley came directly inside rather than fetching his friends. Kreacher figured out rather quickly that he hadn't come as 'Master Harry's' invited guest. House-elves have rather impressive powers when it comes to defending their own homes: Kreacher Obliviated him and ejected him from the premises."

If only we'd known that! For a regretful moment, Hermione let herself dwell on the missed opportunity to stay in a house and eat real food. "Where's Kreacher now?" she asked.

"He's at Hogwarts. He comes by every couple of days or so, cleans the place up, makes some treacle tart. He'll be sorry to have missed you; he's always asking if I've news of the Master and his little friends." Kingsley filled the teapot with boiling water and levitated it to the table along with a couple of mugs. He settled himself in the seat opposite Hermione. "I've a question for you, actually," he stated. "The Prime Minister has his heart set on blowing up Voldemort. What do you think?"

Hermione stared at Kingsley for several seconds, her mouth agape. "Hewhat?"

Kingsley ran one hand over his bald pate and pulled a face. "I guess you don't see it as a good suggestion, then?"

"I...no! Of course not." More calmly, she added, "If you tried to kill him now, he wouldn't actually die. It'd be like last time, and eventually he'd come back. We have to make sure that when we kill him, we kill him for good."

"You've convinced me, Hermione, and I'll make sure the PM's convinced, too." Kingsley held up a restraining hand. "I know that whatever you and Harry are doing, you're making sure that Voldemort dies for good. And you can rest assured that I'm not going to ask you for any details. Just let me know how I can help."

"I came to offer you some information, actually," replied Hermione. "Viktor Krum has been working for the Order."

"He...what?" This was clearly news to Kingsley.

"I organised it about this time last year, on Dumbledore's instructions." Hermione didn't think that bringing Snape into the story would prove fruitful. "The plan was to smuggle Muggle-borns out of the country using voice-activated Portkeys. I haven't been in contact with him since Harry, Ron and I went on the run, but from a brief conversation I had with Viktor at Bill and Fleur's wedding, I understand that the plan was in motion even then."

"Hermione! That's excellent news . . . there are so many unexplained disappearances. If even a small proportion of them turn out to be with Krum, then we've much to be thankful for! How can I..."

Hermione anticipated the question. "Just send an owl to Torvik Murk, Bulgaria," she instructed. Conjuring a sheet of paper, she wrote down the name. As an afterthought, she scribbled a note to Viktor:

Dear Viktor, you can trust Kingsley Shacklebolt...he works for the Order. xo Hermione.

Hermione's next task was to extract as much information from Kingsley as possible before heading back to the boys. That way, she could update her Arithmancy calculations and maybe work out what to do next. She took a deep breath, then paused, not sure where to start.

"Er, Kingsley?"

"Yes?"

"What's all this?" She gestured towards the pile of notes and documents that littered the end of the table.

Kingsley pulled a face. "No offence, Hermione, but just as I don't plan to inquire about the details of what you, Ron and Harry are up to, I think it best you not know what we're up to."

Hermione bit back the complaints and protestations that sprang to her lips. With her heart pounding and her mind whirring, she grasped with relief at the only solution she could think of that didn't involve arguing with Kingsley.

"Fine," she replied, looking up at him intently, "but there's something else: at one stage, Professor Vector was planning to escape to Europe with Viktor's help. I don't know how much you know about it, but she used to work for Dumbledore as the Order's Arithmancer. If you can get hold of her and convince her to help once again, it might make all the difference."

Kingsley nodded vigorously. He was fired with excitement by her information and drummed his fingers against the tabletop. "We thought she'd been killed. You trust her, right?"

"Absolutely," replied Hermione. "If you can find her, tell her everything. The more details she has, the more accurate her calculations will be." Hermione would just have to hope it worked, and then figure out how to contact Vector later and get hold of her updated matrix.

She drained the last of her tea and rose to her feet. "I should be getting back before the boys get worried. Don't tell anyone that you've seen me."

Kingsley swore that his lips were sealed and made her promise to contact him if she needed something herself. *Unfortunately the things I need help with* she thought ruefully, *are beyond anyone's control.* Yet as Hermione prepared to Apparate back to the boys, she felt more positive than she had in a long time.

As February passed and the days shaded into March, Hermione's situation remained unchanged: Harry continued to obsess over the Hallows, and she and Ron continued to look for the Horcruxes in ever-more-unlikely spots. On several occasions, Hermione was tempted to visit Kingsley again, but the thought of something happening to Harry when she wasn't there to save him kept her close to home. Taking the time to go for a run was hard enough with Dumbledore's words echoing in her brain: ". . . *your mission is to keep Harry alive.*"

With March well under way, their deliberately unpredictable itinerary afforded the trio an occasional day of nicer weather. Taking advantage of a few hours of wan sunlight,

Hermione allowed herself the luxury of running for almost an hour. Inscribing a long loop around the tent, she circled with the boys just within earshot. While she ran, she daydreamed of an opportunity to run without worrying, to strike off in a straight line somewhere without thinking of Death Eaters, or Voldemort, or of how to destroy a Horcrux without killing its human carrier. As always, the run helped, clearing her mind as she pushed her body; cheering herself up as she tired herself out.

When she returned to the tent, she found Ron seated at the table by himself.

"Where's Harry?" she asked automatically.

"Out for a walk."

"He's okay?" Anxiety blossomed immediately.

"Yeah, he's just moody. He only left about ten minutes ago; he won't go far."

"Okay." Hermione sunk down into the chair opposite Ron. He looked pretty moody himself. "You alright?" she asked.

"Yeah. Just thinking." Ron poked at a splinter in the table edge and frowned.

"No wonder you look so terrible; you want to start small and work your way up."

"Ha ha." It wasn't really funny, but Ron gave her a begrudging smile. "I was thinking about whoever it was who left us the sword."

This was one of Ron's favourite topics. "Seriously, Ron, you can't still think it might have been Hagrid! I told you last time that even if he got hold of a real wand and knew enough magic to cast the spell, I can't imagine his Patronus would be something with so few teeth!"

"Okay, okay. So not Hagrid. Did you ever wonder . . ." He trailed off and pulled a face before continuing. "This is going to sound really stupid."

"More stupid than Hagrid?" Hermione asked flippantly, but despite her tone, she was interested. Ron had considered almost every possibility except the truth; she'd played the role of shooting his suggestions down with scorn.

"Well . . . maybe." Ron took a deep breath. "Don't get me wrong, but there is someone who would have had access to the sword, someone who could definitely cast a Patronus, someone who we haven't really considered."

"Who?" Hermione was deadly serious now. She realised she was clutching at the rim of the table. "Ron, who?"

"Snape!" he exclaimed finally, throwing back his hands as he said so as if to distance himself from the very idea. "I mean, he's a git, always has been, but he sent Ginny for detention with Hagrid! He must have known that wouldn't be much of a punishment, and he could have sent her to Azkaban like they did with Luna. Plus, it's like he never told You-Know-Who about headquarters, either!"

Ron looked at Hermione expectantly. At his declaration, relief had rushed over her with such palpable, powerful force that she felt weak with the adrenalin. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

Ron's shoulders dropped. "I told you it was stupid. Forget I said anything."

"No! I mean, I agree. I've wondered about Snape for a long time."

Ron's face brightened, and Hermione felt a sudden bright flare in her chest. If the table hadn't separated them, she would have hugged him. Instead, she reached out and grabbed his hand. "Things just don't add up, otherwise," she commented.

"Yeah." Ron nodded, looking thoughtful and taking a firm grip of her hand. "What about Dumbledore, though? Harry . . ." He trailed off once again.

"You know, Ron," replied Hermione, "I don't doubt what Harry saw on top of the Astronomy Tower, but I can't help thinking that Dumbledore wasn't exactly looking his best over the last months of his life. I'm not sure we know the full story."

Ron's eyes widened. "But . . . that would mean . . . you think they planned it?"

"I . . ." Hermione was suddenly panicked that she'd gone too far. "I don't know. I don't know what to think. I just don't think we know the whole story." Ron nodded as she spoke. "Don't tell Harry!" she added urgently.

"Nah, I can't see him taking that well."

Hermione relaxed and grinned at her friend. Gently, she pulled her hand out of his grip. "I'm going to take a shower," she remarked, running a hand up the back of her neck and pulling hair away from the places it was stuck down with sweat.

"Bout time."

"Ha, ha."

It was about two weeks after that point that Ron finally managed to get *Potterwatch* on the wireless.

Passing Information

Chapter 15 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

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.

As always, LAxo and WriterMerrin contributed immensely to the finished product.

Severus was on his way to the Owlery, an information-rich letter to Anastasia Vector-cum-Sedenova coded, warded and safely tucked into one of his many inside pockets. He'd timed his walk through the hallways for the break between classes, which gave him the opportunity to cast an eye over many of his charges as it deflected suspicion from his own activity.

Compared to previous years, the corridors were subdued. The exclusion of Muggle-born students had cut enrolments by almost a fifth, and the small number of formerly-home-schooled students had done little to make up the numbers. Even more pointed was the general sentiment: the children were no longer having fun. Students made their way between classes in tight knots. Prefects supervised chains of younger year-levels, shepherding them from one point to another. Everyone had their eyes out for the Carrows or other dangers; as Severus passed, they ducked their heads, unwilling to meet his gaze.

There were, of course, exceptions...bullies from each of the four houses had added a new swagger to their walk under the tutelage of the Carrows' keen instruction. Mostly, disappointingly, these new tyrants sprang from among his Slytherins, although there, at least, there was some excuse: students who had been shunned and mocked for years had found a new sense of authority. Severus had refused to concede his position as Head of House, but he hadn't had the opportunity to spend as much time attending to his Slytherins as he would have liked. His refusal had, however, prevented one of the Carrows from taking up the job. As it was, they gave those students with green ties automatic privileges and inflated grades. Just the previous day, that fact had set Minerva complaining loudly.

Rounding a corner of the third-floor corridor with his customary billow, Severus came within a hairsbreadth of running Tracey Davis over. She pulled up, startled, and stepped aside.

"Good afternoon, Headmaster," she intoned politely, ducking her head deferentially.

"Miss Davis," he replied. Vector's letter felt suddenly heavy in his pocket as he noticed the fear that radiated from Davis' body. The sentiment was so strong that he could read her emotions even without eye contact. "It must be odd for you," he added abruptly, "to take NEWTs without Arithmancy."

Since Arithmancy had been banned...as any seventh-year Slytherin would know...by the Dark Lord himself, it was a loaded statement, and Severus could sense her panicked attempt to decide on the right thing to say. To his surprise, she went for an uncharacteristically frontal approach, though cleverly, and in characteristic Slytherin fashion, she stuck to the truth.

"I hope you weren't offended, sir," she stuttered, "by my attempt to lift the curse last year. I had only your best interests in mind."

"I know that," replied Severus. *She's been concerned this whole time that I would reveal her as unsympathetic to the Dark Lord's cause? How wrong she was!* Slytherins look out for their own."

She relaxed slightly at the familiar words and even dared, for a second, to raise her eyes to his face. It was just long enough for Severus to notice the graze on her cheek, and he shot out a hand to jerk her face back up again.

"What happened?" he asked in a voice that brooked no disobedience.

"I"...swallow..."I tripped."

"Somebody tripped you," he corrected. His anger, which simmered perpetually these days, rose to a boil.

Only Dumbledore's Army would trip a seventh-year Slytherin. No doubt the arrogant berks had waited until they caught someone alone and, by that process, had ambushed the young woman who now stood before him. Her unwillingness to do them in even now was all the proof he needed to be certain that her own sympathies lay with the rebels and not the Death Eaters. Once again Gryffindors were too blinded by house prejudice to recognise their potential allies.

"Go to the Hospital Wing," he ordered; Davis looked relieved at her reprieve from further questions and made haste to do as she was bid.

Once Davis disappeared around the far corner, Severus conjured a piece of parchment and, tapping it with his wand, transfigured it into Neville Longbottom's timetable. *Transfiguration*, he noted savagely and stalked off, his letter momentarily forgotten.

The class was in session by the time he had crossed the castle to appear at Minerva's door. He threw it open with a bang.

The noise and his unexpected arrival caught the attention of everyone present.

"Severus Snape!" exclaimed Minerva. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Longbottom," he snarled, ignoring her, "a word in the corridor, now!"

"Absolutely not!" shouted Minerva in outrage, her hands on her hips. "Sit back down, Neville. This is my classroom, Snape, and my students have work to do. You can talk to Mr Longbottom in your own time."

"I'm afraid, Minerva," sneered Severus, "that even here, my authority outweighs yours." Drawing his wand, he forced Longbottom from his seat and propelled him out of the room. He spun on his heel, letting his robes spin out behind him, and strode away, leaving Minerva spluttering in his wake.

Longbottom had been pressed up against the windows on the far side of the corridor by the force of Severus' Propulsion Jinx. Severus took the opportunity to loom towards him.

"Mr Longbottom," he began, but anything further was interrupted by Minerva's reappearance.

"Headmaster Snape," she hissed in righteous anger. "I will not have you threatening my students during class time!"

"Professor McGonagall," he replied, investing her name with as much venom as he could muster, "I suggest you attend to the students that remain; you wouldn't want to neglect your duties. Longbottom," he continued, turning back, "my office, now!"

Once there, he set Longbottom writing lines...with a thoroughly ordinary mundane pen: "My juvenile attempts at heroics do nothing but endanger my friends and fellow students."

Unfortunately, if Longbottom's previous record was anything to go on, it seemed unlikely that the idiot boy would get the point, even with such blatantly unsubtle tactics.

Having safely delivered the sword of Gryffindor to Harry Potter, Severus knew that the destruction of Voldemort's Horcruxes must...finally...be under way. As a consequence, Severus had begun to consider how to complete the onerous task of convincing Harry to lay down his own life.

If he got a chance to confront the boy directly, he imagined that the chore would prove fairly simple: he had always been too easy to engage in an argument, and a few choice taunts should do the trick.

What if he didn't get that chance, though? Finding the boy at the right moment would be difficult enough...though not impossible now that he had secured a sample of Granger's hair...but passing on a specific and complicated message would be more difficult still.

In such a situation, he decided, Granger would be key. She, he knew, would trust him. She would believe him. The trick would be to provide enough corroborating evidence that Harry, in turn, would believe her...and believe that she hadn't been fooled.

A Patronus was a distinct possibility. He could dictate the message and send it on its way. His Patronus could find Potter at any moment, and since the strange, ethereal creatures could not lie, Lily's arrogant and infuriating child would have no reason to doubt it. Plus, the doe had already demonstrated her worth by delivering the sword.

Yet the one time Severus had discussed the issue with Dumbledore, the portrait had been irritatingly insistent that he go in person, vetoing the Patronus idea.

Why? wondered Severus. *Does he mistakenly imagine that Potter and I will reconcile? That knowledge of his impending and necessary sacrifice will cause him to see through my own deceptions?* He snorted at the thought. *Not bloody likely.*

Of course, he could always cast a Patronus with Potter present. That might catch at his attention enough that the boy would listen to him...though, to do so would take as long as a confrontation anyway, and in that case he'd be better to trust in cruel jibes. Potter would be more likely to believe his words if he didn't have to totally readjust the impression he carried of one Severus Snape, evil Death Eater.

Legilimency, Severus decided at last. If he didn't get the opportunity to taunt Potter with the spectre of his inevitable failure, and the horrible fate to which his continued survival would consign the world, he would share the memories of the pertinent information with Granger. If he prepared the memories in advance, delivering them would be the work of mere seconds of eye contact; in the worst case scenario, he could just exude them. Without question, Severus could rely on Granger to lower her shields at his request or to gather the memory strands; he could also rest assured that she would know what to do with the information once she got it. There still remained the question, however, of how much background detail she would need to convince Potter.

With that in mind, Severus spent several long sessions hunched over Albus' Pensieve, crafting a highly-edited narrative of memories that would, in his opinion, best persuade Potter. He also took especial care that no hint of his more-than-teacherly feelings for Granger were evident. Who could predict how disgusted the idea might make her? Who could guarantee it wouldn't be enough to have her disregard the vital point of his information? Besides, better, in the end, if she thought him the noble lover or the dedicated friend...far better than creepy old man.

One evening, with only a few weeks remaining of the Easter term, Severus sat in his office, conversing with Dumbledore. He had his copy of Rita's book out, but it lay open on his lap, untouched.

"They have no idea of the risks they're taking!" he exclaimed. Severus restrained the urge to get up again and stride around the room, but Dumbledore had already told him to sit down.

"They know what they're doing Severus; they have a right to participate," replied Dumbledore calmly.

Severus growled in frustration and slammed *The Life and Lies* down on his desk with a rather violent thump. Dumbledore winced. "The right?" he demanded. "They are children! And they think that if they call themselves an 'army' and act like a gang of inner-city miscreants they can win a war against the most dangerous dark wizard of this century! The whole situation is patently ridiculous."

"Calm down, Severus. You just need to use this situation to your advantage."

"Calm down?" he spluttered.

"Come now, you have to admit that Dumbledore's Army is a handy distraction. Every time they call the Carrows' attention to their actions, some other student walks more safely."

"Nonsense, Albus! Your logic is spurious. You act as if the Carrows have a carefully controlled quota of aggression that they deal out each day. In actuality, those idiot students incite their wrath to ever-more unmanageable levels!"

"I still hold that you're overreacting, Severus!" Dumbledore paused and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "You're doing an excellent job, you know. You should be proud of yourself."

"I beg your pardon? You didn't see the state Michael Corner was in after the Carrows were done with him! They beat him! They knocked him unconscious and flung his body repeatedly against the stones of the corridor! When I took him to the hospital wing, I thought Poppy was going to slice me up into little pieces and leave the bits to be mauled by wild beasts in the Forbidden..."

Severus broke off suddenly. Keyed into his wards, he felt someone move past the gargoyle and up the moving staircase of his office. Moving quickly, he tucked the copy of Rita's book into the top drawer of his desk and pulled the nearest pile of administrative paperwork towards him. By the time a knock came on his door, he had a quill in hand and a sneer plastered on his face.

"Come in," he called.

"Good evening," commented Hooch as she opened the door. Shutting it behind herself, she wandered over to the seat opposite his desk. There she made herself comfortable, lacing her fingers over her stomach and propping her feet up on the desk.

The utter familiarity of her behaviour sliced through Severus like a hot knife through flesh. Clearly the novelty value of punching him and ignoring him had worn off; now she had decided to rub the memory of their earlier friendship in his face.

"Get your filthy feet off my desk," he snarled, his lips curling back from his yellowed teeth with barely-restrained anger.

"My, my, Snape, for someone whose door is supposedly always open, you're doing a remarkably poor job of welcoming your only guest." She didn't move her feet.

Severus stabbed his quill rather viciously back into the looped holder of his iron inkpot and crossed his arms. "What do you want, Hooch?" he demanded. "Be quick, and then get out."

"It seems to me," she replied conversationally, "that you expend an awful lot of energy protecting people."

It took all of Severus' training to keep his face impassive. His guts felt like ice. After a long moment, he managed to respond, "You don't know what you're talking about."

Hooch raised her eyebrows...she never had mastered the art of raising just one. "As a Quidditch player," she continued unfazed, "you learn to look past the superficial distractions of your opponents' behaviour and focus on their movements. You learn to think tactically, or you lose."

"Such wisdom!" exclaimed Severus sarcastically, rolling his eyes. "I'm sure there are students who would hang on every word; don't you think you'd better go and find them rather than wasting my time?" He desperately wanted a drink. In fact, he desperately wanted to share a drink with Hooch. He cursed himself for such weakness.

"You're a right tricky, nasty bastard, Severus Snape, and you always have been. I just wanted you to know that I, for one, have been paying attention." He went to speak, but she held up a hand to stop him, and he bit his tongue. "I don't know what happened on the tower that night, but I do know Albus was dying."

By that point, Severus couldn't have spoken if he'd wanted to.

"Oh, he might have been able to fool me, and even Minerva, but Poppy is over-qualified for the position she holds here! You know as well as I do that the only reasons she stays are the constant stream of children who make up somewhat for never having had any of her own and the promise she made Albus long ago that she would stay until You-Know-Who was gone for good. Point being, Poppy knew he was little more than a few weeks from permanent incapacitation.

"Basically," she continued, "I can see three possibilities. Either I'm completely wrong, and you're a thoroughly committed Death Eater. Were that the case, I imagine you clever enough to send me on my way without punishment, storing up the knowledge that I might prove well-disposed towards you at a later date, should you ever need it. Or, at the opposite extreme, you and Albus cooked this whole plan up between yourselves. Knowing the two of you as I once did, the possibility is not completely outrageous."

Severus forced himself to winch his sneer a notch higher, but said nothing. Hooch, he noticed, hadn't even glanced up at Albus' portrait; her eyes were fixed on his face.

"In that situation, I imagine it might mean something to know that such a gesture was not completely unappreciated. The third, and admittedly, most likely possibility, is that Severus Snape, the consummate Slytherin, is just looking out for his own hide." Finally, she paused.

"No cutting analysis of that scenario, then?" Severus was relieved to hear that his voice sounded as sarcastic as ever.

"Oh," breezed Hooch, waving one hand to emphasise her lack of concern, "I imagine that you'd encourage me in my belief, as it could only help you in the long run."

"Hooch, the only encouragement you need is to leave off the hallucinatory agents that you have so clearly imbibed and to consume a Wit-Sharpening Potion instead. I don't mind warning you that any attempt to convince my legion of fans that there's a heart of gold hidden under this bat-like exterior would have you confined to the Janus Thickey ward before the words had left your mouth!"

"Don't worry, Snape, your secret is safe with me." Hooch tapped her chest just over her own heart. "I haven't even discussed this with Poppy."

"That much is evident!" retorted Severus. "Had you tried, she would have treated you immediately for signs of insanity and pointed out the gaping holes in your argument!"

Hooch grinned at his vehemence. She lifted her ankles off the desk and leant forward, one hand on her knee. With the other she mimed zipping her mouth closed, locking it and throwing the key over her shoulder. "As I said, Snape, your secret is safe with me. I just wanted you to know that I know." With that, she rose to her feet. "I'll be seeing you, Headmaster," she called back over her shoulder as she walked to the door. She shut it with a flourish and then was gone.

From behind his back, Severus heard Albus' portrait clear his throat. Severus threw up a hand.

"Not a word!" he commanded. Summoning the Firewhisky bottle, he rose to his feet and strode out the door opposite that which Hooch had taken, entering the headmaster's private quarters. He was deeply shaken by the encounter and couldn't bear to listen to Dumbledore's inevitable urgings to be more careful in future...they would have to wait for another day.

As term came to an end, Severus made a decision. No sooner had the students trundled away on the Hogwarts Express than he pressed his finger to his Dark Mark, summoning the Dark Lord to his side.

Taking his time, he wandered from his office, down through the school and out onto the grounds. There Amycus Carrow caught up with him.

"Did you find 'im then?" he wheezed, short of breath from having run.

"No," Severus replied without pausing. Amycus was left several steps behind.

"Are you crazy? If you don't have Potter, he's gonna kill you!"

"Then I would advise *you* to keep your distance."

Amycus took him at his word, wheeling away to seek out his sister. No doubt they would spend hours speculating on Severus' sanity and chances of survival.

At the Apparation point, Severus sat down on a fallen trunk to wait; it took Voldemort some time to arrive at Hogwarts from wherever he had been in the far reaches of Eastern Europe. When the Dark Lord materialised before him, Severus stood and then sunk down onto one knee, bowing his head.

"Severus!" exclaimed Voldemort eagerly. "You have found him!"

"No, my Lord." Severus remained in his subservient position.

There was a brief pause before Voldemort spoke again. "What, then, is the meaning behind your summons, Severus?" he inquired, his voice threateningly neutral.

"I found this," he replied, pulling his copy of *The Life and Lies* from an internal pocket of his robe. He held it out face up, so that Voldemort could read the title.

"I am disappointed in you, Severusss," hissed Voldemort, his red eyes blazing with anger. He drew his wand, lashing it angrily as he did so, slicing through the foliage near to where Severus knelt.

Calmly, Severus opened the book to the picture of Grindelwald and Dumbledore and extended his offering towards Voldemort once again. He dropped his eyes. The silence was deafening. Only after a long moment did Severus dare to look up.

Voldemort had been brought up short by the unexpected image. One hand hovered in midair, visibly trembling.

"My Lord?" asked Severus solicitously.

Voldemort met his eyes for a brief second, dropping them immediately back to the book. Almost hesitantly, he lifted it out of Severus' grasp. "Gellert Grindelwald," he breathed.

"I'm afraid," commented Severus apologetically, "that I've had the book for some time. Initially, I had no intention of reading it; I only began to do so in the hope of irritating Dumbledore's portrait." *The truth can be a useful tool.*

"You have done well, Severus!" exclaimed Voldemort. A feverish excitement had replaced his earlier shock. "Once again you have proven yourself as my most loyal servant. You shall be rewarded!"

"I seek no reward but your approval, my Lord."

"Knowledge, Severus," replied Voldemort unexpectedly. Severus looked up at him, startled, to find the Dark Lord looking down at him with an odd smile tugging at the flattened cheeks of his serpentine face. "You may not wish for physical rewards, but you have always wanted knowledge."

"My Lord," stuttered Severus, "you know me too well."

"Have you ever wanted to fly, Severus? Not with a broom, but just yourself against the elements? Come, I shall teach you!"

Voldemort held out a hand imperiously, and repressing all physical manifestations of his distaste, Severus took it. Hand in hand with the Dark Lord, he rose to his feet. With a high, awful laugh, Voldemort leapt skyward, pulling Severus up with him. Severus felt weightless, oddly buoyant, yet he knew that were he to let go, he would fall at once.

"*Magister aerum* is the phrase," commented Voldemort, steering them ever higher, "but it does nothing if you merely say the words. You have to believe them. You have to master the element: only then can you fly."

Voldemort was pushing them higher and higher, and Hogwarts soon lay far below, a toy castle tucked into a carpet forest. They were far higher than any sensible wizard would take a broomstick, and it was getting difficult for Severus to breathe.

"If I were to let go of your hand now, you would fall to your death," remarked Voldemort, his grin stretching to an ever-more-grotesque degree. "Unless, of course, you managed to master the spell before you hit the ground."

Or I could Apparate away. That thought was enough to stifle the worst of Severus' panic, and he managed to meet the Dark Lord's eye and return his manic grin with a small smirk. And when, seconds later, Voldemort released his hand, Severus was not surprised.

He began to fall at once. Spread-eagled across the sky, the wind of his downward trajectory whipped at his hair and his robes, pulling them back and up into his wake. It was terrifying, but also exhilarating. While the ground, far below, rushed towards him with a violent and ferocious speed, the lack of objects in his immediate vicinity gave an odd sensation of stasis, as if he hung unmoving, buffeted by a terrible wind.

Magister aerum, he thought to himself. He felt nothing. *Concentrate, Severus.* Reaching into himself and out of himself, he felt the force of the wind against his face. He felt it pull and tug at his clothing. He felt the pressure of the air against his body. *Magister aerum*, he thought again, and this time, it vibrated with his awareness of the element around him. Opening his mouth, he sucked oxygen into his lungs, though it was tight and difficult to do. *Magister aerum!* he shouted silently, and he knew he could fly. Twisting upwards, his freefall turned to flight and he soared in an arc, exulting in the incredible feeling of his body moving through the air.

Above him, he spied Voldemort, and he swooped towards him. The Dark Lord laughed with delight. Like larks, like dragons, the two of them flew a double helix at great height, their bodies curving around each other and through the sky.

"I knew you could do it, Severus!" cried Voldemort.

Severus made a mental note to brew more antivenom.

Sometimes being in the Dark Lord's good books is as terrifying as his displeasure.

Malfoy Manor

Chapter 16 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Sixteen : Malfoy Manor

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

"Good, eh?"* asked Ron as *Potterwatch* drew to an end.

Hearing the voices of so many of their friends had filled Hermione with delight.

"Brilliant,"* replied Harry.

"It's so brave of them,"* exclaimed Hermione happily. "If they were found . . ."

"Well, they keep on the move, don't they? Like us."* Ron sounded almost ridiculously content. Hearing his brother, in particular, must have meant a lot.

"But did you hear what Fred said? He's Abroad!"* The fanatical light was back in Harry's eyes, and Hermione's heart dropped. Neither she nor Ron had to ask who 'he' was. "He's still looking for the Wand, I knew it!"*

"Harry..."*

"Come on, Hermione, why are you so determined not to admit it? Vol..."*

"HARRY, NO!"* she shouted over him, unsuccessfully trying to cut him off.

"...demort's after the Elder Wand!"*

As Harry spoke the Dark Lord's name, there was a loud bang from outside the tent: the wards were down.

"The name's Taboo!"* cried Ron, rebuke heavy in his voice. "I told you, Harry, I told you, we can't say it anymore...we've got to put the protection back around us...quickly...it's how they find..."*

Hermione had leapt to her feet, wand out, but as the Sneakoscope began to spin and whistle, its coloured lights flickering across the room, she froze and Ron broke off. His eyes met hers, and the two of them exchanged a panicked look. Pulling the Deluminator from his pocket, Ron clicked it, plunging the tent into darkness.

"Come out of there with your hands up!"* shouted a scratchy male voice from outside. "We know you're in there! You've got half a dozen wands pointing at you and we don't care who we curse!"*

With only seconds to spare, Hermione pointed her wand at Harry and cast a Stinging Hex directly into his face. He squawked with pain, and she bit down guiltily on her lower lip. *Please let it be enough!* she prayed, hoping against hope that they could talk or fight their way out of the current situation.

For a long moment...even as her skin crawled under the touch of Fenir's dirty fingers and his long yellow nails, and even as her mind threw up horrific images of his pointed teeth sinking into her skin...Hermione had dared to hope that she, Ron and Harry would get away. The Stinging Hex had, indeed, been enough to disguise Harry, and if the Snatchers hadn't recognised her, they might have made it out just fine.

But by the time they'd been Apparated halfway across the country and dragged bodily up the garden path of Malfoy Manor, any such hope had long since evaporated. After the darkness of the Manor estates, the light of the interior was blinding. For the first few feet, Hermione could make out nothing but the bright white and black chequered floor of the entrance passage. Even after they reached the drawing room, she continued to squint, combating both the glow of the open fire and the sparkle of an enormous chandelier.

From what she could see, the room was horrifically ostentatious, with thick plush carpets and aubergine walls. The fire burned in an elaborate marble fireplace, flanked by marble statues of two beautiful young nymphs, one either side of the fire, each bound hand and foot by slithering serpents and writhing as if in pain.

The Snatchers pushed their prisoners into the centre of the room with little concern for their comfort; only the tight bindings linking her to her friends kept Hermione from stumbling to her knees.

"What is this?"* asked Lucius Malfoy with all the outrage of the gentleman whose evening port was just disturbed by a band of filthy peasants. The expression on his face perfectly matched his tone of voice.

"They say they've got Potter,"* replied Narcissa disdainfully. "Draco, come here."*

Draco came, though his reluctance to do so was clear from the set of his shoulders and the uncomfortable look on his face. For the briefest second, he made eye contact with Hermione, but his gaze slipped immediately sideways.

Greyback wrenched the knot of prisoners over towards the brightest part of the room, directly underneath the chandelier. Hermione could no longer see Draco and his father, but as Draco moved closer, he came into view once more.

"Well, Draco?"* asked Lucius urgently. "Is it? Is it Harry Potter?"*

Curiously, Draco was unwilling to look directly at Harry either, his gaze seemingly fixed about five inches left of where he should have been looking.

"I can't...I can't be sure,"* he said irresolutely.

By this stage, Hermione was willing Draco to look her in the eye. Harry did look a little strange. The Stinging Jinx had swollen his features into a near unrecognisable parody of his own face, and his hair was much longer than it had ever been before. Still, there was no way that Draco could fail to recognise him, Ron or Hermione...particularly not all three of them together when the latter two had no jinx to disguise their faces. *What is he playing at?*

Even without Draco's help, Lucius was fast convincing himself of the veracity of the identification. It wasn't long until Greyback and the Malfoys senior turned their attention to her.

"What about the Mudblood, then?"* asked Greyback, snarling the insult from deep in the back of his throat.

Hermione shivered as the werewolf twisted the group of prisoners on their axis. She found herself forced into the brightest patch of light, the gazes of each of her enemies raking her face.

"Wait,"* exclaimed Narcissa, throwing up one hand in a dramatic gesture of surprise. "Yes...yes, she was in Madam Malkin's with Potter! I saw her picture in the *Prophet*! Look, Draco, isn't it the Granger girl?"*

During the microsecond in which Draco obeyed his mother and turned his eyes towards Hermione, his expression was anguished. "I . . . maybe . . . yeah."* Each word of his less-than-adamant statement was more uncertain sounding than the last.

"But then,"* shouted Lucius, the pitch of his voice rising with excitement, "that's the Weasley boy! It's them, Potter's friends...Draco, look at him, isn't it Arthur Weasley's son, what's his name...?"*

"Yeah,"* replied Draco noncommittally, turning his back and taking several steps in the direction of the fireplace, "it could be."*

Hope stirred in Hermione's heart. Draco was definitely unhappy about turning them in. And in her current situation, she was ready to grasp at straws. When the door to her left opened, however, the small blossom of hope withered instantly.

Bellatrix Lestrange, madwoman and murderer, stood in the doorway; her ravaged beauty struck Hermione like a Bludger to the stomach.

"What is this? What's happened, Cissy?"* Stalking towards the prisoners, she eyed them disdainfully. When she got to Hermione, however, she stopped, brows furrowing with surprise. "But surely," she commented with dawning delight, "this is the Mudblood girl? This is Granger?"*

On Bellatrix's lips, the use of Hermione's patronym alone was an insult, but it brought to mind several vivid memories of Snape: Snape calling her "Granger," Snape joking in the Hospital Wing about Bellatrix's wickedness. They brought with them a flare of hope and a flash of anxiety. Automatically, Hermione slammed up her Occlumency shields. Somehow, for some reason, she remembered that Bellatrix had some skill with Legilimency. *How?* The answer came to her quickly: Harry had overheard Draco and Snape discussing it. *At Slughorn's Christmas party*, noted Hermione inately. *Goddamn it, concentrate, Granger!* she rebuked herself at once, forcing her attention back to the scuffle that had broken out between Lucius and Bellatrix, each intent on calling the Dark Lord themselves.

"/shall summon him, Bella!"* Lucius was shouting.

Hermione turned her attention back towards Draco, who was standing near the fire, nervously watching the commotion. Once again, she willed him to make eye contact. *Come on, Draco.* If he noticed her staring, he successfully ignored her.

Bellatrix had reached screeching pitch, her voice raked like fingernails down a blackboard. " . . . what do I want with gold? I seek only the honour of his...of..."*

She broke off so abruptly that it seemed she'd been struck by a Silencing Charm. Hermione snapped her head sideways to see what had happened. Bellatrix's manic gaze was fixed on the point where the other Snatchers stood. With Lucius poised to summon Lord Voldemort...sleeve torn back and the shocking contrast of his black Dark Mark and his pale skin visible to the entire room...Bellatrix drew a deep shuddering breath and began to scream once more.

"STOP!"* she shrieked. "Do not touch it, we shall all perish if the Dark Lord comes now!"*

Her scream was so forceful that Lucius froze with surprise. Bellatrix stalked towards the hapless young man who had attracted her attention. He was, Hermione noticed

with dawning comprehension, holding the sword.

"What is that?" she inquired menacingly, emphasising every word.

The Snatcher wasn't smart enough to obey at once, and soon all of the Snatchers but Greyback had been knocked unconscious by Bellatrix and were dragged outside by Draco Malfoy. Bellatrix had the sword, along with Greyback's wand, and she was muttering to herself as she turned Gryffindor's weapon over in her hands. "If it is indeed Potter, he must not be harmed."

Hermione tried to grab hold of Harry's hand and give it a comforting squeeze. She was so closely tied to Ron, Harry and Dean, however, that it could have been anyone's hand.

"The Dark Lord wishes to dispose of Potter himself . . ." continued Bellatrix. "But if he finds out . . . I must . . . I must know . . ."

What must she know? What mustn't he find out? Hermione tried to parse the insane woman's words, but there wasn't enough information to make sense of them. She glanced around what she could see of the room; no-one else seemed to know what Bellatrix was talking about, either.

"The prisoners must be placed in the cellar," ordered Bellatrix suddenly, "while I think what to do!"

"This is my house, Bella," retorted Lucius, "you don't give orders in my..."

"Do it!" she shrieked, interrupting her brother-in-law. "You have no idea of the danger we are in!" She was so close to the edge that sparks flew from the end of her wand, singing the carpet rather badly. Lucius stared at the burn mark, horrified.

It was Narcissa who finally broke the stalemate. "Take these prisoners down to the cellar, Greyback," she commanded in her thin, cold voice.

"Wait!" interpolated Bellatrix. "All except . . . except for the Mudblood."

A wave of nausea washed over Hermione.

"No!" cried Ron. "You can have me, keep me!"

Hermione was anxiously flailing for his hand with hers, but couldn't manage to catch hold of him. Her heart ached at his willingness to take her place, but better it was her. She, at least, could use Occlumency. Bellatrix took the opportunity to slap Ron across the face...capitalising on the bruising where the Snatchers had hit him earlier.

"If she dies under questioning, I'll take you next," she promised maliciously. "Blood traitor is next to Mudblood in my book."

Hermione failed to hear the rest of what Bellatrix said; the words "dies under questioning" echoed terrifyingly through her head. She couldn't help but notice, however, when Bellatrix drew a delicate silver dagger from under her robes. *How odd that she might kill me with such a beautiful piece of workmanship* Hermione realised that she was suffering from shock. *You need to get a grip, Granger*, she berated herself. As Bellatrix sliced through the ropes that held her tied to the other prisoners, Hermione strengthened her Occlumency shields.

Greyback forced the other prisoners from the room, and Bellatrix grabbed hold of Hermione's hair and yanked at it, dragging her directly under the chandelier. Panic had seized Hermione, though she did her best to funnel the energy of it back into her shields. Draco, she noticed suddenly, had his father by one arm and was whispering urgently into his ear. A look of slight concern wavered on Lucius' face, but only momentarily. He shook his arm free and turned away from his son. Hermione didn't know whether to feel better or worse because of Draco's involvement...better because someone in the room seemed to be on her side, or worse because if Draco was bothered, events promised to be rather terrible indeed.

Hermione could hear Ron shouting her name over and over; as he disappeared down the hall, the volume faded, though his anguish increased.

"Your boyfriend seems a little distressed," crooned Bellatrix into Hermione's ear, stroking the flat blade of her dagger down Hermione's cheek. "And with good reason. Certainly, by the time I'm done with you, he won't ever want to fuck you again."

Hermione could not repress a shudder as the cool metal of Bellatrix's knife pressed against her cheek.

"I'm going to ask you a question, little Mudblood; I suggest you answer it honestly. Where did you get this sword?"

Hermione swallowed and steeled herself, though she couldn't control the shake in her voice. "We-we found it," she stuttered.

"Wrong answer!" snarled Bellatrix. She flicked lightly at the lobe of Hermione's ear with her dagger as she withdrew it, only to point her wand at her instead. "This, little Mudblood, is what my displeasure feels like: *Crucio!*"

Though Bellatrix merely whispered the word, the fire that blossomed along Hermione's nerve endings threatened to tear her apart. Never before had Hermione felt such pain, and her Occlumency shields, which she'd primed in anticipation of the attack, did nothing, for the pain was within her; her own body was on fire.

Only once the pain stopped did Hermione realise she'd been screaming. Her throat was raw, and her limbs were trembling. *Come on, Granger, get up!* she urged, pushing up against the floor and managing to pull herself to her knees. Bellatrix would not break her.

"Aunt Bella!" exclaimed Draco, who had inched closer. Hermione had to suppress an hysterical urge to giggle when she noticed the familiar tones of the Malfoy whinge. "If this is the Granger girl, then Snape..."

"Fuck Snape," replied Bellatrix, silencing him with an outstretched arm. She didn't bother to turn towards him. "If you're squeamish, look away."

The mention of Snape had set Hermione's heart racing. She brutally squashed each of her reactions. Though her Occlumency shields held firm, she buried every thought of Snape that came to mind in the library books of her brain. There was absolutely no way that she would betray Snape to this maniac; no hint of his espionage would reach Bellatrix from her, nor any sign of her desperation to see him.

Having dismissed Draco, Bellatrix leaned her face down close to Hermione's. "I'm going to ask you again!" she shrieked, the sudden volume and vehemence startling her victim. "Where did you get this sword? *Where?*"

"We found it..." gasped Hermione. Bellatrix was looking her directly in the eye, and Hermione was acutely aware of the mounting Legilimency pressure pushing against her shields. "We found it...PLEASE!"

"*Crucio!*" shouted Bellatrix angrily, and for the next couple of minutes, Hermione knew nothing but indescribable pain.

As the pain faded, and her surroundings came back into focus, Hermione knew a small, fierce flame of triumph. Bellatrix had yet to break through her defences, and the crazy woman's irritation was showing.

"You are lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it!" she shrieked. Hermione knew that Bellatrix couldn't be sure she wasn't telling the truth, but the very presence of her Occlumency shields was enough to cast doubt on her words. "You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, *tell the truth!*"

"I am," lied Hermione, with an almost savage delight at her ability to do so. Before she succumbed yet again to the pain blossoming along her nervous system, she tried in vain to place the ringing tone and oddly declamatory phrasing of Bellatrix's final words. For some strange reason, it reminded her of Harry.

This time, it took longer for Hermione to return to full awareness. The pain, if anything, was worse, and she was unable to push herself back up from the ground. The best she could do was rub ineffectively at the thin thread of drool that hung from her mouth. Both she and Bellatrix were aware that Hermione's Occlumentic shields were too strong to be easily broken, though by now Hermione had started to worry about how long her body itself would hold up. Resolutely, she pushed away all thought of Neville's parents; she'd rather be dead than brain damaged. *Get a grip, Granger.* Pressing her eyes closed for a moment, she delved deep. She had resources Bellatrix couldn't touch.

When she finally managed to force her eyes open, Hermione froze in shock. Standing in the open doorway...dressed only in a long white nightshirt, decoratively smocked and layered with ruffles...was Jocelyn Smith. Her mouth was open in surprise, and one hand hung by her face, suspended in the act of rubbing at her bleary eyes. In the long second during which their eyes met, Hermione knew Jocelyn was horrified. She knew Jocelyn was about to scream her name and run towards her, yet Draco moved first.

In two strides, he crossed to the door. Covering Jocelyn's mouth with one hand, he swept the young girl off the ground. Even as she began to struggle, he carried her from the room, impervious to her flailing limbs and a spirited attempt to kick his legs out from under him.

Meanwhile, Hermione's fortitude was pushing Bellatrix even further towards incoherence, and in her fury, she seemed oblivious to the brief appearance of a second Muggle-born witch.

"What else did you take?" she ranted. "What else have you got? Tell me the truth, or I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!"

As if to emphasise her point, she leant down and pressed the tip of her dagger against Hermione's breastbone. Thankfully, it snagged on the underwire of her bra, rather than slicing through into the already scarred skin across her chest.

"I am telling the truth," Hermione ground out, looking directly up into Bellatrix's face and forcefully clearing her mind.

"It's not working, Bella!" exclaimed Draco, stepping back into the room...alone.

Hermione watched the snarl on Bellatrix's face deepen viciously. She spun on her heel and glared at Lucius Malfoy.

"How disappointed you must be in Draco," she sneered. "He cares more about the concerns of his teacher than he does for his family."

"Draco knows his place!" retorted Lucius quickly, though an edge of uncertainty undercut his words.

"Severus saved my life!" replied Draco defensively. "Family honour requires that I respect..."

He was cut off by a silencing charm launched by his aunt.

"Once we turn in Potter," Bellatrix stated, "Snape's position will mean nothing." She waved her wand towards Draco again, and the young man flinched.

"Being a Death Eater doesn't seem to agree with you, Malfoy," thought Hermione.

Only when all of the room's occupants swung their gazes towards her did Hermione realise that she had spoken aloud. *Shit.* She was losing control. *Get a grip, Granger!* With an inordinate effort, she strengthened her mental shields once more. She couldn't but notice, however, that the implications of her slip were evident to Bellatrix, too, for the madwoman pointed her wand directly at her once again.

"What else did you take?" she screeched. "What else? ANSWER ME! *CRUCIO!*"

The pain was so awful that when it finally stopped, Hermione caught herself sobbing with relief. Over her tears, she thought she could hear Ron, still shouting her name.

And where, she wondered, where the hell is Jocelyn and what is she doing here?

"How did you get into my vault?" snarled Bellatrix, fisting a hand into Hermione's hair and twisting her neck awkwardly so that once again Hermione's eyes stared into the crazed pupils of her tormentor. "Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?"

"We only met him tonight!" panted Hermione, trying to let the sincerity of that particular statement shine through without actually lowering any of her mental defences. "We've never been inside your vault . . . It isn't the real sword! It's a copy, just a copy!"

"A copy?" Bellatrix let go of Hermione's head and it thudded painfully back onto the floor. "Oh, a likely story!"

"But we can find out easily!" interrupted Lucius. "Draco, fetch the goblin, he can tell us whether the sword is real or not!"

Hermione's slim hope that Bellatrix might leave her alone while Draco fetched Griphook proved to be unfounded. Almost lazily, the awful woman Crucioed her repeatedly, giving her not quite enough time to recover any sense of equanimity between agonising intervals of pain. Deep inside, Hermione began to wonder how long it would take for her to die.

"What was that?" Hermione had heard nothing, but Lucius sounded genuinely worried. "Did you hear that? What was that noise in the cellar? Draco...no, call Wormtail! Make him go and check!"

Draco had only just returned from his own trip down below, half dragging the goblin along behind him. As soon as Wormtail scurried away, Bellatrix raised her wand once more. Hermione could have kissed Lucius Malfoy's boot when he caught at her hand and stopped her.

"Hold on a moment," he ordered, "I want to listen."

No-one in the room spoke for several blessedly-pain-free moments. Hermione used the time to take stock of her physical aches. *Am I already brain damaged?* she wondered. *How would I even tell?*

There were several muffled thumps from below where she lay. *Let Harry and Ron be okay,* prayed Hermione, worried by the noises.

"What is it, Wormtail?" shouted Lucius immediately.

"Nothing! All fine!" came the reply.

Lucius' shoulders sagged visibly with relief; Bellatrix grimaced and pulled her hand from Lucius' grip. Vindictively, she Crucioed Hermione as soon as her hand was free.

This time, Hermione almost didn't make the return trip to consciousness. For long moments, she fought against the blackness that threatened to swamp her. Her eyelids seemed impossibly heavy. Vaguely, Hermione became aware that Bellatrix had begun to interrogate Griphook. The room around her was fading in and out of focus, and there was an awful roaring noise in her ears.

"Well?"* asked Bellatrix. "Is it the true sword?"*

Hermione did her best to concentrate on the goblin, willing him to confirm her story. He was turning the sword over in his hand, examining the hilt carefully.

"No,"* replied Griphook finally. "It is a fake."*

As relief rolled over Hermione, her eyes slid back into her head. She struggled against the sensation. *Must stay awake. Must open my eyes* By the time she managed to focus on the scene unfolding above her prone body, Griphook had been thrown to the floor as well. Bellatrix crowed her delight as she summoned her master.

A pointed, patent leather boot nudged Hermione's aching ribs as Bellatrix graced her battered victim with a last, gloating farewell: "And I think, we can dispose of the Mudblood. Greyback, take her if you want her."*

Horror curdled her insides. Hermione wanted to scream, to howl, to kick, to crawl away...but her mistreated body was incapable of anything beyond the nausea that washed over her. Oddly, though, the sounds of her silent scream resounded through the room. Only belatedly did Hermione realise the sound came from Ron.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!"*

As Ron barrelled into the drawing room, wand outstretched and screaming with rage, several things happened. Spells flew from all directions: one disarmed Bellatrix, one stunned Lucius, another tripped Greyback, sending him sprawling. The last thought Hermione had, before she lost consciousness, was amazement that Draco had missed Harry by such a large margin that his trip jinx had struck the werewolf by mistake.

High Tide

Chapter 17 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Seventeen : High Tide

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To the betas-of-pure-awesomeness: LAXo and WriterMerrin, THANK YOU!!

Severus was woken in the middle of the night by the burn of his Dark Mark...not the savagely painful flare of an immediate summons, but the awkward ache of another Death Eater communicating with the Dark Lord. The panic that followed was very nearly incapacitating.

Severus dressed quickly. His exit, via the headmaster's office, sparked a flurry of questions from the resident portraits.

"Severus?"

"What has happened?"

"Where are you going?"

"It would seem that someone has captured Potter," he replied from the door, then ran lightly through the empty corridors, headed for the outside. He was in such a hurry that he left before the Malfoy owl arrived bearing an urgent personal message.

Without knowing exactly who had activated their mark, he Apparated to Malfoy Manor. The chances were good that someone there would know what was going on.

A slight figure in a white gown threw itself upon him halfway up the garden path, and he lowered his wand only once he realised it was pressed into Jocelyn's throat.

"You came!" she sobbed with obvious relief. "They've got Hermione, and Aunt Bellatrix..."

Severus didn't wait to hear more. He lifted her bodily and leapt into the air, covering the ground between them and the front door in the shortest possible time.

"Where?" he demanded as they touched down.

"Living room!" she replied, breathless and wide-eyed.

"Go back upstairs and get dressed as quickly as possible; wait for me on the stairs."

Jocelyn nodded obediently and ran off quickly, her bare feet flashing under her gown as it streamed out behind her. Severus, for his part, straightened his robes and plastered a sneer onto his face as he strode towards the living room. The scene he found was one of chaos: Lucius, Bellatrix and Fenrir were screaming at each other amid shards of broken glass. The chandelier had wreaked havoc on the decor. Granger was nowhere to be seen.

"You!" shrieked Bellatrix at Snape's appearance. "This is your fault!"

"I beg your pardon?" drawled Severus, raising one eyebrow derisively. He tamped his anger down under a cold shield of self-control.

"You sent Dobby! I know he works at Hogwarts!" Spittle flew from the corner of Bellatrix's mouth.

Dobby?

"Enough, Bella!" Narcissa cut across her hysterical sister.

"Let go of me! Once again Snape turns up at the opportune moment; once again Potter escapes!"

"I came because you called," sneered Severus, flexing his arm slightly to make his point. "I can assure you that concern for Potter's safety was far from my motives."

"I said, enough!" Narcissa spoke harshly. "The Dark Lord will arrive any moment now! We need to calm down!"

With a vengeful and slightly panicked glance at Severus, Bellatrix spun back towards Lucius, leaving Draco the opportunity to pull his Head of House aside.

It was a relief to hear that all three members of the trio had managed to get away, and when Lucius discovered that they'd somehow managed to take Ollivander and Lovegood with them, leaving Wormtail for dead in the downstairs dungeon, Severus felt an unanticipated surge of elation. It did little, though, to dull the edge of fury that he felt at the evening's other events.

Bellatrix. Fenrir.

Severus wanted to kill her. He wanted to tear the werewolf limb from limb.

Behind his Occlumency shields he swore to wreak punishment in every imaginable way. Bellatrix would be made to regret her actions, and leaving her to the Dark Lord's displeasure was but the first and most sensible step. His arrival, anticipated with terror, came not a moment too soon. Unsurprisingly, Voldemort was incensed to have been called back for no reason, and Severus took pains to make sure that his own belated arrival was noted...impugning Bellatrix's handling of the situation without hesitation.

"Once again the Black family have disappointed me!" exclaimed Voldemort, his eyes flashing a terrifying red in anger. "Your presence here, Severus, is no longer needed. Return to Hogwarts, I shall visit you there once I'm done."

Severus bowed deferentially. "I shall take the children with me," he commented. "Come along, Draco."

It was a bold move, but it succeeded. With an anguished glance at his parents, the boy obeyed, following close by Severus' heels. Lucius called after them both despairingly as they left, but Severus felt no pity for his friend. As far as he was concerned, if Lucius was prepared to ignore Severus' stated desires regarding Granger, he deserved whatever punishment the Dark Lord might hand out.

Jocelyn, as directed, was waiting on the marble staircase in the foyer, and Severus Apparated both her and Draco back to Hogwarts. He shooved them off towards the dungeons the instant they arrived back at the school. Jocelyn kept her head bowed and went to move off obediently. The boy, however, was hesitant.

"You saved me . . . again."

Severus sneered. "Yes. I confess it's getting a little tedious. Do try and take better care of yourself in the future."

"He . . . he won't kill them, will he?"

"It's unlikely." He added more gently: "Go to bed, Draco. The Dark Lord is on his way, and I don't want to see you until dinner time tomorrow."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Jocelyn gave him a long look, followed by a firm nod, then she pulled Draco off after her to the dungeons. Severus made his way up to his office as quickly as possible. There he found the Malfoy owl and, too late to be of any use, read the short letter:

Come to Malfoy Manor immediately, Jocelyn Malfoy-Smith.

The open childish letters of her script caught at his heart, and once he'd sent the owl back, he began to pace his office, the small scrap of parchment crushed in his hand. He set Phineas scurrying back and forth from one portrait to the other; at each re-appearance, Severus' heart leapt into his mouth in hope of news, but there was nothing forthcoming. In answer to Dumbledore's many questions, Severus replied only that Potter had escaped. He couldn't bring himself to voice anything more.

His mind threw up image after image of Bellatrix torturing a steady stream of victims, with Granger's face superimposed over those in his memory. Bellatrix tended towards the viciously creative; she took an unseemly, sadistic joy in inflicting pain. Snape imagined that knife of hers slicing through Granger's tender flesh, marking it with indelible, painful runes. He saw Bellatrix's hands tearing at clothes and rending private flesh in public humiliation. He thought, all too vividly, about Fenrir's yellowed teeth and imagined the werewolf's fetid breath against Granger's neck before biting through skin and muscle and tendon to contaminate her blood once and for all.

Not even the sure knowledge that Voldemort was punishing those responsible was enough to stem the tide of horrific imagery. He knew. He'd seen it before; there was no possible way to deny how awful, how damaging, how degrading the experience must have been.

Severus felt ill.

He had only meant to keep her safe; but once again he had failed.

It was nearly dawn when his Dark Mark burned once more.

Severus was no fool. From the point...mere days before...when he had told Voldemort about Grindelwald, he knew it was only a matter of time before the Dark Lord turned up to claim Dumbledore's wand. He only hoped he would survive the event.

Availing himself of a torch from the wall near the castle doors, Severus walked down to the gate and let Voldemort in. Up, through the grounds and past the lake, they walked together. When Voldemort dismissed him, Severus kept his relief under wraps. Bowing deeply, he turned his back on the terrifying travesty of a man that Voldemort had become and walked away.

The novelty of not yet being dead sustained Severus through several hours more of the Dark Lord's company. After desecrating Dumbledore's grave, Voldemort joined Severus in the headmaster's office and flaunted his new wand before the old man's portrait. In other circumstances, Severus might have found a kernel of black humour in the odd farce he and the portraits were forced to maintain, but with every thought behind his Occlumency shields focussed on Granger and her current, unknown state of health, he itched and fretted the entire time.

For all he knew, she could be bleeding to death while the sun came up, with the two idiot boys bungling healing spells over her desperately injured body...while he drank Firewhisky with the Dark Lord.

Afterwards, he was never sure how he made it through without losing the remains of his dinner.

The moment the Dark Lord Disapparated, Severus turned on his heel and ran. He sprinted up the path towards the castle through the early morning sunshine, his robes billowing in his wake. He thundered up the staircases and bounced on the balls of his feet impatiently as he waited for the gargoyle at the entrance to his office to move aside. He took the moving stairs two at a time. He threw the door open with his customary bang and raced across the room. Vaulting the last corner of his desk, he skidded to a stop in front of Dumbledore's portrait, his left hand pressed flat against the canvas.

"Now, Albus," he ordered, his breath laboured from the effort of his mad dash. "Use the Deluminator."

"Er, Severus," Dumbledore replied without moving to comply, "I don't really think that's a good idea."

"I mean it, Albus! Do it now!" Tracking Hermione would take hours. The Deluminator would be much, much faster.

Dumbledore drew back slightly, his brows pulled together and a dubious look on his face. "Really, Severus! It's vital that they not see you or know you to be acting on my behalf! In your current state, it could be disastrous!"

Severus gripped the frame of Dumbledore's painting with his other hand and shook it in frustration. He growled with anger.

"It won't do you much good even if he does use the Deluminator," interjected Phineas smoothly. Severus spun his attention towards him immediately. "They've gone to Shell Cottage, and as you know, it's Secret Kept."

"How do you know?" demanded Severus, striding across the room towards Phineas' frame. "What did you hear?"

Phineas shrugged. "I had it from the girl."

"How is she?" There was a dangerous edge of desperation to Severus' voice.

"Seemed fine to me," replied Phineas unconcernedly. "Apparently she's off for a walk along the beach."

"When?" He had hold of Phineas' frame and was gripping both edges tightly.

"Oh, about ten minutes ago..."

Without waiting for any more information, Severus took off at a run. He heard Dumbledore's shouts behind him, but he paid them no mind. When he reached the main staircase, Severus leapt from the banister, soaring through the air to the ground. He landed only to push open the main door, then he took flight once again.

From the Apparation point, he spun into nothingness only to reappear on the beach below Shell Cottage. The house itself was hidden from view by the height of the cliffs. Severus Disillusioned himself. Too tense to sit down, too careful to pace...and perhaps give himself away by the resultant puffs of sand...he stood frozen in place, his eyes flickering from one side of the deserted beach to the other.

It was a long ten minutes before Granger rounded the corner. She was blessedly alone, and blessedly upright. He dropped the charm that had kept him hidden as he waited for Granger to notice him. His gut roiled with a new anxiety.

She looked up and saw him within seconds; as their eyes met, she Apparated away.

The sharp crack of her disappearance hit Severus like a slap in the face, and his eyes blinked closed. *What did you expect?* he berated himself. *She was just tortured by Death Eaters. Why would she want to talk to you?* The wand at his throat forced his attention back to the present, and his eyes flew open.

Hermione Granger stood before him, wand out and a grim expression on her face. Gone was the eager, naive girl who had willingly opened the door to him last June; in her place was a whipcord thin warrior, all reflexes and hard edges. She was still alone.

"Granger," he ventured, making sure to keep his arms motionless at his side.

"Snape," she replied. "Give me one good reason to believe you are who you appear to be."

Severus swallowed, causing his Adam's apple to rasp uncomfortably against the tip of her wand. "In the Hospital Wing you called me a phoenix."

"Not good enough; that's what I asked you last time."

After a moment's thought, he responded, "Ask me a question, then."

Granger didn't hesitate. "Where is the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix?"

It was a clever question: no doubt, then, that *she* was who she seemed to be.

"The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix," he began, getting as far as, "can be found," before Mad-Eye's Tongue-Tying Curse kicked in and he spluttered to a halt, momentarily choked and unable to continue.

By the time he'd regained control of his mouth and his breathing, Granger had sheathed her wand...no, not her wand: Bellatrix's wand. The realisation made Severus shudder, though luckily the reaction was concealed within the rather violent motions engendered by the Tongue-Tying Curse.

"What do you want, Snape?" she asked, arms crossed.

Sometime in the last few months, he'd lost the honorific "Professor." Severus found that he didn't mind at all.

For several moments he sought for the right words.

I needed to see you.

I had to be sure you were alright.

I... I... I...

How ridiculous to be stuck in the first person singular when it was her he was worried about.

"You were tortured by Bellatrix," he said finally.

Granger shrugged, a hard expression on her face. "So?" she asked.

"And by Fenrir Greyback?"

"He threatened," she replied dismissively. "Touched my cheek, nothing more."

"Bellatrix," he said again, the tip of his tongue flicking out to moisten his lips, "did she cut you? Did she . . . ?" He trailed off, too invested in the answer to voice the question.

Granger pulled at the neckline of her jacket to reveal a thin, red scar, newly healed. "She cut me here, nicked my ear; the rest was Crucio."

Relief softened every muscle in his body at once, and his shoulders dropped perceptibly lower. Unexpectedly, the palpable palliation of his anxiety spurred Granger's anger.

"Do you think that makes it okay?" she inquired, outraged. She stepped towards him and gave him a sharp push.

Severus took a step backwards in surprise.

"Do you think that I didn't feel Greyback's hand on my cheek every time I closed my eyes and tried to sleep?" She pushed him again, stepping forward to close the space between them once more. "That I didn't imagine those sickly pointed teeth sinking into my skin? Didn't smell his stinking breath? Didn't wonder what it would be like to be raped? Or torn to pieces?" With every question she pushed him, and eventually he stumbled, falling backwards into the sand.

She followed him down, striking him now with her fists, beating against his chest; her questions were less and less coherent.

"Didn't see Bellatrix's awful face behind my eyelids?" she managed, gasping. "Didn't wonder..."

Severus managed to catch at one of her hands, pinning it to him, when, to his consternation, she burst into tears, her face buried in his robes.

Automatically, his free arm closed around her. Liberating the other, he managed to lever himself up so that Granger sat in his lap rather than crouching over him. Once their balance was secure, he wrapped the second arm around her too.

She cried until her tears soaked through several layers of wool to reach his chest, and he held her without complaint. With one hand buried in her hair and the other pulled tight around her shoulders, he breathed her in and wordlessly willed her whole and happy. His throat hurt with guilt.

A good fifteen minutes later, Granger gave a final, punctuating sniff, her shoulders no longer shaking with sobs. Severus' legs were slightly numb from the weight of her, but he didn't want her to get up...not before he had said what he needed to say. Once the uncontrollable outpouring of tears was over, there was a sudden awkwardness in their position, and Severus was struck by a new panic.

"I owe you an apology, Granger." His throat was tight from the long minutes of tongue-tied desperation, but it was somehow easier to confess with her head buried in his chest and her big, too-familiar eyes hidden; as he held onto her, overwhelmed by her nearness and clutching onto her like a precious gift, it was easier to hold on to the false hope that she might forgive him just once more.

From the unnaturally still set of her shoulders, he knew she was listening, though she hadn't replied and she didn't look up. He imagined that her eyes were pressed shut; he could feel the tense grip of her fists curled in the folds of his robes.

He cleared his throat, staring out at the undulating surface of the sea, and willed himself onwards. "Several of the Death Eaters have taken advantage of women imprisoned under the regime's anti-Muggle-born laws."

Granger didn't move, yet it seemed to Severus that she shrank away; her almost imperceptible response twisted the pain in his chest tighter still.

"The Dark Lord wanted . . . he wanted to reward me; he offered me a 'Mudblood' of my own. I refused."

One of Granger's fists relaxed, and she pressed one palm firmly against his chest. He knew it for a sign of her relief, and his heart grieved at what was yet to come.

"I told him..." Severus swallowed heavily, and when he could continue, his voice came out as a whisper. "I told him that I desired you."

Granger flinched. Her whole body twisted inwards, the hand that had been pressed flat closed back into a fist, and her face burrowed further in towards his breastbone. Severus felt the involuntary spasm of her body physically and psychologically. He felt inordinately glad that he hadn't had to witness the revulsion that surely pulled at her face as clearly as it did her other muscles.

"Had anyone other than Bellatrix apprehended you," he continued, determined to finish his sordid tale, "it should have been enough to ensure your survival . . . Bellatrix, however, has little desire to do well by me. I'm afraid that you suffered the brunt of a punishment that was simultaneously intended for me."

Granger moved, pushing herself back slightly from his chest with her palms, though carefully not meeting his eyes.

"That was very noble of you, Snape. Thank you." Her voice was thickened by her very recent tears. "It was lucky, really, that it was me she chose to interrogate. She used Legilimency in an attempt to find out where we'd got the sword and had she picked one of the boys, they would have offered little resistance to that means of questioning. They might have betrayed you inadvertently."

Severus couldn't wrap his mind around the implications of her words: once again she wanted to see the best in him.

Ineffectually, she smoothed one hand down the wet, rumpled patch she had left on his robes. "I'm sorry that I took out my anger," she added before he'd managed to formulate a reply to her first comment, "and my...my fears on you. I won't do it again."

Clumsily, she tried to stand. Severus handed her up and then quickly rose to his own feet. As the blood rushed unimpeded into his legs, they burned with pins and needles. He felt bereft. He couldn't find the words to tell her how much her tears and anger had meant to him.

"Do you need a handkerchief?" he asked stiffly.

"No, er, I've got one of yours somewhere." After a second's fumbling, she pulled his handkerchief from a pocket and blew her nose thoroughly. Glancing around self-consciously, she sat herself, rather tentatively, on one of the larger rocks that lined the base of the cliff.

After a moment's hesitation, Severus settled himself one rock over. He could feel the wind against the damp patch left by her tears, but he chose not to dry it. His emotions were in such turmoil that he felt dizzy. He should have sent her back to the cottage and safety, but instead he grasped greedily at the possibility of additional seconds in her company.

Granger was folding her...his...handkerchief in a clumsy attempt to keep the soggy patch tucked well away. Her face was red and blotchy, but now that it was visible to him, Severus couldn't get enough of looking at it; he tilted his head forward and gazed at her through his hair.

"Please tell me that Jocelyn's presence at Malfoy Manor has nothing to do with her being someone's . . . Mudblood," she asked at last, staring out at the horizon.

"No!" Severus saw Granger's shoulders relax slightly at his explosive denial. "On the contrary, I told everyone she was Malfoy's bastard, and everyone believed me...to the point where I was able to get her blood status changed. At the time, it seemed like a good way to keep her safe, to hide her in plain sight in the bosom of a Death Eater family . . ."

Severus took a deep breath.

"But I was wrong," he added with new certainty. "It's far too . . . damaging for her to be around that kind of behaviour. Later today I shall owl Vector and have her send a Portkey. I should have sent Jocelyn to Krum from the very beginning."

"You're in contact with Vector?" There was an urgency to Granger's question, and Severus felt an unmistakable flash of jealousy at the interest Granger showed in her other professor.

"Yes. She is in Bulgaria with Krum."

"Is she still working on the matrix?"

"Yes, of course."

"How can I get a copy?" Granger was leaning towards him now, and his realisation of what sparked her interest eased his heart a little.

"Actually," he said, "I'm fairly certain she intends to get information to you when she thinks you will need it." The memory of her questions about how to contact Granger were fresh in his mind.

"Huh," she replied, leaning back once more and running a thumb nail absently down the outside seam of her jeans. Her next question was completely unexpected. "Can you Occlude against Crucio?"

"No," he replied. "Though you can use Occlumency to conceal thoughts that you otherwise might have revealed."

Granger nodded. "That's exactly what I did."

Severus could tell that there were other questions fomenting, and he waited patiently.

"How long before the damage . . . becomes permanent?"

"Did your shields fail?" he asked in response. Granger shook her head. "Then you're fine. The shields are the first line of defence."

Granger let out a long rush of breath, and Severus knew that he had just relieved her of a terrible anxiety. Something inside him twisted painfully.

"Granger," he said urgently. "It's crucial that you not use Occlumency to hide away the events of last night."

She turned her face to look at him directly.

"The memories may be painful to deal with, but if you lock them away, you risk them becoming permanent and potentially dangerous blockages. Even if you have dreams, don't try to block them; use Dreamless Sleep if you must...though never more than twice a week."

He knew that she'd read the Cvetkovich, but under the pressure of traumatic events, even the most well-informed theorist could act impulsively.

"I know," she said finally, turning her gaze to stare out over the ocean. There was a long silence, broken only by the endless hiss of the waves, their soft gurgle as they pulled back from the pebbles and sand at the shore.

Severus pulled out his wand. "Let me run a diagnostic," he said. It came out halfway between an order and question.

"Fleur already did one..." At his raised eyebrow, the ghost of a smile pulled at the corner of her mouth. "Go ahead, then, I'm sure you think you can do a better job."

Severus waved his wand over her, scanning the resultant lines and colours that shimmered into being with an expert eye.

"What the hell happened to your back?" The question burst from him in a rush, but Granger seemed unperturbed by the savage edge to his voice.

"Oh, Dobby dropped the chandelier on me. I was unconscious at the time, so I didn't really notice. Fleur got all of the glass out and treated it with dittany."

Severus merely grunted. It was obvious from the charm's readings that she was telling the truth, but it did little to calm his ruffled temper. Sheathing his wand, he rooted around in an inside pocket, unearthing several phials of potion. "Here," he said ungracefully, passing them to Granger.

She took them and peered at the labels. There were a couple of bottles of Dreamless Sleep..."That's the concentrated form," he warned her...a general healing potion, and a bottle of the virulent green antivenom. Her eyes widened when she recognised the last one.

"Thank you," she breathed. "You knew, then?"

He nodded, watching as she tucked the glass containers carefully into the pocket of her jacket. Her next question was unexpected.

"Have you ever," she hesitated momentarily, her gaze newly turned away from him and out towards the horizon, "have you ever been Crucioed?"

"Yes." Her eyes flickered back towards him for just a second, then turned back to the view. "Many times," he continued. "Even, on occasion, by Bellatrix herself."

"Is that why you learned Occlumency?" There was an odd edge to her voice, as if she wanted to feign nonchalance, yet still each question tumbled from her lips as if she couldn't hold it back.

It was easier to answer such personal questions while she didn't look directly at him. She was too thin, he realised suddenly, and even though her face was puffy from her extended crying session, the sharpened lines of her face made her eyes too large against the bones of her cheek.

"No. My mother taught me Occlumency long before I met Bellatrix." Stretching out his long legs, he balanced the heel of one boot on the toe of the other; his circulation had returned to normal. "My father was not a nice man."

Granger inhaled sharply. "I'm sorry," she replied awkwardly.

"Don't be ridiculous," he snapped. She gave him the ghost of a watery smile.

"I should get back before someone comes looking for me," she said.

Severus got to his feet at once. Granger stood more slowly.

"We'll probably stay at Shell Cottage for a few weeks," she commented, her gaze fixed on the horizon. When Severus made no reply, she continued, "Once I feel a little better, I'll probably run here on the beach quite early in the mornings."

Severus opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

"Say, six thirty. Probably not tomorrow or the day after, but after that I might try and run every day."

"In your situation, I wouldn't advise running alone," he replied finally.

Granger turned towards him. Her arms were crossed tightly over her chest, and a lock of curly hair blew across her face. "Thank you,"...she paused momentarily before adding impulsively..."thank you, Snape, for everything."

"Hurry up," he replied crossly, jerking his head towards the cliff and Shell Cottage. With another fleeting, watery smile, she was gone. Severus watched her walk up the narrow cliff staircase with an uncomfortable tightness in his chest. He didn't deserve her easy forgiveness.

He'd have to try harder.

Heist

Chapter 18 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. ****DH SPOILERS****

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Eighteen : Heist

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LXo and WriterMerrin...I salute you both!

Hermione forced herself not to look back until she'd reached the top of the stairs. By then, she was exhausted and out of breath, and the rocks on which she and Snape had sat were thankfully hidden from sight by the drop of the cliffs. She hadn't wanted to turn around and find he'd already gone, not after he'd been so perfectly understanding about everything else.

He cares, she told herself. *He cared enough to find out where I was from Phineas and to come and check on me.*

Sneaking back into Shell Cottage, Hermione's luck ran out, and she crossed paths with Fleur in the kitchen. The Frenchwoman was appalled by the discovery that Hermione was not in bed as supposed. She showered Hermione with a macaronic stream of reproaches while she shoed her up the stairs and into the room she was to share with Luna. The other girl was fast asleep: her pale hair, spread over her pillow, the only visible part of her.

Fleur stood watch, arms akimbo, until Hermione was changed and under the covers. Then she left the room, still muttering crossly. Hermione heard her ward the door to ensure that this time, she stayed in her place.

As Fleur's footsteps faded away, Hermione pushed her pillow vertically up against the headboard and rolled onto her front, face pressed against the sheets. Grabbing her blankets on either side, she pulled them tightly around herself and clutched the extra material below her chin. If she screwed her eyes closed, she could imagine the pressure across her shoulders as the comforting warmth of his arms, the sheets as his robes.

He cares.

Unlike the awful hour she'd spent in bed earlier, desperately trying to sleep and besieged by visions of Malfoy Manor, she now felt safe. Tired, exhausted, but safe.

As she drifted towards sleep, her treacherous mind replayed the moment she was deliberately trying not to think about! *I told him . . . I told him that I desired you.* As his voice whispered in the mind's ear of her memory, desire shuddered through her.

If only it were true.

If anything, Hermione had imagined time apart would have lessened her crush on Professor Snape, but the events of the morning demonstrated otherwise. He must have noticed, too...her reaction to his confession had been far from subtle, and before that she'd practically thrown herself upon him and burst into tears. No wonder he'd felt awkward telling her what he'd said to Voldemort.

She wasn't stupid, though. She knew he would say pretty much anything that might protect one of the students under his care. It didn't mean that he actually did desire her.

He cares, though, enough to worry about me.

And seriously, that was more than she might have hoped for. It would just have to do. She wouldn't embarrass him by making her crush any more evident than she had already. After everything he'd done for her, the last thing he deserved was a silly schoolgirl who couldn't tell the difference between the things he had to say as a spy and his true feelings. He trusted her and he cared about her, and Hermione Granger wasn't going to betray his trust for anything.

The next few days at Shell Cottage were an endless negotiation between Fleur and Harry. The former wanted to treat them all as children and wrap them up in cotton wool while the latter had reached some kind of epiphany during the Malfoy Manor ordeal and seemed to have matured dramatically overnight. He let Fleur cut his hair, and the return to his more usual style only served to emphasise the differences in his face: he looked older. The food deprivations of the past six months had hollowed out his cheeks, but there was something more, too. Something in the set of his chin and the calm, respectful expression with which he would listen to Fleur's complaints and yet concede only the points he had clearly intended to comply with all along.

Hermione was impressed and distressed by the information Harry had deduced about the Deathly Hallows and Bellatrix's bank vault. The Arithmantic matrix, it seemed, had been right: Harry was the one to work out the information for himself. Which meant, of course, that it was still her job to keep him alive...not that she was likely to forget.

If Harry seemed different, so too did Ron. He couldn't keep his eyes off Hermione. Anytime she got close enough, his arm would snake around her, and he treated her as if she were fragile. Hermione found it alternately reassuring and frustrating.

"When they tortured you," he ventured the first time they were alone, an anguished expression on his face, "I couldn't bear it. I would have done anything to get you out."

Biting back an ungenerous urge to snap at him and tell him that he'd suffered nothing compared to her, Hermione tried to think about how she would have felt had the tables been turned. She tried to imagine listening to the sound of Ron being tortured, and she remembered his scream as he ran into the Malfoys' drawing room...she had thought his scream was her own. *It must have been awful*, she surmised, and she pulled his head forward onto her lap, rubbing comforting circles on his back as he wept.

"Everything's going to be okay, Ron, I promise," she whispered.

Her memories of the torture itself revisited her in flashes, for with Snape's advice echoing in her ears, Hermione was careful not to Occlude against them. Instead, she concentrated on the fact that she had revealed nothing and comforted herself with the knowledge that Snape had cared enough to come looking for her. It was still hard, but she was coping.

Luna, on the other hand, seemed completely unfazed by the several months she had spent in the dungeon.

"Oh, it wasn't that bad," she replied when Hermione pressed her on the topic as they were getting ready for bed. "It was Draco I really felt sorry for."

The worst thing of all, from Hermione's perspective, was the loss of her wand. Not only was Bellatrix's wand less responsive in her hand, it felt evil. And every time she used it, she imagined the horrible woman somewhere, with her hand on Hermione's wand, putting it to terrible use.

The current whereabouts of her wand was the first thing she asked Snape about, the next time they met up. She wasn't yet well enough to run, but they took an early morning walk along the beach. He stayed Disillusioned almost the entire time, but she could tell his approximate location from the sound of his voice.

"Presumably Bellatrix has it. If she was the one who tortured you, it's possible that she has managed to wrestle it into some form of submission. Do you want me to try and get it for you?"

"No," she replied quickly, her face screwed up in distaste. Not only was a wand "wrestled into submission" by Bellatrix one Hermione might consider gone beyond the point of return, any attempt to take the wand would put Snape and his cover among the Death Eaters into very great danger.

Hermione found Snape's company incredibly comforting, even though she couldn't see him. Although in practice he managed to meet up with her only a couple of times, and though her disappointment on the days he didn't come was crushing, she kept walking at that same time and very much appreciated knowing that he might be there.

One morning, she returned to the cottage to find Ron up at an unexpectedly early hour. He was seated at the kitchen table in his pyjamas, hair tousled from sleep, with his chess board set up before him. As she came in, he snatched one of the pieces suddenly from the board.

"Oh, hey Hermione," he said when he realised it was her. Sheepishly, he put the chess piece back down.

Hermione looked at it curiously. It was a black knight, but for some reason Ron had balanced a twisted triangle of white paper on its head; it looked like it was wearing a jaunty cap.

"Ron, what are you doing?"

"I couldn't sleep," he replied, grimacing and poking at the capped knight with the tip of one finger. The black horse reared, and the tiny horseman shook his lance at Ron. Ron looked up and caught her eye. "I was thinking about things."

"What's the hat for?" she asked. Curiosity getting the better of her, she slipped into the chair opposite him.

"Don't you ever wonder," he asked back, "what it would be like to play chess if one player controlled one of the pieces from the other team, without the other player knowing?"

Comprehension dawned: the white-hatted knight was Snape. A fierce affection for Ron surged within her breast.

"It changes the whole game," said Ron, answering his own question. He gave the knight another disconsolate poke.

"You're the best, Ron," said Hermione. She got up from the table and headed towards the shower. As she walked past the back of his chair, she reached around and gave him a quick hug, pressing a kiss to his cheek. When she reached the doorway, she glanced back to see him moving the white-hatted knight around the board once more, an endearingly foolish grin plastered across his face.

It took a full month before the trio, with Griphook's help, thought themselves ready to break into Gringotts. Despite the weeks of preparation and the hours spent closeted with the goblin in a darkened room, polishing their strategy, the entire event was pretty much a farce from start to finish.

First they ran into a Death Eater (Travers), then the goblins had known (as Hermione should have anticipated) that Bellatrix's wand had been stolen, and Harry had had to use Unforgivable curses on two separate individuals (not only Travers but also the bank teller, Bogrod). Once inside the tunnels, the Thief's Downfall had splashed over all four of them, washing away Hermione's Polyjuice disguise and the rather nifty transfiguration she had worked on Ron, and then she, Ron and Harry were all badly burnt by the gold in Bellatrix's vault. At the culmination of what had proved a rather poorly-conceived plan, Griphook scarpered with the sword, leaving the trio to the mercy of the other goblins, and the three friends had escaped only by hitching a ride on a pain-deranged, half-blind dragon...destroying large sections of the bank in the process.

Hermione knew she should feel more worked up about the situation, but as the cool air of their literal and figurative flight blew against her seared skin, she felt only an almost incapacitating relief that they had...against all the odds...survived. As the dragon flapped its way awkwardly across the sky, Hermione clung to the hard spines of its back and sobbed. After a few moments, she felt Ron move up close behind her. He threaded both arms around her, clutching at the knob of dragon with one hand and pulling her back against his chest with the other. He was shouting random swear words rather loudly, but his presence was deeply reassuring.

Hermione moved one of her hands tentatively, lacing her fingers over his without releasing her death grip on the dragon. The sleeves of his robe, like hers, were singed, and she could see the shiny, red marks of burns on his arms. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"Fuck me!" he shouted into the wind. "Just wait until Fred and George hear about this!"

That comment brought a gurggle of laughter to Hermione's lips...a hiccupping, spluttering, short-lived laugh, but her sobs began to ease.

"What do you reckon it's looking for?"* asked Ron after awhile, shouting over the wind.

"No idea,"* Harry yelled back.

Hermione glanced around her nervously. She couldn't see sign of pursuit. The moment she did, she resolved, she would lean forward, grab hold of Harry's shoulder, and Apparate the three of them away. For now, though the dragon was terrifying, there was something oddly calm about their ride. It felt as if they were untouchable, protected by the enormous body of their potentially deadly host. Its enormous wings flapped, its body undulated, and Harry, Ron and Hermione sailed through the air, rocked gently forwards and back in a strangely soothing manner.

Several hours later, still airborne, Hermione woke with a start at the sound of Ron's voice. Her burns hurt terribly, and she remained emotionally exhausted from having impersonated Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Is it my imagination," yelled Ron, "or are we losing height?"*

Silently castigating herself for having let her attention wander, Hermione glanced around. Ron was right, the ground looked significantly closer, and even as she watched, the dragon lowered one wingtip, circling down towards the sparkling surface of a mountain lake. As the dragon tilted, Hermione gripped convulsively onto the spines of its back. Her back ached, and her hands hurt. She couldn't believe that she'd managed to sleep in such a position.

"I say we jump when it gets low enough!"* suggested Harry, shouting back over his shoulder at the others. "Straight into the water before it realizes we're here!"*

"Just say the word, mate!" replied Ron. He still had one arm around Hermione, and he gave her a reassuring squeeze.

Hermione agreed with rather less enthusiasm, though she was more than happy to be leaving the dragon behind. Gripping the handle of Bellatrix's wand, she cast a Water-Resistant Charm on her beaded bag; truly, she hated that wand.

"NOW!" shouted Harry as he threw himself sideways.

Hermione sucked in a breath. She felt Ron lever his right leg over and watched as he let go. She felt too weak to pull her own leg over, so just tilted sideways instead. As she shifted her weight, she slipped and then began to fall; the water swung up towards her face with terrifying speed. Instinctively, Hermione pulled her arms forward and dove below the surface.

The water was shockingly cold, and the air left her lungs in a painful rush. But it was also blissfully soothing against her burned skin. Hermione pulled herself out of the dive quickly, careful not to hit the bottom. Twisting in the green water, she tried to make out the disturbances where Harry and Ron had landed, but her hair floated across her face in a tangle of curls. She struck out for the surface.

When she broke through into the air, she gasped for breath. Her ribs were still constricted from the sudden cold, and she panted in order to pull in the oxygen her body so desperately needed. Harry and Ron were not far away, and overhead the dragon soared on, oblivious to their departure.

The three friends swam towards the shore furthest from the dragon. Conserving the little strength she had, Hermione used breaststroke, although unfortunately, the lake was not particularly deep, and before long, the reeds and mud were so thick and the water so shallow that Hermione was forced to fight her way through on foot.

"Come on," urged Ron gently, hooking his hands under her armpits and half pushing, half dragging her up the last few yards onto dry land.

With a small sob of relief, Hermione collapsed onto the ground. She squeezed her eyes shut in a futile attempt to hold back the prickle of tears.

"Come on," repeated Ron. "Where's the beaded bag?"

Hermione managed to pat the correct pocket, and Ron extricated it from her robes.

"*Accio dittany*," he muttered with his wand hand thrust into the opening. "Here we go."

After a few seconds, Hermione started, and her eyes flew open. Ron knelt over her, dabbing dittany onto the most prominent of her burns, a solicitous look on his face.

"All right, Hermione?" he asked.

"Yeah." A genuinely happy smile curved her face, and she reached out and caught hold of his hand. Pulling it towards her, she placed a gentle kiss on his knuckles. He blushed...adorably. "Let me do that," she instructed, pulling the cloth from his grip. "You do yours."

Ron's concern infused Hermione with a new energy. By the time Harry had finished setting the wards, she was ready to push the dittany into his hand. She rummaged around in her beaded bag for the bottles of pumpkin juice she'd packed at Shell Cottage and clean, dry robes.

As the dittany did its job, her skin prickled and itched. She could literally see a new layer of skin growing over her burns.

"Well, on the upside, we got the Horcrux," said Ron, "On the downside..."

"...no sword," finished Harry, wincing as he treated a particularly nasty burn on his knee.

"No sword," echoed Ron. "That double-crossing little scab . . ."

Hermione wacked Ron on the shoulder and he tailed off with a sheepish grin. After his and Harry's plan to double cross Griphook, he didn't have much of a leg to stand on.

Harry extricated the golden cup from his wet clothes and put it down on the grass. It looked so innocent. Where the locket had a kind of macabre beauty...not unlike some of the family heirlooms sported by Slytherin girls at the Yule ball...the cup looked innocuous, almost cute. As if you might give it to a small child to drink from.

"At least we can't wear it this time," noted Ron, "that'd look a bit weird hanging round our necks."

Hermione rolled her eyes and gazed out over the lake. The dragon was crouched on the far shore, sucking seemingly endless quantities of water up through pursed lips. Hermione wondered when he or she had last had the chance to drink their fill.

"What will happen to it, do you think?" she asked suddenly. "Will it be all right?"

Ron grinned and rolled towards her. "You sound like Hagrid," he teased. "It's a dragon, Hermione, it can look after itself. It's us we need to worry about."

"What do you mean?" she demanded indignantly.

"Well,"...he sounded like his old self: joking, happy..."I don't know how to break this to you, but I think they*might* have noticed we broke into Gringotts."

Laughter gurgled up from somewhere deep inside Hermione. Harry was laughing, too, as was Ron. The look on the boys' faces was itself so comical that Hermione laughed harder still. She laughed until her stomach ached and tears were rolling down her face. Ron had gone so red from laughing that she laughed some more.

"What are we going to do, though?" she managed eventually, wiping tears from her eyelids with the edge of a finger. "He'll know, won't he? You-Know-Who will know we know about his Horcruxes!"

"Maybe they'll be so scared to tell him?" suggested Ron. "Maybe they'll cover up..."

Harry's dramatic scream cut Ron off. He collapsed backwards, clutching at his scar. Ron and Hermione leapt instantly to their feet.

"Harry? Mate?" Ron was kneeling over his friend, his hands clutching at the front of his robes.

"It's his scar!" exclaimed Hermione. Ron grabbed at Harry's wrists, and Hermione placed a hand on Harry's forehead only to snatch it back. Harry's scar throbbed horribly. It pulsed with a sickening energy that reminded her of the locket. *It's the scar. The scar is the Horcrux...not Harry.* It was a minor distinction, but it filled Hermione with hope that she might be able to do something. What if she cut it off? Or sliced it open? Could she separate the scar from Harry's head?

"Harry? Harry? Hermione! Do something!"

Ron's urgent words brought Hermione back to the present with a thud, and she realised she'd been staring blankly into space.

"Here," she ordered, reaching over and grabbing the wet clothes Harry had discarded. She dried them with a non-verbal charm and shoved them under Harry's head. "We just have to wait till it passes. The only thing we can do is make sure he doesn't hurt himself in the meantime."

Ron and Hermione both rocked back on their heels, and luckily, they didn't have long to wait. Harry's body stilled after a few more minutes, and only moments after that, his eyes flew open. He looked apprehensive. His gaze flicked from Ron to Hermione and back again, then he pushed himself back up into a sitting position and ran a hand roughly down his face.

"He knows," he said, staring at the cup and not at either of his friends. "He knows, and he's going to check where the others are, and," he added, pushing himself to his

feet, a sudden, rather wild light in his eyes, "the last one is at Hogwarts. I knew it. I *knew* it."

"What?" exclaimed Ron, still on his knees and staring up at him, squinting against the sunset.

"But what did you see?" demanded Hermione. "How do you know?"

"I saw him find out about the cup," replied Harry, staring out over the water. "I...I was in his head, he's...he's seriously angry, and scared too, he can't understand how we knew, and now he's going to check the others are safe, the ring first. He thinks the Hogwarts one is safest, because Snape's there, because it'll be so hard not to be seen getting in, I think he'll check that one last, but he could still be there within hours..."

As Harry spoke, Ron had risen to his feet. "Did you see where in Hogwarts it is?" he asked.

"No, he was concentrating on warning Snape, he didn't think about exactly where it is..."

Harry had pulled out the Invisibility Cloak from the beaded bag, and Ron had bent and snatched up the Horcrux. Things were moving too quickly, and Hermione felt overwhelmed. They couldn't confront Voldemort until Hermione had worked out how to separate Harry from his Horcrux.

"Wait, *wait!*" cried Hermione. "We can't just go, we haven't got a plan, we need to..."

"We need to get going," replied Harry. Just as he had been with Fleur, he spoke calmly, but in a tone that brooked no argument. "Can you imagine what he's going to do once he realises the ring and the locket are gone? What if he moves the Hogwarts Horcrux, decides it isn't safe enough?"

"But how are we going to get in?"

"We'll go to Hogsmeade," Harry decided, "and try to work something out once we see what the protection around the school's like. Get under the Cloak, Hermione, I want to stick together this time."

"But we don't really fit..."

Harry spoke over her protestations. "It'll be dark, no one's going to notice our feet."

Hermione had a bad feeling about rushing off to Hogwarts. A feeling of desperate urgency gripped at her heart *It's too early, I haven't solved the problem yet!* Harry and Ron had the cloak already slung round their shoulders, and Harry held out an imperious arm towards her. For a long second, the three of them stood motionless; only the sound of the dragon taking flight once more interrupted their frozen tableau.

Hermione turned towards their unlikely saviour and watched as its huge silhouette flapped over them, blotting out the rapidly-darkening sky, and then disappeared into the distance. She didn't really have a choice, she realised: the decisions were Harry's to make.

With a sinking heart, she stepped forward and felt both boys take hold of her arms. Harry pulled the Cloak tightly around her, and moving together, they twisted into nothingness.

A/N: reviews are lovely :)

Dumbledore's Army

Chapter 19 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Nineteen : Dumbledore's Army

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.

As always, my betas, LAxo and WriterMerrin have done a sterling job.

Severus was able to sneak out to walk on the beach with Granger only twice, but both meetings seemed freighted with emotional intensity. For reasons of security, he had been Disillusioned, yet to be completely honest, he hadn't minded: he'd been able to watch her without having to worry that he was staring.

"It was just hard," she said during his second visit, "knowing that I was helpless, that I couldn't do anything. Bellatrix had all of the power..."

"Nonsense," he said sharply, cutting across her. She turned towards his voice, but her eyes stared through the spot where he stood. "You had information she wanted, therefore you had the power."

"But I couldn't do anything!" she insisted.

"Are you seriously implying you had no choice?" Severus delivered the question in his sceptical-teacher voice, the one that made even confident students doubt the ingredient they were about to add to their cauldron and double check the instructions.

"What else are you suggesting I could have done?" Granger sounded angry, and a bit like she might cry. She was no longer trying to look at him, but had come to a stop, staring out at the green-gold light of the sun as it gradually rose up over the horizon. Her arms were crossed, and she had a fierce look on her face.

"I'm not suggesting anything," replied Severus. "But you could have crumbled. You could have betrayed your friends and ideals just to stop the pain. You could have spilled every secret with which you'd ever been entrusted. But you didn't. You chose not to. Instead, you endured." He broke off, aware that he'd raised his voice with each

additional sentence.

After a long moment, Granger let out the breath she'd been holding. "I guess you might be right," she conceded before spinning on her heel and stalking off. She chose the direction so haphazardly that she almost walked into him.

It was that same morning, during breakfast, that events at Hogwarts spun completely out of control.

Enthroned in the ridiculously ornate seat that was once Dumbledore's, Severus took a sip of his first espresso of the day. As he swallowed, he let his eyelids flutter closed for a brief second, luxuriating in the subtle sensation of his brain relaxing, of essential synapses connecting. He might even have sighed.

The arrival of the post, only moments later, brought his attention back to the scene around him: Severus couldn't afford to indulge in anything but the level of vigilance Mad-Eye loved. The sky, as reflected in the charmed ceiling, was scattered with fluffy white clouds, and the morning sun streaked down into the room in ribbons of golden dust motes that lit up some students and left others in shadow. As the post owls circled the room, they soared in and out of the bands of light, and the colours of their feather flared brighter and darker accordingly.

When Severus noticed the distinctive silhouette of Lucius' eagle Owl soaring towards him, he narrowed his eyes. The bird landed on the staff table, folding its large wings elegantly to avoid the milk jug, and held out its leg. Offering the owl a piece of bacon from the end of his fork, Severus unfastened the proffered scroll. The Carrows, he noticed, were avidly watching his every move.

Severus waited until the owl flapped off towards the Slytherin table...where Draco could be relied on to lavish it with treats...before unfurling his letter. He used the time to scan his eyes over the room. There were fewer students than there were in a typical year, and the house tables had shrunk accordingly; it kept the students clustered up in the space directly under the teachers' eyes.

He found the object of his attention without difficulty: Longbottom had a letter of his own. As the boy's eyes dropped to read his mail, Severus glanced down at his own missive.

Severus,

The old lady turned out to be more than a match for Dawlish; he's completely incapacitated, and we've had to send him to St. Mungo's. She's disappeared. Do what you will with the boy.

Lucius.

Keeping his head bowed, with his hair hanging forward to shield his eyes, Severus glanced back at Longbottom. As he watched, the boy closed his fist convulsively, crushing his letter. Longbottom's eyes sought out the High Table, and for a second, their gazes met. Severus caught a flash of anxiety and a fierce, hard pride before Longbottom pushed himself to his feet. Clapping his nearest classmate on the shoulder, Longbottom made a jovial-looking excuse, turned on his heel and strolled towards the door of the Great Hall. Surely it was only Severus who could spot the tense lines of the boy's shoulders?

"Severus?" Alecto had noticed Longbottom's rather abrupt departure from the breakfast table and was anxious to know the contents of Severus' letter.

With a wave of his hand, Severus sent the parchment winging down the table towards the Carrows, who now sat in the spot that was rightly Hagrid's. Amycus grabbed the letter out of the air, and the two siblings bowed their heads over it immediately. Severus sat half turned so that one eye watched Longbottom's casually slow progress towards the door, the other fixed on the Carrows.

"Stop him!" shrieked Alecto suddenly, leaping to her feet and pointing one yellowed finger accusingly at Longbottom's back.

Amycus pulled out his wand, Longbottom broke into a run, and Severus sprung into action. Pushing up from the arms of his chair, he lifted his feet onto his seat, and from there, leapt up onto the table. He took one stride, and then jumped, clearing the table and the raised platform on which it stood to land on the floor. His robes were still in mid-billow when he broke into a run, streaking down the gap between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

His shortcut had put him in front of the Carrows, but they weren't far behind. He could hear them scrabbling down the staircase adjacent to the Slytherin table, shouting at the students to help as they came.

Longbottom was only metres from the door. He was moving quickly, but Severus was gaining. If only he could get to him first, he could take him to his office; he could salvage the situation somehow.

As several of the Slytherins rose to help the Carrows, Severus saw other students rising too...Gryffindors, mostly, but also some Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. *Dumbledore's Army*. The room was in uproar, Minerva was shrieking, and Severus realised that he was only seconds away from open warfare and utter disaster. As Longbottom disappeared through the door, Severus abandoned Plan A.

He wheeled on his heel and flung out both arms, his wand was held in one hand and his robes spun out dramatically behind him.

"Silence!" he commanded. The occupants of the Great Hall froze.

"But, Severus!" objected Amycus, finding his voice first.

Severus beckoned the two Death Eaters closer with a jerk of his head. "Surely two fully qualified wizards can handle one underage wizard without assistance?" he sneered *sotto voce*.

"But he's getting away!" whinged Alecto.

Severus stared down his nose at her without speaking until she shuffled her feet awkwardly.

"Then you had better get started, hadn't you?" he said finally. With an exclamation of surprise...on Alecto's part...and irritation on that of Amycus, they turned and ran after Longbottom. Severus could only hope that the boy had had enough of a head start.

"Back to your seats!" he thundered, turning his attention back to the other students. Those who had been standing in their places sat abruptly, others slunk back towards their spots, moving as subtly as possible in order not to attract attention.

"Sir?" inquired a quiet voice by his elbow. Severus turned to find that Draco Malfoy had come across to stand beside him. "I could go and help, if you wanted."

Severus stared appraisingly at the young man before him. Then, almost imperceptibly, he shook his head. "Go and sit down," he instructed. With a formal half-bow that reminded Severus of Lucius, Draco did as he was bid.

"Finish your breakfast!" he barked to the room at large. Most of the students obeyed mechanically, obediently shovelling food into their mouths, chewing and swallowing. Not a single person spoke. Severus patrolled back and forth along the far wall, his arms crossed and a masterful scowl plastered on his face.

Surely not even Longbottom is stupid enough to be caught by the Carrows?

On his next turn, he scanned along the line of teachers seated at the High Table. Hooch...*damn her*...caught his eye and winked. Her proclamation of interest in his motivations had provided Severus with very little comfort. Quite apart from the endless lectures it had inspired from Dumbledore, who was concerned that Severus had been insufficiently careful, Severus found it increasingly difficult to maintain his Death Eater persona around her. He was panicked that Hooch would tell Minerva or Poppy and worried that other people, too, might begin to see through the charade.

Severus heard the bickering of the Carrows before they were visible.

"Classes! NOW!" he ordered and was instantly rewarded by a scraping back of chairs and the familiar noises of a room full of dismissed students. Spinning on his heel, Severus strode out into the Entrance Hall where he took Alecto and Amycus by their collars and propelled them up towards his office.

They moaned the entire way, but he ignored them, releasing them unceremoniously in front of his desk. Severus took a seat. "So? What happened?" he demanded.

"He got away," replied Amycus sulkily.

"He made it into the Come-and-Go room," added Alecto. "An' we couldn't follow."

Severus took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Thank you very much, Mr Longbottom.*

"Well, then," he replied. "It's just a matter of time. He can't stay in there forever, and he'll need to eat eventually. I'll go now and set up wards to let us know if he leaves. You two, on the other hand, have classes to teach. You don't want to be late."

This job, he reflected as the Carrows tramped out, *gets more difficult every day*

Just after lunchtime, a second owl arrived...this one had flown from Bulgaria, and bore only a silver button and a scrap of paper, marked "Ledeno ezero."

Longbottom's retreat into hiding marked the beginning of a new, and particularly dangerous, phase of Dumbledore's Army's guerrilla tactics. It also, surprisingly, marked a new chapter in Severus' relationship with Draco. The boy turned up that same evening, knocking on Severus' door not long after dinner was over. When he came in, he looked anxious.

"Draco, what can I do for you?"

"I, er,..."Draco's eyes flickered up towards the portrait of Dumbledore, who was feigning sleep, and back down towards Severus..."I wanted to talk to you."

"Come," replied Severus, getting to his feet and opening the door to his private rooms. He gestured Draco through. After a moment's hesitation, he Summoned the bottle of Firewhisky and took it with him.

The headmaster's private chambers were located up a narrow flight of stairs. A private sitting room...mercifully free of portraiture...occupied the space directly above the office; a bedroom and bathroom were located one floor above that.

"Have a seat, Draco," instructed Severus, gesturing towards the nearest armchair with a jerk of his head. He poured them each a generous slug of the smoky, amber liqueur and settled himself in the seat opposite. He waited for Draco to speak.

"Severus, sir," Draco trailed off a little awkwardly.

The mismatched form of address was oddly endearing, but Severus said nothing, merely raising one eyebrow and sipping his drink.

"Sir," Draco began once again, "I don't know what to do."

"If you want my advice, Draco, you'll have to be more specific."

Draco took several deep breaths. "I keep thinking about what you said to me the night that . . . the night that we were in your living room and I was healing your back." He ran one hand back through his floppy, pale blond fringe.

"Ah, yes." The boy's anxieties were painfully apparent. "I promised to take care of you Draco, and I meant it."

"I believe you," he responded quickly. "I really do. Honestly, I can't work out what you truly think about anything else, but I do believe that you have my best interests at heart."

"Slytherins look out for their own."

The familiar words worked in the expected way, and some of the tension seemed to slide out of Draco's shoulders. He took another mouthful of his drink. "Certainly no-one else seems to care about them," he replied.

Severus grimaced. Draco had hit the nail on the head. He had aptly articulated the main reason why so many Slytherins had landed on the wrong side of this ideological battlefield...that and pure-blood rhetoric, of course, but deep down, for Voldemort, the idea of pure-blood supremacy was nothing more than a rallying cry and a justification for patricide.

"Being a Death Eater doesn't suit me. You said it, and . . . and Granger said it. I don't want to kill people," said Draco heavily. "I don't want to watch people being killed. I don't even want to watch them being hurt." He swirled his Firewhisky in his glass and swallowed down another mouthful. "Sometimes," he confessed without looking at Severus, "when I was home over the holidays, I would be sent down to the cellar to Crucio the prisoners by myself. I just couldn't do it. I made the girl . . . Luna . . . I made her scream, but I didn't actually hurt her. It's awful, knowing what you can do to someone, how much you can hurt them, but they can't fight back."

Draco was leaning forward, his forearms resting on his thighs, and his head hung down so that his face was hidden. Severus was fairly certain that the boy was crying. Talking, however, seemed to help, and Severus let him continue without interruption.

"When they caught Potter and Granger and Weasley, though, that was the worst. I tried!" Draco broke off to rub at his face. "I tried to convince my father that it wasn't them, and then I tried to get them to stop torturing Granger...I told them that you wouldn't like it." He was openly sobbing now; his shoulders were shaking and his words became less intelligible. "I just . . . couldn't . . . And then Jocelyn . . . I was so worried!" Drawing a deep, shaky breath, he appeared to pull himself together somewhat. "What should I do?" he asked.

"First," remarked Severus dryly, "you should dry your tears and calm down." He passed Draco a handkerchief and gave the boy a couple of moments to compose himself.

"You realise, don't you, that if you switch allegiances, the rest of your family will suffer?" asked Severus, his voice deliberately neutral.

Draco gulped and stared at Severus, his grey eyes wide. "I..." he began, but Severus cut him off with one raised hand.

"It's possible that I could spirit Jocelyn away. As long as school is in session, the Dark Lord is unlikely to notice her disappearance. You, however, are marked. Your parents would be punished." Severus catalogued Draco's responses through slightly narrowed eyes.

"Save Jocelyn," replied the young man quickly. "Please."

"It will depend on you, to a large extent," replied Severus. "You will need to write home and maintain the fiction that she's still at school."

Draco nodded determinedly. "I'll do whatever you want me to do, sir."

"Drink your Firewhisky," replied Severus.

Obediently, the boy drank; the glass clattered slightly against his teeth.

"Draco," said Severus, leaning forward slightly in his chair and looking the Malfoy heir directly in the face. "I will do my best to protect you, and I will do my best to protect Jocelyn. As I will for every other student."

Draco nodded once again. "That's what you've always done, isn't it, sir? All of those lectures in Slytherin house about making our decisions for ourselves and not blindly following others."

It was Severus' turn to nod. Relieved as he was that Draco was reading the unvoiced elements of the conversation, Severus felt the heavy weight of failure in his gut. How many of the Slytherin students had learnt the lesson he was trying to teach? How much more successful might he have been had he taken a different approach?

"I will do what I can to help," promised Draco. He sounded calmer. "Thank you."

Severus nodded once more. He stood and ushered Draco down the stairs and then out through the office door and onto the moving staircase.

"Goodnight, sir," called Draco as the stairs ground into motion. "Thank you!"

"Goodnight, Draco." Severus shut the door and waited, without turning, for the interrogation that he knew to be imminent.

"Severus?" inquired Albus, right on cue.

Severus turned towards the portrait and considered it for a long moment, his lips pursed. "I promised to protect Draco," he remarked a little belligerently. "The boy very much regrets his decision to join the Death Eaters. If I don't make it out of this mess alive, Albus, I'm entrusting you with the responsibility of saving him."

With those words, Severus strode back across the room and up through his staircase to the next floor. He poured himself another drink.

The next morning, Severus took Jocelyn aside for a word after breakfast. Opening the nearest door, he beckoned her into an abandoned classroom and locked, warded and Silenced the door behind them. It took him only a couple of minutes to explain the purpose of the Portkey, the existence of the Bulgarian school and what she could expect from Vector and Krum.

Severus had sat her down in one of the desks while he spoke, and once he was done she stared down at the Portkey in her hand for a long moment, an odd, strained expression on her face.

"I didn't tell Draco," she said at last, giving him a miserable glance.

"What didn't you tell Draco?" he asked at once, his voice neutral but all his senses on high alert.

"He wanted to know what side I thought you were on, but I didn't tell him!" A tear slipped from one eye and slid down her cheek, leaving a shiny trail behind. "Please don't send me away!"

Reaching down, Severus took hold of her chin and looked her directly in the eye.

"Do you have kids, Professor Snape?"

"And what side do you think I'm on, young lady?" he asked in a cold, imperious tone.

Jocelyn took a shuddering breath; her lower lip trembled. "I think you're on the side that protects people," she ventured. "Not the side that hurts them."

"Jocelyn," he said urgently, "I am sending you to Bulgaria for your own safety. I should have done it long ago."

"But when will I see you again?"

"Soon," he lied. Things were so tenuous at Hogwarts these days that he didn't doubt he would lose it completely at some point. Both Minerva and Amycus Carrow were a hairsbreadth from murdering him in frustration, and the Dark Lord was, as ever, a perilous employer.

"Once this is over, you'll come and get me?" Jocelyn stared up at him with the same wide-eyed trusting and utterly irrefutable gaze Granger had perfected. Severus found himself nodding his agreement. "All right, then," said Jocelyn firmly as she clenched her hand around the thin disc of silver metal. "Say goodbye to Draco for me." When he nodded, she pursed her lips slightly. "Activate the Portkey," she instructed.

Severus let go of her chin and stood up straight. "Ledeno ezero," he said.

Squinting through the flash of blue light, he watched Jocelyn spin away.

Not long after sunset on the first of May, Severus sat once more in the Great Hall, watching the students dribble in for their evening meal. Their number had shrunk even further now that most of Dumbledore's Army was living in the Room of Requirement, and not for the first time, Severus wondered what the poor buggers were eating. Amycus Carrow...unexpectedly...had had the foresight to forbid the Hogwarts house-elves from supplying the delinquents with food.

On this particular evening, the students were more unsettled than usual. Wild rumours had been flying around all day suggesting Potter had broken into Gringotts and escaped on a dragon. Severus sighed. The story was outrageously Gryffindor enough that it might even be true. Alecto, who seemed to think she was single-handedly capable of squashing the rumours, had set herself to patrolling the dining hall and was stalking up and down the aisles. A little puddle of silence followed her path: at her approach, students fell quiet, and as she waddled away, the whispers sprung up once more.

The last of the students were making their way to their dinner places, including, Severus noted with surprise, Terry Boot. The boy had disappeared several days earlier, thus presumably demonstrating his loyalty to Longbottom's ragtag group of vigilantes. He'd cleaned up his appearance tonight and was strolling towards the Ravenclaw table as if he hadn't a care in the world.

A quick glance at Alecto was enough to make certain that she hadn't yet spotted the intruder, another glance the length of the table told a slightly different story. Minerva had her wand flush against the table, but clearly in her hand, and her eyes flickered from Alecto to Boot and back.

Can I use Minerva to my advantage? he wondered.

Boot slid into his seat at the Ravenclaw table and pulled a plate of food towards him. His appearance had sent a ripple of anticipation through the student body. Even at the Slytherin table, the sense of expectation was palpable. When Pansy Parkinson nudged Gregory Goyle, Severus couldn't hold back a grimace. He tasted the metallic tang of disappointment across the back of his mouth. His Slytherins were about to betray him once again.

Goyle squinted across the room at Boot. Seconds later, he was looking around for Alecto.

"Hey, Professor Carrow!" he called out.

Boot realised the game was up immediately, and as Alecto turned away towards the Slytherin table, he leapt to his feet and clambered up onto his seat.

"POTTER BROKE INTO GRINGOTTS AND ESCAPED ON A DRAGON!" he bellowed.

Pandemonium broke out. Minerva's shield charm blocked the savage hex Alecto aimed at Boot, but a Cutting Curse fired off by Amycus missed its target completely and sliced into Mandy Brocklehurst, who began to wail pitifully.

"Enough!" shouted Severus over the crowd. For good measure, he knocked away Minerva's shielding charm and immobilised Boot; that should keep the Carrows from an extended assault. "Miss Li," he ordered, "take Miss Brocklehurst to the Hospital Wing immediately." He didn't turn around, but he heard Poppy get up from the table behind him and hurry out the staff exit. "In future," he continued, addressing the entire room, "there will be no unauthorised magic during mealtimes...and that goes for all members of the Hogwarts community. Do I make myself clear?"

As he spoke, Alecto approached the stationary figure of Terry Boot.

"Perfectly, Severus," she snarled, lifting a large goblet from the table and hefting it in one hand. "No unauthorised magic!" she shrieked as she swung the goblet, spilling pumpkin juice in a splash of orange. As it impacted with Boot's cheek, it made a nasty thunk, and the boy toppled to the floor. In his magically-restrained state, the boy was unable to defend himself.

"No!" shrieked Minerva.

As Severus practically flew towards the commotion, he noticed, with relief, that Hooch had restrained Minerva. He hoped, for his own sake, that she also had an eye on Filius.

Alecto had swung her arm back to strike at the poor boy once more, but Severus hit the goblet with a Flagrante Curse, and she dropped it with a howl of pain, clutching at her injured hand. Once he was close enough, Severus grabbed a handful of her robes and pulled her to him. Lowering his head, he muttered in her ear.

"I never want to see you use Muggle discipline, ever again. Do I make myself clear?"

Alecto nodded, and he pushed her away. With his wand, he levitated Boot back up and onto his feet.

"Severus." It was Amycus who spoke. The male Carrow had followed him down from the High Table. "We still need to discipline the boy somehow."

"Not in the Great Hall, you don't," he snapped back.

"Fine, I'll take him to our office."

"No," replied Severus, glancing around. "We can't afford your absence...who would keep control here?" Even Amycus wasn't stupid enough to miss the sarcasm of that statement. "I'll send him to my office with a student and deal with him myself after dinner. You can make yourself useful and heal Alecto's hand."

Scanning the table of Slytherin students, Severus' eye fell first on Draco. The boy nodded minutely, signalling his willingness, but Severus shook his head slightly and turned to the next seat along. Undoubtedly, there were several members of Dumbledore's so-called Army stationed outside, ready to bust their comrade free. Draco didn't deserve that, but Gregory Goyle did.

"Mr Goyle, Mr Crabbe, take Mr Boot here to my office. Then return." The two buffoons lumbered to their feet. With a hand on each of Boot's biceps, they lifted him easily and shuffled away.

"Eat your dinner," snarled Severus at the watching students as he strode back to the High Table. Taking the stairs by the Slytherin table, he walked past several of his fellow teachers on the way to Dumbledore's ridiculous chair. Filius, he noted grimly, had his tiny hands fisted in his napkin and was muttering high-pitched imprecations under his breath.

About time you showed some concern for your students Severus thought rather bitterly as he lowered himself into his chair. "Buon appetito," he remarked to the table as a whole, infusing the phrase with as much sarcasm as possible. Spreading his own napkin over his lap, Severus began to eat.

Less than fifteen minutes later, an unexpected discomfort in his Dark Mark informed Severus that the Dark Lord was deeply upset. Clearly Amycus, Alecto and Draco had noticed it, too. The Carrows were fidgeting in their seats, and Draco sat unnaturally still. His eyes sought out Severus. Severus blinked back and looked away, concentrating on his meal.

One part of Severus' mind raced with possible scenarios for the Dark Lord's current displeasure; Voldemort hadn't summoned his servants from Hogwarts, however, which meant that they might be lucky enough to avoid any of the most immediate repercussions. The other part dwelt on Draco.

The meal was almost over, and a number of students had already left the Great Hall when a lone eagle owl flapped in through the mail slot and glided the length of the room. As it dropped down towards the High Table, it caught the attention of most of those present, and any number of silent eyes watched it land in the empty space in front of Severus' plate. Plucking a grape from the desk, leaving her brother on his feet. Growling irritably, Amycus finally conjured himself something on which to sit...a rather misshapen lump that only a generous soul might label "furniture." Severus sneered.

"Severus?" called Alecto from the antechamber full of portraits as Severus disappeared through the far door.

He spun back towards her before he replied. "My office, Alecto, and not before."

It took only a few minutes to reach the headmaster's office, and Draco was not far behind them. Severus conjured the boy a chair, to Amycus' visible annoyance. Alecto had taken the one that normally sat before the desk, leaving her brother on his feet. Growling irritably, Amycus finally conjured himself something on which to sit...a rather misshapen lump that only a generous soul might label "furniture." Severus sneered.

"Get on with it, Severus, open the letter," instructed Alecto.

Severus sighed and did as she had asked. Once again, the letter was from Lucius.

Dear Severus,

Potter has broken into Gringotts and stolen something of some importance from the Lestrage family vault. Our Lord has reason to believe that Potter may arrive at Hogwarts in the near future; in particular, he may try to gain entrance to the Ravenclaw common room. Our Lord has every confidence in your ability to apprehend the boy should the occasion arise. Please notify the Dark Lord immediately if you happen to do so. Our Lord himself will arrive at Hogwarts some time later this evening and looks forward to the pleasure of your company.

Please give my regards, and those of his mother, to our son, Draco, and to my daughter, Jocelyn.

Yours Sincerely,

Lucius.

Relief and tension warred for supremacy on Draco's face. The last line made it clear that neither Lucius or Narcissa had been irreparably injured by the Dark Lord's displeasure, but the content of the message was far from reassuring.

"Very well," said Severus. "Alecto and Amycus, I shall leave supervision of the Ravenclaw common room in your capable hands. Draco, return to Slytherin House. I suggest that you check up on Mr Goyle and Mr Crabbe on the way. All of you, look out for anything unusual, and keep me informed."

"But wot are you gonna do?" asked Amycus.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I intend to pay careful attention to the wards in the hope of catching that reprobate Potter the instant he sets foot on Hogwarts territory."

"Oh, right."

Severus stood up and held open the door to hurry his visitors from his office. Once they were gone, he closed the door.

"Be careful, Severus," remarked Albus' portrait unnecessarily. "You're treading on dangerous ground."

The Chamber of Secrets

Chapter 20 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Twenty : The Chamber of Secrets

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

Please thank my betas, LAXo and WriterMerrin, who worked overtime on this one!

It wasn't until the trio was safe upstairs at the Hog's Head, and Hermione had eaten about twice as much as she normally would in one sitting, that she began to feel better. *So it was Aberforth who sent Dobby? Dumbledore's brother was looking out for us!* With the assistance of the bread, cheese and mead she'd consumed, Hermione's brain clicked back into action.

"Can I use the loo?" she asked their host. Aberforth merely grunted and jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. The loo was grimy, but Hermione paid it no mind, doing her actual business quickly and tidying what she could see of her robes and her nest of hair in the tiny mirror set over the sink. Out of sight of the boys, she pulled the beaded bag from her pocket and cast a Silencing Charm on the door.

If there was any real chance that Harry might confront Voldemort within the next twenty-four hours, there were a couple of things she could do.

It took Hermione very little time to locate Phineas' portrait, and she balanced it on the toilet lid.

"Phineas?" she called, infusing her voice with as much politeness as she could.

He popped into sight as if he'd been waiting. "No blindfold?" he exclaimed immediately, staring around the cramped space avidly. "Where are we? HOW DARE YOU put my portrait in this filthy water closet! What in..."

"Phineas!" she interrupted. "This is important! I need you to take a message."

"Take heed, girl," he snarled back, crossing his arms over his chest and drawing himself up to his full height, "that the Blacks do not 'take messages'! I might be prevailed upon to deliver your regards, but you'd have to be far more polite than I believe you to be capable of!"

Hermione suppressed a grimace. "Please, sir," she ventured sweetly through gritted teeth. "It is *terribly* important."

Phineas regarded her for several seconds with pursed lips. "Very well, I'll consider it."

Hermione sucked in a sharp breath and forced herself to smile at him. "Thank you," she managed. "Please tell Snape..."

"HEADMASTER SNAPE!"

"Sorry! *Headmaster* Snape!" Hermione berated herself for the slip. It wasn't exactly possible to explain to Phineas that her slip was indicative of her increased regard for the man, so she ploughed on. "Please tell *Headmaster* Snape to keep an eye out for intruders."

"That's it?" Phineas looked severely unimpressed with the content of her message.

"Yes." Hermione felt pretty confident that Snape would understand. "Oh," she added, "and ask him to have some antivenom handy."

"Well," sneered Phineas, "if he happens to drop by the office, I'll try to remember."

With that, he sauntered out of the frame. Hermione took her revenge in a very childish fashion: pulling a face and poking out her tongue. Then she pushed the portrait frame back into her bag.

"*Accio antivenom*," she muttered, palming the small bottle of green liquid and adjusting her sleeve so that it hung over her hand and concealed what she was holding. Though a small part of her worried about wasting it unnecessarily, Hermione comforted herself with the possibility of obtaining more from Snape.

It was with a new certainty that Hermione removed the Silencing Charm, flushed the toilet, splashed some clean water on her face and went back out into the other room.

"Tea?" she inquired innocently, fiddling with the cups on the sideboard. Everyone, including Harry, happily acquiesced to a cup, and Hermione managed to dose Harry's without him noticing. She felt a little thrill of triumph when he drank it all down.

When the empty teacups clinked back into their saucers, Aberforth began to talk about getting the trio away from Hogsmeade and back into hiding. Unlike most people, this man seemed unmoved by the new serious Harry. And unlike most people, his arguments seemed to work. He had Harry looking severely discomforted, and his assessment of his brother Albus' character was, Hermione thought, both intriguing and disturbing.

"I knew my brother, Potter,"* Aberforth concluded, staring up at the room's only ornament...a painting of a mild-looking, melancholy girl. "He learned secrecy at our mother's knee. Secrets and lies, that's how we grew up, and Albus . . . he was a natural."*

"Mr Dumbledore?"* ventured Hermione, her curiosity getting the better of her. "Is that your sister? Ariana?"*

The story her question triggered made a sad, miserable sense. It seemed far more believable than the hypothesis Rita Skeeter had cobbled together and left Hermione with tears rolling down her face. Ariana had been blocking...just like Jocelyn had been.

"I'm so . . . I'm so sorry,"* Hermione whispered. She couldn't help wondering what Ariana Dumbledore's life might have been like had the techniques Snape used been available one hundred years earlier, or what Ariana might have been like...a grown woman, a witch, perhaps with the kind of power her brother had had. She offered up a silent prayer of thanks that Jocelyn had been spared the horrible fate of Aberforth's sister.

Harry's argument with Aberforth swung back and forth until finally...and unexpectedly from Hermione's perspective...the old man suddenly capitulated. With a grunt of annoyance, he looked up at the vacant, smiling visage of Ariana Dumbledore.

"You know what to do,"* he stated in the tones of one who washes his hands of all responsibility.

Seeing Neville was a shock. From the little she'd heard from Snape, Hermione had known things at Hogwarts were problematic, but the sight of Neville's injuries brought the issue home at a physical level.

After so long on the run, the friendly crowd of students that filled the Room of Requirement was completely overwhelming. The whole thing was rather a blur. Hermione couldn't believe so many of the students had gone into hiding; it seemed impossible that the "student group" she'd forced Harry to start more than two years ago had blossomed into this. Staring round at the room, she noticed with a twinge of guilt that there were no Slytherin banners. *What would Jocelyn say to that?* she wondered.

Once Harry and Luna disappeared off to the Ravenclaw common room, there was nothing but chaos. More and more people kept appearing through the portrait hole, and various people were showering Hermione and Ron with questions.

Hermione's head hurt. All she wanted was a moment's peace to try and work out what to do next. She was seriously considering her chances of sneaking out to the library when Ron pulled her aside.

"All right, Hermione?" he asked.

She grimaced. "It's just that getting the Horcrux isn't going to be much help unless we can destroy it," she muttered, turning her body so that no-one would overhear their conversation.

"We'll just have to get some more basilisk venom, then," he replied calmly.

"Oh, very good, Ronald," she replied rather irritably. "But unless you think Neville can ask the Room of Requirement..."

He gave her arm a shake, interrupting her. "No, Hermione, we just have to go and get some," replied Ron, raising his eyebrows at her expectantly.

"The *Chamber*?" she asked incredulously. "But..."

"But what? Harry killed the basilisk, so it should be safe."

"You remember how to get in?"

"I reckon I do. Come on! We'll need a broomstick, then we need to go to the bathroom . . ."

After a muttered consultation with Neville, they snuck out into the corridor, leaving the ever-more-boisterous Dumbledore's Army behind. They didn't have the benefit of Harry's Cloak or Map, but Hermione performed two very impressive Disillusionment Charms, and that alone upped their chances of successful concealment. The Room of Requirement was also considerate enough to eject them out onto the third floor...only one staircase and a short corridor from Myrtle's bathroom; Hermione was almost disappointed not to encounter Snape on the way.

"It's over here," muttered Ron when they entered the room, tugging Hermione towards the sink at the far end of the room. In order not to lose each other while they were Disillusioned, they were holding hands; it was kind of lovely.

"Who's there?" It was Myrtle's voice, shrill and accusatory.

Hermione froze.

"I have business here tonight, Myrtle," intoned Ron unexpectedly in a passable imitation of the Bloody Baron.

With a frightened squeal, Myrtle dove into her toilet and disappeared with a gurgle.

"Brilliant, Ron!" breathed Hermione, squeezing his hand. She couldn't see Ron's face, but she would have sworn he was blushing.

He tugged on her hand again. "It's just over here, see?"

Since Hermione couldn't see where he was pointing, she sighed and reluctantly dropped the Charm. Once Ron was visible, she saw he had the tip of one finger pressed against a small snake, which was engraved on one of the copper taps.

"All we have to do," he continued, "is tell it to 'open up' in Parseltongue."

Hermione's heart sank, but she bit back the criticism that sprang to her lips. Ron had a fixed, determined look on his face.

"Spksssssmk," he spluttered suddenly.

"Ron?"

"Just let me try, Hermione," he replied without looking at her. "I've heard Harry do this a couple of times now, and I reckon I can do it."

He tried a second time to no avail. On the third try, Hermione held her breath. *Third time lucky*, she thought to herself. Again Ron failed. It wasn't until the fifth time, by which time Hermione had well and truly given up, that the tap glowed brightly white and began to spin.

Hermione gripped hold of Ron's upper arm, hard. The sink itself began to move, and it slipped back into the wall and out of sight, leaving only a gaping hole and the shiny entrance to a large pipe.

"Yes!" exclaimed Ron, fisting the air in triumph.

If anything, Hermione tightened her hold on his arm. To be completely honest, she was terrified of entering that tunnel: her last encounter with a basilisk had stolen a month of her life. That in itself was not such a big issue, but she hadn't forgotten the moment when she'd spied the creature in Penelope Clearwater's compact mirror. She swallowed hard.

"I'll go first...it's a long, sliding tunnel. It smoothes out at the end, so don't worry about the landing. Okay?"

Hermione forced a smile of encouragement onto her face and waved him forward. Ron lowered his legs into the hole and, with a quick thumbs up, let go and disappeared from sight. Hermione counted to ten. Then she counted to ten again. *Gryffindor? Mean anything to you?* she chided herself. With a rather melodramatic sigh, she climbed into the tunnel and let go.

The trip was long and slimy. After a while, Hermione just closed her eyes and clutched tightly to Bellatrix's wand; there wasn't much else she could do. Eventually, as Ron had promised, the tunnel levelled out, and her speed slowed dramatically before she skidded to a halt. She opened her eyes to find Ron leaning over her, his wand lit and his hand extended to help her up.

They were, she realised, in a large stone tunnel that had to be located far below the normally habitable parts of the school.

"This way," directed Ron, slinging an arm around her shoulder and giving it a squeeze. "If I remember rightly, the fallen rock that Lockhart caused isn't that far. We'll have to come back the same way; I'll leave the broom here."

Hermione kept close behind him, their footsteps crunching over the long-discarded remains of a number of small animals. At the rock fall, they stopped.

"Blimey," commented Ron. "Hard to believe we were ever small enough to fit through there!"

It took Hermione only moments to enlarge the tiny hole, however, and it wasn't long before Ron was able to climb through.

"Oh, yeah," he called from the other side. "I forgot there was a shed skin here. It's not a real snake, don't be alarmed!"

Heartened by his concern, Hermione followed him. They crawled over and then past the hideously large coils of discarded snake skin and followed the hallway onwards. It took a while, but eventually they stopped short once more. This time, the problem was a huge, solid wall, decorated with two carved serpents. Their eyes were jewels which flickered ominously in the thin light of their wand beams.

"What now?" asked Hermione.

"Dunno, same as before, you reckon?"

Hermione nodded, and Ron repeated his spluttering routine from earlier. This time he hit upon the right set of sounds the second time, and the wall split open. The two halves of the great door slid away into the wall.

The room inside was enormous, narrow and dimly lit by some unseen source. It was lined with pillars and decorated with an inordinate number of snakes. Though the far end was deeply in shadow, there was definitely something piled on the floor.

"Is that it?" she asked Ron, her voice echoing oddly in the cavernous space.

"I guess," he replied. "I wasn't here for this part, but I reckon it must be."

As they drew closer, Hermione's anxiety rose. Small rodents fled at their approach; their squeaks and the scrabbling of their claws against the stone floor made her twitchy. The carcass, they saw at last, had been eaten away. Nothing but the bones and skin remained. Its size was shocking: Hermione couldn't imagine actually fighting the monster...let alone Harry doing so at the tender age of twelve years old. Not for the first time, she wondered what Dumbledore had thought he was playing at. *Training Harry*, was the ready answer. That in itself made her shiver much the way the rats had.

At the head of the beast, Ron and Hermione paused. Most of the fangs remained attached to the skeletal mouth of the snake, though one...presumably that with which Harry had stabbed the diary...was discarded to one side. It lay in a patch of dried blood. Hermione racked her brain to remember whether it might be Harry's or someone else's.

"How many do we need?" she asked, staring at the jawbone of the basilisk. She easily could have stood up inside the space it occupied.

That thing almost killed me.

"As many as we can carry, I reckon." Ron sounded so certain that she glanced at him for clarification. He shrugged. "We don't know what we're looking for, and we don't know how many people are going to be looking. The more ways of destroying it the better."

"Right." Hermione nodded. *Pull yourself together, Granger.* She gave herself a mental shake. "Stand back," she ordered. Casting a Barrier Charm over the surface of each fang, she severed a dozen or so of the huge, dirty yellow teeth from the jaw in which they were embedded, cushioning each one so that it fell gently to the floor and didn't bounce around. "Let's go," she concluded, reaching out and picking up the fang closest to her.

"Wait," said Ron. "Where's the cup?"

"It's in the beaded . . . You want to destroy it now?"

"No time like the present. And I think you should do it."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Harry and me have both done one. I think it's your turn."

He was, Hermione realised, completely serious. She would have rather left as soon as possible, but she had to agree that there was no point in delaying. Anything that might negatively effect Voldemort's power was worth doing immediately.

"Fine," she agreed, snapping open the bag and reaching inside to pull out the cup. It took her a couple of moments to snag hold of the handle; the cup seemed to scurry

into the crevices between her other belongings in an attempt to stay out of reach. When her hand finally closed around the cold metal, it was clammy against her skin. She could feel the Horcrux inside, throbbing like a bad bruise.

"Give it here," instructed Ron. He took the cup and placed it upside down in the centre of one of the flagstones. "Just stab it. Ignore whatever it says and just stab it."

Hermione knelt down in front of the cup and removed the Barrier Charm from the fang she was holding. Tentatively, she raised it over her head. At the apex of her swing, she noticed the dark liquid seeping from underneath the cup. She froze, her eyes fixed on the spreading stain. *The cup had been empty, hadn't it?*

Hermione watched in horror as the viscous liquid peeled up from the ground and began to twist upwards. A pair of red eyes blinked into view from within the resultant dark cloud.

"You think you can save them, don't you?"

The voice hissed from under the cup; it bubbled out with more of the thick, syrupy liquid. *Is that blood?* Hermione swallowed and, without even thinking about it, shuffled backwards.

"All you want to do," the voice continued, "is keep your boys alive. Yet you know, don't you, that I am going to kill them?"

The dark mist began to spin and morph into a recognisable figure. An odd parody of Ronald Weasley hung before her, though his chin was barely represented at all and his lower lip was trembling in a fearful expression Hermione had never seen the real Ron wear.

"Hermione!" the fake Ron called out. Though he looked no younger than seventeen, he spoke with the voice Ron had used as a young boy. "He's going to kill me, and it's all your fault!"

Hermione's breath was choked, and she could feel tears threatening to overwhelm her. Deep down, she knew this was a trick of the Horcrux. She tried to lift the basilisk fang to stab it and stop it, but her hands were sweaty and it slipped in her grip.

The figure was shifting. The colours were changing, and Hermione recognised Harry's green eyes and crooked glasses. Like with Ron, this Harry looked weak.

"Hermione," it whispered, terror struck. "He killed my parents. He killed Cedric. Now he's going to kill me, too!"

A sob escaped her. She knew it wasn't real, but it still cut her to the core. A second later, the Harry simulacrum, too, began to change. His hair was growing and his nose lengthening. True panic blossomed in Hermione's chest. She couldn't, she mustn't let Ron see.

"No!" she shouted. With all the strength she could muster, she flung up the fang and brought it down on the Horcrux; the Horcrux screamed. Before the apparition of Snape was completely recognisable, it fragmented, dispersing into puffs of insubstantial mist that withered away. Where the fang had punctured the cup, there was a smoking black hole.

Did Ron realise? she wondered, panicked. *Did he recognise who it was?*

As the sound of the Horcrux's scream faded, Hermione noticed that her own tears were running unchecked. Ron had knelt down behind her, and his strong arms cradled her to his chest. His body was warm.

"You did it, 'Mione," he murmured comfortingly. "It's okay."

Hermione turned and buried her face in his chest. With one hand, he rubbed her between her shoulder blades.

"It feels your fears," he said, with his chin resting on the top of her head, "but it doesn't really know you."

Hermione found his words incredibly comforting. Pushing back from his chest, she looked up at him and graced him with a watery smile.

"Thanks, Ron," she said.

"You're welcome," he replied as he wiped a tear from her cheek with the ball of his thumb. "Come on, let's take the rest of these fangs and go and find Harry."

"Good idea. He's probably wondering where we are." Hermione pushed herself to her feet and gathered up several of the long, yellow teeth.

"Maybe he's found the other Horcrux already!" remarked Ron hopefully.

As Hermione gave a last glance to the looming bulk of the basilisk's skeleton and hooked up the melted remnants of the Horcrux, a rather fierce joy blossomed in her chest. Maybe they would make it out of this mess alive.

Elation sat like a hard, almost painful lump behind Hermione's ribs as they flew up and out of the Chamber of Secrets. Hermione had conjured a net, with which they strapped the fangs to the underside of the broom handle; she rode on the back, her arms wrapped tightly around Ron's upper body.

Ron, she acknowledged with a searing pride, had been magnificent: the idea had been brilliant, and he himself had managed the situation with competence and generosity. She took in a deep breath with her face pressed against his shoulder blade. *Maybe, she repeated to herself, Harry has found the other Horcrux already!*

As they burst out of Myrtle's bathroom and tore through corridors marked with the signs of the battle...broken windows, a crushed suit of armour pierced with daggers, a group of older students and Order members who rushed past with grim, panicked expressions...the feeling in her chest expanded. She felt bursting with it.

They found Harry quickly, and his news was good: he knew what the Horcrux was, and he knew where to find it. From his description, Hermione realised she had seen it too: when she had snuck into the Room of Requirement to steal away Snape's NEWT-level potion book, she'd seen the bust and the old, battered-looking tiara.

They were so close to their goal, and Hermione felt that knowledge bubbling through her system. She felt it expand out towards her extremities; she thought her pride in both her boys would burst out of her fingertips.

When Ron expressed his desire to warn the house-elves, she threw herself at him, dropping her armful of Basilisk fangs to crush him in a fierce hug. Before she even thought through what was happening, she was kissing him, and he, surprisingly, was kissing her back. His own load of fangs and broomstick tumbled unheeded to the floor, and his arms wrapped around her, lifting her off her feet.

His kiss was warm and it was nice. It was happy and it was desperate. Hermione knew...as Ron did...that one or both of them might die; they had both lived through the worst year of their lives, and it wasn't yet over. The kiss was a promise, and the kiss was a balm to the terror that limned Hermione's sense of determination. The time to act was now, and she wouldn't look back.

She loved him, of course. She always, kind of had. Just as she loved Harry, though she would never kiss Harry, not like that. And when she and Ron broke apart, she knew exactly what it meant: he loved her and he was there with her. Both of them were committed to the tasks they had ahead of them. Both of them would follow Harry; both of them would help to destroy Voldemort, no matter what it took.

Once inside the Room of Requirement, the trio split up. Though both Harry and Hermione had been there before, the towering aisles of detritus were confusing.

How could Voldemort seriously think no-one else could get in? Hermione wondered. *There's far too much stuff here for that to be possible.*

Hermione was convinced Harry had taken a wrong turn not far from the entrance. She decided to go back there and retrace their steps.

"*Point me*," she whispered at her wand, double checking where north was and then heading back the way she came. It didn't take long to reach the place where she thought they'd gone wrong, and it was there that she heard voices.

"Harry?" she heard Ron call out. "Are you talking to someone?"

It wasn't Ron and Harry, then. She heard curses, and Harry called Ron's name urgently. A huge pile of junk teetered dangerously, knocking against an adjacent stack and sending a number of objects crashing to the floor. A strangled squawk of panic escaped her, and Hermione began to run in the direction of the commotion. As she ran, the arguing continued, and she identified Vincent Crabbe and Draco Malfoy. Presumably Gregory Goyle wasn't far behind.

"*Crucio!*" shouted Crabbe viciously from closer at hand.

Hermione paused at a fork, unsure of which way to go. Her chest was heaving with the effort of sprinting through the narrow passages of the maze of abandoned objects.

"STOP!"

That other voice was definitely Malfoy, and it definitely came from the left fork. Hermione ran forwards once again.

What on earth are you up to, Malfoy? From the sounds of it, he was still trying to protect the trio, but why then had he brought his thugs along for the ride?

"The Dark Lord wants him alive..."

"So? I'm not killing him, am I? But if I can, I will, the Dark Lord wants him dead anyway, what's the diff...?"

Hermione rounded the final corner and sent off a non-verbal stunner at Crabbe; she missed only because Malfoy yanked him out of the way.

"It's that Mudblood!" snarled Crabbe, anger and surprise twisting his face into an ugly sneer. *Avada Kedavra!*

Fear shivered through Hermione's belly as she dove aside. The green splash of the curse thudded into a faded wooden rocking horse, decapitating the poor creature. Hermione heard Harry shouting and the bang of several other curses.

"Don't kill him!" screamed Malfoy. "DON'T KILL HIM!"

Hermione wriggled under a rickety table, emerging back in the same aisle as Harry. Both Crabbe and Goyle had their wands trained on the Boy-Who-Lived, although it seemed that Malfoy's shouting had bought Harry a second of hesitation. Harry disarmed Goyle as Hermione shot a Stunning Spell at Crabbe. Ron appeared around the far corner and fired a full Body-Bind Curse at Malfoy. Both Hermione and Ron missed.

Crabbe spun towards Ron and fired off another killing curse. Hermione saw red. She pushed up from the floor into a runner's crouch and leapt forwards. As she ran, she stunned Goyle, who was wandless and leaping up and down on the spot in a futile attempt to regain his weapon. Hermione ignored Malfoy, intent on disabling Crabbe before he got another shot at any of her friends.

"It's somewhere here!" shouted Harry as she sprinted past towards the corner where Ron and Crabbe had last been. "Look for it while I go and help R..."

At the corner, Hermione came upon a terrifying sight. Crabbe looked maniacal, and he laughed horribly as he conjured a flame in a pile of discarded study notes. The flames leapt up immediately, leaving Crabbe silhouetted against their light...a dark shadow with one arm raised.

"HARRY!" she screamed.

"You idiot!" shouted Ron, who had somehow...luckily...ended up on the close side of the flames.

The fire was spreading quickly, and Hermione could feel the wall of heat it was emitting. Hermione trained her wand on the blaze and hit it with several fire-dampening and water-producing spells. Nothing worked.

Ron and Crabbe were racing back up the path towards her, away from the flames. Crabbe was still laughing, but Ron looked terrified. He grabbed her upper arm as he passed, pulling her back with him.

"Like it hot, scum?" squealed Crabbe.

The flames were unnatural...impossibly hot and horrifyingly fast. They formed animalistic shapes and seemed to move with a creaturely intelligence, heading unerringly towards the warm, human bodies of Hermione, her friends, and their Slytherin classmates.

"RUN!" shouted Ron.

Crabbe had already disappeared around an upended bed frame, and Malfoy grabbed Goyle's stunned body under the arms and was lumbering after Crabbe at a quite remarkable speed. Ron, his hand firmly around Hermione's arm, pulled her along beside Harry.

Still, the flames were gaining.

"What can we do?" shouted Hermione in desperation. "What can we do?"

"Here!" shouted Harry, grasping at two outdated and cumbersome broomsticks. He threw one to Ron, who caught it ably.

Ron had his leg over the handle within seconds, and Hermione was not far behind. For the second time that day, she pressed her face into his shoulder blade, yet this time, she felt panicked rather than elated. Ron kicked off, and they soared up towards the high arches of the ceiling. The heat there was no less intense, and the smoke made it difficult to breathe.

"Gods, Hermione," panted Ron, his voice edged with desperation. "I can't see the door."

"*Point me!*" whispered Hermione urgently. Her wand span in her hand, pointing through the undifferentiated smoke towards north. "The door has to be towards our left!" she exclaimed.

Unquestioningly, Ron followed her directions.

"Harry," he shouted. "Let's get out, let's get out!"

But someone, down below in the fire, was screaming. A thin, awful sound that brought up the hairs on the back of Hermione's neck. And Harry had already turned towards

it.

"It's...too...dangerous..." panted Ron, coughing up smoke, yet despite his words, he was no less Gryffindor than his friend, and he had already turned his broom to follow.

They followed the sound of the screams, diving down after Harry into the thick smoke. The snapping, crackling flames gave off an unbearable heat.

Malfoy had somehow dragged Goyle's body up onto the top of a mountain of broken furniture, but the flames were already lapping up the sides. The smoke billowed around him, and Hermione watched him raise one hand towards Harry in supplication.

"IF WE DIE FOR THEM, I'LL KILL YOU, HARRY!" shrieked Ron, as Harry managed to wrestle Malfoy onto the back of his broom.

"I'll steer, you grab Goyle," ordered Hermione. There was no way she could have managed the dead weight of the boy. Ron got a grip on Goyle's robes and heaved him over the handle of the broom as an enormous Basilisk of flame lunged towards them, jaw wide and deadly fangs picked out in flame orange. The broom bucked under the extra weight, but Hermione, who had hold of the handle over Ron's thighs, wrenched it back upwards and away from the fire. Her wand was still tugging at her hand in the direction of north, and Hermione twisted them around to face the place where the door had to be.

Good God, let the door be open.

Hermione flew faster than she'd ever flown before, her terror of the fire and the choking black smoke trumping her fear of heights. After several endless seconds, with the noise of the fire pressing in from all sides, Hermione saw a rectangular patch in the grey smoke.

"There!" shouted Ron.

They swung lower, aiming for the doorway, and then suddenly, they were through. They crashed into the wall on the other side of the corridor and fell ungracefully to the floor. Hermione landed on Goyle...which can't have been comfortable for him, but saved her from the worst of the bruising. Oxygen flooded into her lungs like a drug.

Moments later, Harry and Malfoy rocketed through to safety, and the door abruptly disappeared.

"C-Crabbe," gasped Malfoy, in some distress, his eyes raking the empty wall that had once been the door as if that alone could make it appear. "C-Crabbe . . ."

"He's dead," replied Ron, his voice harsh and raspy. Then there was silence.

Flight

Chapter 21 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Twenty-One : Flight

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

This chapter is for LAxo and WriterMerrin who have been here holding my hand since the start!

Severus hadn't bothered to explain to his Death Eater colleagues that there was almost no hope that Harry Potter would register on the castle wards. Potter would appear to the school as a thoroughly benign presence; his motivations aligned precisely with Hogwarts' conception of the Greater Good. Dumbledore had run up against the same issue when Sirius Black had attempted to break in, several years earlier.

Thus, once he'd sent them on their way, he set to patrolling the hallways, his senses on high alert, as he racked his brain as to the possible modes of entry Potter might discover.

Potter, he reasoned, has stolen something important. Something worth breaking into Gringotts to obtain Because of the magnitude of risk, there was only one real possibility: *a Horcrux.*

Severus stepped out the front doors of the school and squinted out through the darkness at the Whomping Willow. *Would Potter know that tunnel had been effectively blocked? Or would he try there regardless?* He'd certainly used that tunnel a number of times in the past. Just to be on the safe side, Severus decided to dismantle the curses that blocked the entrance. He strode purposely across the grounds towards the old tree.

Assuming Potter succeeded at destroying the Gringotts Horcrux...and the Dark Lord's anger indicates that he did...then his anticipated presence at Hogwarts suggest that a further Horcrux is located in the school.

No, realised Severus suddenly, the force of his flash of logic bringing him to an unexpected stop. *The Dark Lord expects him here, which means that a Horcrux is here, it doesn't necessarily mean that Potter knows where it can be found.*

After a second of indecision, Severus sprinted forwards towards the Whomping Willow. Since he'd set the complicated trap wards himself, it took only a couple of minutes of sustained unravelling to clear the passage. Then he spun on his heel and leapt into the air. He flew back to the Great Doors, revelling in the speed he could manage and the feeling of flying without a broom.

Once inside, he ran back to his office.

"Phineas!" he called as he bounded up the last of the moving stairs and flung open the door.

"No need to shout, Severus, I'm right here."

"I need you to take a message," continued Severus, ignoring the portrait's snide response.

"Funny, that's what she said," replied Phineas, frowning down at his nail. With a moue of distaste, he withdrew a nail file and started shaping the nails on his left hand.

"What? What did she say?"

"She said,"...Phineas paused and rolled his eyes skywards, then he continued his tale in the singsong falsetto of a poor imitation..."Please tell ~~the~~^{Headmaster} Snape to keep an eye out for intruders'."

Intruders. So they knew after all. They were on their way

"Oh," added Phineas, "and she wanted you to have some antivenom handy."

That was not a problem. These days, Severus Snape *always* had antivenom handy.

"Phineas," he said finally, "this is important. I need you to go back to your other portrait. If you get a chance to talk to her again, make sure you tell her that the passageway through to the Shrieking Shack is clear. And tell her that unless she knows of someplace better, the Ravenclaw common room might be a good place to start."

Phineas sighed dramatically. "That's a ridiculous message, you know?"

"Phineas, just do it. Now."

With another sigh, he was gone. Severus took a deep breath. Ignoring the questions that poured from a dozen different portraits...Albus' included...he took the staircase up to his private chambers. From a small cupboard next to the couch, he pulled out a handful of potions. Sorting through them rapidly, he tucked a couple of phials of antivenom, one of Blood-Replenishing Potion, and, after a moment of hesitation, a Strengthening Solution into the inner breast pocket of his robes. It never hurt to be prepared.

The next thing he needed to do was remove the Carrows from the Ravenclaw common room. He tore back down the stairs, through his office...paying no attention to the various portraits clamouring for his attention...and out into the Hogwarts corridors.

When Severus felt his Dark Mark activate, he quickened his pace. Yet he was still several floors from Ravenclaw tower when he spotted Minerva McGonagall stalking back towards him, a fierce expression on her face. Instinctively, he stepped sideways, into the shadow of a doorway. When she strode past, he noticed something more: he saw one (angry) woman, he heard three sets of footsteps.

Potter, he realised. *Under his wrapper*.

He couldn't help the uncomfortable leap of his heart at the realisation that Granger might be third member of the group. Stealthily, he began to trail them, ducking from one hiding spot to another. Within moments, however, he was noticed.

"Who's there?"* asked Minerva warily. Her wand was raised into a duelling position.

"It is I,"* he replied, stepping out from behind a suit of armour. He held his own wand at the ready. Minerva froze. Severus raked the air around her, searching for some scrap of movement, some indication of Potter's location. When Minerva did and said nothing, he asked her a question. "Where are the Carrows?"*

"Wherever you told them to be, I expect, Severus,"* replied Minerva. She spat his name as if it were poison.

"I was under the impression that Alecto had apprehended an intruder,"* he continued, his eyes still searched for some sign of Potter.

"Really?"* sneered Minerva. "And what gave you that impression?"*

Involuntarily, Severus clenched his left hand, and his arm flexed slightly. Minerva's sneer deepened at his response.

"Oh, but naturally,"* she exclaimed. "You Death Eaters have your own private means of communication. I forgot."*

The days when Minerva had reassured him that, in his case, the title no longer applied, were long gone. Severus pushed the pain of her taunt deep into one of the library books of his brain. He took a step towards her.

"I didn't know that it was your night to patrol the corridors, Minerva."*

"You have some objections?"*

"I wonder what could have brought you out of your bed at this late hour?"*

They were conversing in questions. It was irritating.

"I thought I heard a disturbance,"* replied Minerva, breaking the stalemate at last.

"Really?"* he replied. "But all seems so calm."* Stepping closer once more, Severus gave up his attempt to find Potter by sight and decided to try other means. Looking directly into Minerva's eyes, he pushed forward against her shields. "Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva?"* he asked. Minerva was no Occlumens, but the sheer force and rigidity of her personality gave her some defences. "Because if you have,"* he continued, "I must insist..."*

Severus broke off as she struck out, conjuring his Shield Charm only just in time to protect himself. The force of it unbalanced Minerva, but she recovered quickly and sent the closest torch flying from its wall bracket. The flames stretched and curled like a giant rope, looping into a lasso and attempting to encircle him.

The next few moves unfurled with textbook precision: Severus transformed the fire into a snake, which Minerva vaporised and sent back towards him as a cloud of daggers. Rather than spinning them back towards her, Potter, and his unknown companion, Severus levitated the suit of armour into their path. They sunk into the metal with sharp ringing noises.

"Minerva!"* shouted Filius unexpectedly in the distance. Severus glanced up to see the diminutive Charms professor sprinting towards him, with Pomona and Horace in hot pursuit.

Time for Plan B, he decided.

"No!"* shrieked Filius as he ran. "You'll do no more murder at Hogwarts!"*

Funny that Minerva's plight has moved him to action, when that of his students didn't, noted Severus bitterly as he struggled to free himself from the grip of the suit of armour. Filius had hit it with some spell that caused it to hold him fast. A non-verbal Repulsion Jinx did the trick, sending the clanking lengths of metal back across the hallway in the direction of his attackers.

Severus Snape turned and ran, his black robes billowing out behind him. He skidded around a corner into the nearest classroom and ran for the window. With his wand, he

blew the glass from the frame, and without slowing his steps, leapt for the opening.

The air caught him like a soft pillow, and he squinted his eyes into the wind and soared upward. In the distance, he heard Minerva shouting after him.

"Coward!"* she shrieked. "COWARD!"*

Gryffindors always say that when it's four to one, he comforted himself. It wasn't much help.

By chance, Severus' flight took him towards the Forbidden Forest, and he continued in that direction in order to minimise the time before he hit the perimeter of the anti-Apparation wards. Since he was still the headmaster of Hogwarts, he was able to modify the wards in order to let him through without slowing down.

Once beyond the boundary, he began to look for a place to land. Odd shapes were moving in the forest. They were so large that it took a moment for Severus to process what he was seeing. Only when he realised he was looking at giants did he understand how close to the end they were: Voldemort was gearing up for battle. This was war.

Soaring above the hordes of gathering monsters, Severus soon located the spot where the Death Eaters were situated and came to land. Voldemort himself, it turned out, had only just arrived. Furthermore, he had brought his snake with him...and she was wrapped in a sparkling, shimmering case, protected from external threat by the Dark Lord's extraordinary magic.

"If there comes a time"...Dumbledore's words echoed in his mind..."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 . . ."

With his Occlumency shields firmly in place, Severus reported to the Dark Lord, passing on the information that Potter had arrived and that the teachers of the school were preparing for battle. The Dark Lord seemed unfazed that news of his arrival had preceded him.

"I want you close at hand, Severus," he remarked in closing. "Don't stray too far."

Waiting on the sidelines while the Dark Lord sent Death Eaters and monsters to attack his students and his friends was almost more than Severus could bear. He paced back and forth along the edge of the Forbidden Forest, waging an irresolvable argument with himself.

Time and time again, Severus had promised Albus he would maintain his cover...no matter the cost. Yet he'd also promised to inform Potter of the awful legacy carried within his body.

For the first time in a long time, Severus didn't know what to do.

Was this worth throwing his position as Voldemort's favoured minion? Or could he somehow find Potter, give him the news, and yet still carry on as double agent?

It wasn't as if he could protect the students any longer, and yet, as long as Voldemort lurked in the forest, the need to inform Potter was pressing but not yet urgent. Perhaps he still had time. As long as he stuck with Voldemort, he could intervene in the Dark Lord's inevitable showdown with the young boy. He could reveal the crucial information in front of several witnesses...no-one would be able to doubt the validity of his statement, Voldemort himself would count it a triumph. Severus could keep both promises at once.

Yet the noises of the distant battle provided horrific imagery to Severus' overactive imagination. What if Potter were accidentally killed by somebody else? Severus reached the end of his eastward trajectory, spun on his heel, and headed back the other way.

It was there that Lucius found him.

The last few years had not been kind to Lucius Malfoy, and the last weeks had been the worst of the lot. His face was drawn with tiredness and concern, and the bruises that marked the Dark Lord's most recent bout of displeasure were clearly visible.

"Severus!" he called as he stepped out from under the trees.

"Lucius," replied Severus curtly.

"Our Lord requires your presence. You will find him in the Shrieking Shack."

"Very well." For a moment, neither man spoke. Both stood still, staring out at the distant castle, which flared with a constant, multicoloured sparkle of various spells.

"You...you didn't happen to see Draco, did you?"

"Earlier this evening, when I received your letter, he was alive and well. But I know nothing further."

"And Jocelyn?"

"Jocelyn is safe." Severus spoke with conviction.

"How can you sound so certain?"

Severus turned towards the tired man who had once been such a close friend. "Because I sent her away; I Portkeyed her to safety."

Lucius let out a sharp breath. "Thank you, Severus. You have always been good to my family."

Severus gave the school a last glance. "I should go," he replied. He placed a hand on Lucius' shoulder in a gesture that was both farewell and intended to comfort. Then he walked away through the trees.

Severus hated the Shrieking Shack. The dilapidated exterior was depressing, but the brutally damaged interior was an inescapable testament to the horror that his younger self had but barely escaped. Even years afterwards, Severus imagined that his sensitive nostrils caught the sickly taint of feral dog.

Standing before Voldemort, he pulled his robes tightly around his body, unwilling to dirty them with the dust and detritus of this particular place. He did his best to convince the Dark Lord to let him go.

". . . my Lord," he begged, "their resistance is crumbling..."

"...and it is doing so without your help. Skilled wizard though you are, Severus, I do not think you will make a difference now. We are almost there . . . almost..."

"Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please..."

Snape found himself pacing again as he had outside; the repetitive movement was the only release he could allow himself for the crushing anxiety he felt.

"I have a problem, Severus..." remarked Voldemort conversationally. He had his...no Dumbledore's...wand out and was tapping it against the curve of his serpentine cheek,

as if in thought.

"My Lord?"*

"Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?"*

Severus' heart was pounding loudly in his chest. *Surely not? Not now that the end is in sight? He cannot mean to kill me now...not before I manage to pass on the information to Potter?*

"My...my Lord?"* he managed, keeping his face blank and his voice flat and neutral. "I do not understand. You...you have performed extraordinary magic with that wand."*

"No."* Voldemort contradicted him directly. "I have performed my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand . . . no. It has not revealed the wonders it has promised." The Dark Lord stroked his chin, holding out the wand now in one hand to contemplate it from a distance. "I feel no difference between this wand," he continued, "and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago. No difference."*

Severus swallowed, hard. There was nothing he could say. *Has he realised?* he wondered. *Did he call me here to kill me, or to ask my advice?* Instinct told him that the first guess was the more likely. At least that meant Draco was safe.

"I have thought long and hard, Severus. . . . Do you know why I have kept you back from the battle?"*

Yes.

Severus stared at Nagini. Her body coiled in and over itself as she wriggled in her enchanted bauble. *If there comes a time . . .* *

"No, my Lord," he responded finally. Obedient to his master even unto death, he tried once more. "But I beg you will let me return. Let me find Potter."*

"You sound like Lucius,"* snapped Voldemort dismissively. "Neither of you understands Potter as I do. He does not need finding. Potter will come to me. I know his weakness, you see, his one great flaw. He will hate watching the others struck down around him, knowing that it is for him that it happens. He will want to stop it at any cost. He will come."*

"But my Lord,"* Severus protested, "he might be killed accidentally by one other than yourself..."*

"My instructions to my Death Eaters have been perfectly clear. Capture Potter. Kill his friends...the more, the better...but do not kill him."* Voldemort broke off for a moment. His unconcern for the lives of innocent citizens chilled Severus to the bone. "But it is of you that I wished to speak, Severus, not Harry Potter. You have been very valuable to me. Very valuable."*

The words struck dread into Severus' heart, and once again, he heard Dumbledore's words: ". . . *when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding . . .*"

"My Lord knows I seek only to serve him," he babbled. "But...let me go and find the boy, my Lord. Let me bring him to you. I know I can..."*

"I have told you, no!"* snarled Voldemort, spinning on his heel. "My concern at the moment, Severus, is what will happen when I finally meet the boy!"*

"My Lord, there can be no question, surely...?"*

"...but there is a question, Severus. There is."*

How ridiculous. For the first and only time this evening, I have told him the full, unmitigated truth. And he refuses to believe me, thinking that I respond out of servility that knowledge left Severus tongue tied. How to frame the truth as convincingly as his typical lies?

Voldemort rolled the thin length of the Elder wand around between his spindly fingers.

"Why did both the wands I have used fail when directed at Harry Potter?"* he demanded.

"I...I cannot answer that, my Lord."* Severus felt overwhelmed by despair.

"Can't you?" There was a long pregnant pause. "My wand of yew did everything of which I asked it, Severus, except to kill Harry Potter. Twice it failed. Ollivander told me under torture of the twin cores, told me to take another's wand. I did so, but Lucius's wand shattered upon meeting Potter's."*

Severus had his eyes fixed on the twisting, tumbling Snake.

. . . but keeps it safe beside him under magical protection . . . *

"I...I have no explanation, my Lord."* The taste of failure lay heavy on Severus' tongue.

"I sought a third wand, Severus. The Elder Wand, the Wand of Destiny, the Deathstick. I took it from its previous master. I took it from the grave of Albus Dumbledore."*

. . . then, I think, it will be safe to tell Harry."

"My Lord..."* Severus turned his eyes beseechingly on the face of the Dark Lord. He tried to let his faith that Voldemort could, should, indeed ~~must~~ kill the boy shine from his eyes. "...let me go to the boy..."*

"All this long night,"* continued Voldemort, oblivious to Severus' distress, "when I am on the brink of victory, I have sat here wondering, wondering, why the Elder Wand refuses to be what it ought to be, refuses to perform as legend says it must perform for its rightful owner . . . and I think I have the answer."*

So close, and yet I have failed

"Perhaps you already know it? You are a clever man, after all, Severus. You have been a good and faithful servant, and I regret what must happen."*

The snake, please. Please, if it has to happen, let it be the snake Severus imagined the antivenom swimming through his bloodstream.

"My Lord..."* he stammered, cursing the tremor in his voice.

Perhaps Albus' portrait would deliver the message to Potter? But would it know it needed to? Could Albus bring himself to switch tactics and allow himself to become the bearer of bad news?

"The Elder Wand cannot serve me properly, Severus, because I am not its true master. The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner. You killed Albus Dumbledore. While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot be truly mine."*

"My Lord!"* Automatically, Severus raised his wand.

"It cannot be any other way," replied Voldemort, a twinge of regret twisting his voice. "I must master the wand, Severus. Master the wand, and I master Potter at last."

As the Dark Lord slashed his wand through the air, true terror gripped at Severus. His own wand jerked higher in an ingrained pattern of self-defence, though when Nagini's cage began to move towards him, the words of his Shield Charm died on his lips.

An exultant joy blossomed in his chest, so strong that he couldn't manage to keep the relief from his face*He chose the snake!*

His joy was short lived, however, for the snake struck, ripping into the flesh of his neck and pumping his body full of searing pain. Severus' eyes rolled back into his head, and he heard his own voice shouting in the distance. Not even Crucio felt like this.

Pain tore at his throat and down through his abdomen. It leaked through his veins and seared into his vision. Like a red haze, it pushed at the edges of his consciousness. Without being aware of it, Severus had fallen to the floor. His hands clutched ineffectually at his neck, trying to stop the precious blood that was flowing out in terrifying quantities. The warmth of it as it seeped through his fingers pushed home the very real possibility of death.

Get a grip, Severus.

Severus felt the vibrations of Voldemort's departure more clearly than he heard the sounds of the Dark Lord's booted feet against the floorboards.

That's when he felt it. Where he clutched at his throat, the cool metal of Granger's Portkey was sandwiched hard against his neck.

Concentrate.

Severus was alone. All he had to do was say the trigger word and he would be whipped to safety. At Spinner's End he had more than enough medicine stashed to treat his injuries. If he did so quickly enough, he might even be able to get back and warn Potter in time. The fate of wizarding society depended on it.

Severus forced himself to take several calming breaths. The pain pushed at the corners of his vision, threatening to overwhelm him. He focussed on the ceiling.

All of a sudden, Harry Potter appeared before him; Severus wondered if he were going mad.

"Harry!" He heard Granger's voice, urgent and irritated. He had, he realised, been handed a miracle.

Severus knew what he had to do. Reaching deep inside for the strength to keep it together, he clutched at the front of Potter's robes. He tried to talk but managed only a deep gurgling noise. The sound frightened him.

Concentrating hard, Severus sought and found the bundle of memories that he'd prepared for Granger, and he exuded them from his temples. A small tendril of pride wiggled in his belly at the knowledge he could manage such a difficult feat of wandless magic, despite his blood loss and the extraordinary battle between poison and antivenom that raged within his body.

"Take . . . it. . . ." he gasped. "Take . . . it. . . ."

Granger was there...of course...conjuring a flask and ensuring Potter collected every last tendril of memory.

Severus realised that his lack of vocal control laid bare the flaw in his plan: if he waited till the trio left, he wasn't going to be capable of triggering the Portkey; he wasn't capable of healing the hole in his neck.

At least he'd managed to pass on the message. He'd kept his promise to Albus, his promise to Lily.

"Look . . . at . . . me" he gasped.

Potter...*blast the boy*...seemed to think Severus still spoke to him, and he lowered his face over Severus', staring into his eyes and blocking Severus' view of the rest of the room.

Severus let go of Potter's shirt, and his hand smacked back down onto the ground. For a second, he felt warm familiar hands on his, and someone.*Granger*...wrapped his fingers around the slim, wooden handle of his wand.

Come on, Granger, look at me, it's important

As Potter...*finally*...pulled back just enough, Granger's face appeared in Severus' field of vision. She looked terrible: singed, dirty, tired and worried; Severus had never seen anything more beautiful. Anxiety had deepened the lines that stretched from the side of her nose, past the corners of her mouth and down to her chin.

With his eyes boring into hers, he pushed forward a snippet of memory. It was one they shared: the headmaster's office swum into view, with Dumbledore ensconced behind his desk and Severus and Granger seated on the visitor's side. "*Your mission*," said his memory of the old man, "*is to keep Harry alive.*"

Granger blinked, and then grimaced as she cut the memory short. He knew she had understood; she would carry on without him. Her face was fixed in a bitter expression, her mouth twisted in disappointment. She pushed herself back on her heels, ready to stand, but froze as Voldemort's high, clear voice rang through the ravaged room.

Severus watched her as she glanced around quickly, then suddenly, she was leaning over him once more, pushing into his mind. He let her in without a second thought, though he had no idea what she was looking for. She moved quickly, rifling back through his most recent memories. He caught quick flashes of his conversation with Voldemort, of the long agony of waiting and of his flight from the school. She stopped at the memory of his conversation with Phineas. She saw him receive her message and pass on one of his own, she watched him run up the staircase into his room and tuck several bottles of potion into his inner pocket. Then she withdrew.

The episode had taken only seconds, and Voldemort was still speaking. Granger ignored him.

Guided by Severus' memories, she slid her hand across his chest and into his inner pocket. Unerringly, she withdrew three bottles of liquid: one virulent green, one dark red, and the other deepest purple.

Moving with the precision he remembered from her Potions classes, Granger thumbed the cork from the first bottle and held it to his lips. She slipped one hand under his neck and tilted his head so that he could swallow without choking.

Severus saw her glance over at the boys, but they were standing, and staring, out towards the source of Voldemort's voice, and they paid no heed to Granger's careful movements. In less than thirty seconds, she had dosed him with an extra dose of antivenom, a shot of Blood-Replenishing Potion and a much-needed Strengthening Solution. With the pad of her thumb, she wiped a drip of spilled liquid from the corner of his mouth and pushed it between his lips. Her eyes met his in a silent question, and he gave her a minuscule nod.

Severus felt the Blood-Replenishing Potion take effect and pressed harder at the wound in his neck. If only he could prevent himself from pumping the entirety of his bodily fluids out over the floor of the shack before making it back to Spinner's End, he really would be just fine. Granger's eyes were narrowed as she stared down at him; he knew she was noting the change in colour the potions had effected.

"Don't listen to him!"

Weasley's voice intruded, and Granger leapt up and away without a backward glance.

"It'll be alright,"* added Granger urgently, "Let's...let's get back to the castle, if he's gone to the forest we'll need to think of a new plan."*

She turned back towards Severus then and gave him an eloquent look. He almost laughed; he felt giddy with relief. Hermione Granger was going to keep Potter alive, but it didn't mean she was finished with Severus Snape.

Granger hurried over to the entrance to the tunnel and gestured for her friends to follow quickly. Within moments, Severus was left alone.

Severus drew a deep, shuddering breath. One word, that was all he needed. Pulling on the resources of the Strengthening Solution, he wet his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"Fenice," he rasped.

Severus Snape caught sight of the bright blue flash of light and felt the cold disc of metal, slippery with his blood, tug at his flesh where he held it pressed against his neck. With a jerk, he was pulled bodily from the Shrieking Shack and spun off into the darkness. He landed, with a thump, on the living room couch at Spinner's End.

A/N: I'm absolutely thrilled and delighted to announce that both this story and *Phoenix Song* have been nominated in the the SS/HG awards--alongside a host of other BRILLIANT stories. Thank you very, very much to everyone who is still reading for all of your support, and if anyone wishes to vote in the awards, they're now open . . . tootle on over to the [sshg_awards](#) community on LJ!

Hermione's Task

Chapter 22 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Twenty-Two : Hermione's Task

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

Let me thank my two brilliant betas: LAxo and WriterMerrin, who have, as always, my deepest thanks!

As Hermione clambered back through the tunnel, her mind raced. The events of the last few hours tumbled through her memories in a confusing and far from logical order: Snape...lying in a pool of his own blood, Fred's death, Crabbe's death, the Chamber of Secrets, her shared kiss with Ron, the Fiendfyre, Fenrir Greyback attacking Lavender, Draco Malfoy, the mess and noise of the battle.

We need a new plan.

Somehow, she had to get the situation straight; she had to work out what to do next.

The snake. Harry's scar.

They still had two Horcruxes to destroy, and once again, the means for doing so were limited...since the basilisk fangs they'd collected had been destroyed in the Room of Requirement along with everything else.

The fresh air of the Hogwarts grounds came as a relief, and Hermione stopped and drew in several deep breaths. Her brief pause left her jogging after the boys as they hurried towards the stone steps of the main entrance. Everything was eerily silent, and the sky above was pitch black. Not even a sprinkling of stars could be seen. In the thin beams of light cast by their wands, Hermione saw that the smooth grass of the school lawn was torn and damaged. There were lumps scattered around...and with an awful lurch, she realised some of them were bodies.

The Great Doors hung open on their hinges, and she, Ron and Harry hurried up the stone steps and into the entrance hall. Their footsteps crunched across fallen gemstones from the shattered hourglasses, dust, bricks and other debris. There was no-one in sight.

"Where is everyone?"* she whispered.

Ron took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. Then he led the way towards the Great Hall; they paused in the doorway.

The tables were gone, and the room was full of people. Those that could stand were clustered in small groups, their arms slung around each other, drawing comfort from the physical proximity of other people. A long line of dead bodies stretched down the centre of the room, and at the far end, up on the platform where the High Table normally stood, Madam Pomfrey was treating the desperately injured.

Without thinking, without knowing what else to do, Hermione walked forward towards the Weasley family. Her arms moved around Ginny, pulling the younger girl to her chest. Over the other girl's shoulder, Hermione stared at Fred's prone and lifeless body, tears rolling down her face.

In a silent and awful choreography, she moved from family member to family member, hugging each in turn.

"Thanks, Hermione," whispered Percy. His glasses were pushed up on his head, and his eyes were red from weeping.

Hermione forced herself to look at the other dead: at Lupin and at Tonks. She thought her heart might burst. As she walked along the long line of bodies, she recognised many of them as friends, others as students. Others, she realised by the mourners who knelt by them or wept over them, were family members, and she thought, suddenly, of her own parents...whisked away to safety almost despite themselves. Not everyone had had that luxury.

At the row's end, she glanced up and met an unexpectedly familiar face. Tracey Davis was seated against the teacher's platform, in obvious pain. Her lips were clenched firmly shut, and there was sweat beaded across her upper lip. Her hands clutched at her abdomen, and there was blood...lots of blood...seeping through her fingers.

"Davis...Tracey!" she exclaimed, falling to her knees beside the other girl. "What's wrong?"

"Slicing Hex," grunted Tracey in reply. She clearly didn't have much energy to talk.

Even before the words were out of Tracey's mouth, Hermione was scrabbling in the beaded bag.

"*Accio dittany*!" she cried in desperation, gasping in relief when the small bottle flew into her outstretched palm. There wasn't much left, but Hermione poured the entirety of what remained into and over Tracey's wound.

The other girl gasped as her flesh shuddered and then began to knit back together. A minute later, she ran an uncertain hand over the scarred flesh that had so recently gaped open. Tracey swallowed and then looked up at Hermione with an odd expression on her face.

"Thanks," she said at last. Never before had Hermione heard Tracey sound so genuine.

Hermione waved a hand dismissively. "You probably better get Madam Pomfrey to check it still; I'm no mediwitch." Hermione looked around. "Where are the other Slytherins?" she asked.

Tracey's face hardened.

"McGonagall sent them away," she replied. The old, antagonistic edge had returned to her voice.

Hermione's mouth fell open in complete surprise. "Why on earth did she do that?" she asked blankly.

"Why do you think?" responded Tracey. "Because Slytherins are traitors."

"But..." spluttered Hermione, "but...Snape...oh . . ." She trailed off. No-one knew, of course. Just because she and Ron had figured out didn't mean that anyone else had. "How come you're here then?" she asked after a moment.

"Vector pulled me out of the crowd of departing students and told me to do what I wanted to do, not what others thought I should do," replied Tracey with a shrug.

"Vector?" Hermione sat up straight and glanced around once more.

"She's over there somewhere," replied Tracey, gesturing with her head towards the adjacent wall.

"Come on, then," said Hermione with new determination. She held out her hand to Tracey. "If I help you, do you think you can walk?"

Tracey stared at Hermione's hand with a bemused expression. "You're odd for a Gryffindor, you know?" she asked.

Hermione just rolled her eyes and refused to lower her hand. After a second, Tracey took it.

Hermione helped the other girl to her feet and then slung Tracey's arm over her shoulders. With Hermione's arm around Tracey's waist, they lumbered over to the other side of the room. There, they found not only Professor Vector but Viktor, Jocelyn, Dennis Creevey and an unexpectedly large number of other Muggle-born students.

The greetings and hugs took several minutes. Viktor wrapped Hermione tightly with one arm and pressed a kiss to her hairline.

"But," asked Hermione of Vector as soon as she had a chance, "how on earth did you get here?"

"Oh, Viktor made us a Portkey...he's got quite a knack, you know."

"And you knew to come because you'd calculated it?"

"Not exactly. I knew that the confrontation was imminent, but it was Colin and Dennis' contact Galleons that let us know exactly when to turn up." Vector glanced around suddenly, looking for something. "Where's Harry?" she asked unexpectedly.

"He's . . ." Hermione glanced around as well, a sudden panic thrumming in her veins. "He was here just a minute ago." Desperately, Hermione tried to remember if she'd seen Harry since they arrived at the Great Hall.

"Hermione!" It was odd to hear rebuke in Vector's normally easy-going voice. "It's your job to keep him alive!"

"I know!" exclaimed Hermione, stressed and suddenly frustrated. She gripped at a handful of Vector's robes, overwhelmed by the entire situation. "I know that! I just don't know how!"

Vector glanced around, then pulled Hermione a couple of steps away from the crowd of chattering students and cast an Anti-Eavesdropping Charm. She pulled a roll of parchment from her robes and, with a flick of her wrist, unfurled it. The parchment was so long that it hit the ground. The full length of it would have rolled away across the floor if Vector hadn't stopped it with a foot. The paper was covered with Arithmantic calculations, and Hermione's professor was skimming down the paper quickly, looking for some particular section.

"Here," she said suddenly, pushing the parchment towards Hermione and pointing to a specific formula. "In essence, your task hasn't changed: you need to keep Harry alive."

"Yes," replied Hermione, scanning the formula, hoping it might provide some answer. It didn't seem to code anything beyond what she already knew. "But,"...the moment for secrecy had past, she decided. Hermione needed help, and Vector might be the only person who could tell her what to do..."but, he's a Horcrux. I don't know how to destroy the Horcrux without killing Harry in the process."

"Oh," sighed Vector in relief. She smiled her familiar smile. "You don't need to destroy the Horcrux, Hermione, Tom Riddle is going to do that part. You just need to keep Harry alive."

Hermione stared up at Vector, her mouth agape. *Just keep him alive* . . . Her mind was thudding with new possibilities.

"I dosed him with antivenom!" she exclaimed. "Will that do it?"

"Maybe," replied Vector eagerly, searching through the parchment again for another section of the mathematics. Conjuring a quill, she balanced the parchment on thin air and started scribbling additions to the equation. "If Riddle decides to use the snake, that might just do it. It's more likely, though, that he'll use Adava Kedavra."

"But," stammered Hermione desperate once again, "then what can I do?"

"Don't worry about his soul," replied Vector confidently. "Just concern yourself with his body."

"But I still..."

"Listen Hermione: you're Muggle-born, this concept should sound familiar. Keeping the body alive after death is a simple matter of resuscitation techniques. Normally, of course, without a soul a live body is useless, but this case is not typical. All you need to do is apply Artificial Breathing and Chest-Compression Charms to Harry's body until his soul returns. It's easier with two people, so I suggest you take Ronald Weasley with you. You'll need him, anyway, to locate Harry."

Hermione stared at Vector. Her mind whirled to process this new information.

"We can't very well just lean over Harry's body and resuscitate it in the middle of a battle or group of Death Eaters! They'd stop us within seconds."

"You might think so, but my calculations suggest that as long as you use a thorough Disillusionment Charm, and as long as you leave immediately once you're certain Harry has returned to consciousness, your chances of success are remarkably high. You must leave afterwards, though...that bit is crucial."

Hermione took several deep breaths. Glancing around, she saw Ron still standing near his brother's body. Molly and Arthur were there, too, but the others had gone elsewhere. She ran the plan through once more.

"Okay," she said finally. "Teach me the charms."

Ron took one look at Hermione's expression and stood wordlessly. He followed her out into the entrance hall. She explained the situation as concisely as she could and ensured he could do the charm.

The wand movement was a simple prod, and Ron muttered, "*Batti, batti, batti*," to himself several times.

"Nonverbal would be best, of course, but just make sure you're as quiet as possible. This is one instance when we don't want to be found."

Ron nodded his comprehension. "And once that's done, we just leave him?" he clarified dubiously.

"Yes, Ron. That part is crucial." Hermione heard Vector's words echoing under her own. "Promise me you'll leave at the right moment?"

"You trust these calculations?"

"Implicitly."

Ron sighed, then straightened his shoulders. "Okay, I promise." He looked pale but determined. "Are you ready, then?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "Have you got the Deluminator?"

Ron extricated it from the pocket of his jeans. "Think hard about Harry," he instructed, then he clicked the button. The light of the nearby torches flew towards them, plunging the rest of the room into darkness, and hovered before them glowing a bright, unnatural blue.

Hermione glanced up at Ron's face.

"We'll touch it together," he decided. "On three: one, two, three!"

Hermione and Ron reached out at the same moment and touched the glowing blue orb of light. It seemed to seep into her fingers, and Hermione felt the warmth of it travel towards her heart. It hung inside her, as if suspended within her chest.

In the dark of the pre-dawn entrance hall, she stepped towards Ron and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Hermione!" There was surprise and some castigation in Ron's voice, and she looked up towards his face. "You can't Apparate on the Hogwarts grounds! You should know that!"

A gurgle of laughter escaped her at his outraged expression.

"Ron," she replied firmly. "The wards are down...if they hadn't been, the Death Eaters would never have got in."

"Oh," he said sheepishly. "Well, then, shall we go?"

Hermione tightened her grip and then twisted into the crushing nothingness of Apparation, trusting that the warm blue bubble within her chest would take her to Harry.

They reappeared in the middle of the forest somewhere, safely concealed behind a tree. Hermione wasted no time in casting a strong Disillusionment Charm over both of them, then she groped for Ron's hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Harry Potter."

Voldemort spoke softly, but his thin, high voice carried across the quiet night air. He couldn't be very far away. Hermione poked her head around the tree trunk and felt Ron do likewise.

She looked into a large clearing, filled with silent, watchful Death Eaters, and lit by a flickering fire. Voldemort and Harry stared at each other from opposite sides. Harry himself was only metres from where she and Ron stood.

Nagini was there, too, shimmering and slithering behind the sparkling facade of her magical cage. Hermione also saw the hulking shapes of giants at the far edge of the circle of light.

"The Boy Who Lived."

As Voldemort spoke again, Hermione felt Ron's grip on her hand tighten convulsively. It was hard to watch Harry standing alone among his enemies and yet not run to help him. She squeezed back.

Harry hadn't moved, even though Voldemort had raised his wand. She wanted to scream at him to protect himself, but she bit down on the tip of her tongue. She tasted the metallic taint of her own blood.

"*Adava Kedavra!*" shrieked Voldemort, and with a blinding flash of green light, her dear, dear friend Harry crumpled to the ground.

Hermione's own legs faltered, and she would have fallen had Ron not caught her. Someone...not her...screamed.

"Come on, now, 'Mione," he breathed in her ear. "You can do it."

Taking a deep breath, Hermione nodded before she realised Ron couldn't actually see her. "Let's go!" she muttered back. Pulling on Ron's hand, she edged them closer...close enough that she could see Harry's face crushed against the ground. His glasses were crooked.

Get a grip, Granger.

Pointing her wand directly at Harry's mouth, Hermione cast the charm. *Soffio della vita!* she thought, waving her wand in a complicated swirl.

Beside her, she heard Ron muttering quietly: "*Batti! Batti! Batti!*"

Almost imperceptibly, Harry's chest was moving. It was working! *Soffio della vita!* she thought. *Pause. Soffio della vita!*

The Death Eaters, she realised suddenly, were bent over the body of Voldemort, who it seemed had also collapsed. Panicked cries and shouted snatches of arguments floated over the clearing towards them. Bellatrix was screaming at everyone to get back, and when some of them did shuffle away, Hermione got a glimpse of Voldemort's prone figure. To her complete surprise, Bellatrix was bent over Voldemort's face, performing manual mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. From the sounds of things, someone else was casting the same Batti charm that Ron was murmuring under his breath.

Momentarily distracted from her own task, Hermione was tempted to run over there and strike them all down before they could save the Dark Lord. *And leave Harry?* she reminded herself harshly, redoubling her attention to the breathing charm. *Soffio della vita! Soffio della vita!*

One last glance at the group on the other side of the clearing fell on the Malfoys. They stood slightly back from the commotion, their faces turned towards Harry and the place where Ron and Hermione stood invisible. Their expressions were blank, emotionless masks. Lucius stood behind his wife, his hands on her biceps as if he held her in check, yet her body was as motionless as his. Their frozen faces crept Hermione out, and she pulled her eyes back to Harry's face, noting the way that his cheek was compressed by the forest floor, concentrating on the tiny movements of the grass near his mouth.

After an aeon, Harry's face twitched. The movement was small, but definitely there. Ron had seen it too, and they clutched tightly at each other's hands. They froze. Though their spells had stopped, the miniscule, tricky-to-see rise and fall of Harry's chest continued.

It worked.

"My Lord . . . my Lord . . ."

Bellatrix's crooning voice cut through Hermione's stupor, and she flinched. Hermione could march over there and kill her now, she realised. It would be worth it.

It was Ron who stopped her. Inexorably, he was pulling her back behind the tree. She struggled for a moment, but let him win.

"My Lord . . ."

"That will do."

The harsh, scratchy sound of Voldemort's voice brought Hermione back to her senses. She and Ron had to get out of there. He was still tugging on her arm, and she followed him further back into the bushes.

"We need to get further away before we Apparate," he breathed into her ear.

They'd made it about one hundred metres when a raucous, celebratory cheer burst from the forest behind them.

"Now," said Hermione, and tightening her grip on Ron once more, she span into nothing.

They arrived back in the darkened entrance hall, shaken, but safe.

"I can't believe we left him there," whispered Ron.

"We had to," replied Hermione firmly. "Following Vector's calculations is the only hope we've got."

Ron restored the light of the hall to the wall sconces, and they went to find the others. Hermione couldn't seem to stop the trembling in her hands, no matter how tightly she gripped onto Ron.

The next little while passed in a blur. Hermione was alternately washed by the conviction that she'd done the wrong thing, that Harry was truly dead, and fired by certainty that they'd fooled Voldemort, that *any moment now* Harry would leap to his feet and kill the evil beast with shock alone.

When Hagrid appeared carrying Harry's body, Hermione screamed along with the others. She couldn't see him and not call for him. She couldn't process his dead appearance alongside the hope that he still lived.

Then, in a single moment, Voldemort set Neville on fire, a horde of supporting wizards, witches and centaurs arrived to aid in the battle, Grawp turned up and flung himself to Hagrid's defence, and Harry, when Hermione scanned for his body, had disappeared.

A wild war cry on her lips, Hermione ran forward into the fray. She watched Neville wrench the burning hat from his head and pull forth the familiar shape of Gryffindor's sword. She saw him slice through Nagini's neck, and a fierce joy bubbled through her every limb.

The snake: gone! The scar: gone!

Voldemort was mortal once more, and the knowledge was like Firewhisky pumping through Hermione's veins; it was like Felix Felicis singing through her body. Hermione pointed the wand she'd inherited from Bellatrix at the nearest Death Eater.

"*Expelliarmus!*" she cried, snatching the new wand out of the air as it flew towards her. She thrust Bellatrix's wand back in her pocket. Armed with a different weapon...and one that she mastered easily...Hermione set to stunning every enemy in reach. She wanted to fight her way to Voldemort's side. She wanted to kill him herself.

The giants, though, were pushing the fight in the opposite direction. Thestrals and hippogriffs were flapping around their heads, kicking and clawing at their eyes. Yet as the monstrous beasts staggered forwards, they pushed the crowd back. Swept up in the press of bodies, Hermione was forced back inside Hogwarts, back into the Great Hall.

Hermione caught sight of Kreacher, stabbing at a Death Eater with a long, wicked carving knife. She saw Charlie Weasley leap a fallen gargoyle to slice Fenrir Greyback across the face with a well-placed hex.

"That's for Bill, you animal!" she heard him cry.

Ron and Neville screamed as they ran to Charlie's aid, Neville still brandishing Gryffindor's sword. Hermione saw Tracey Davis, side by side with Justin Finch-Fletchley, bring down Alecko Carrow. She saw Hooch on her broom, beater's bat in hand, swoop down and whack a masked Death Eater like a polo player leaning from a horse.

In the Great Hall, Hermione saw Poppy Pomfrey levitating the dead bodies that had lined the centre of the room up and across to the teacher's platform for safety. She saw Luna Lovegood duelling a masked Death Eater and stunned him from behind.

"Thanks, Hermione," said Luna calmly. "Watch out yourself."

Luna fired a curse over Hermione's shoulder, and Hermione spun to see the danger. She found herself face to face with Bellatrix.

"Oooh, little Mudblood!" the evil woman crooned. "How lovely to find you here. Now I get to kill you with your own wand!"

Hermione fired off a nonverbal stunning spell, but Bellatrix only laughed hysterically and deflected it without trouble. By Hermione's side, Luna was also firing off curses, but the two of them combined were no match for the Dark Lord's crazy devotee. No matter how quickly they attacked her, she blocked everything and even had time to attack in return. Hermione had to dive sideways to avoid an *Adava Kedavra*.

In her peripheral vision, Hermione saw Ginny shoulder her way out of the crowd.

"I've got your back!" Ginny shouted as she added herself to the fray.

Hermione felt cold and hard as she battled Bellatrix, but seek as she might, she couldn't find a way through the awful woman's defences. Another killing curse very nearly hit Ginny.

"NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!"

Bellatrix spun to see her new attacker, laughing uproariously at the sight of Molly Weasley jogging towards her. Molly pulled off her cloak as she ran, throwing it unceremoniously at Hermione. Instinctively, Hermione caught it before it hit the ground.

"OUT OF MY WAY!" screamed Molly with the authority of she who is always obeyed.

Hermione stepped back several paces and took hold of Ginny's arm. The girl was panting from her exertions, and she stared at her mother in amazement. Molly, for her part, fought like a fury. Spells were flying so thick and fast between the two women that the air crackled and the floor sparkled. At the other end of the room, Voldemort was locked in a three way duel...with Professor McGonagall, Professor Slughorn and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"I've never seen Mum like that!" breathed Ginny.

Several other members of the DA pushed forward, eager to help, but Molly waved them back without lowering her guard.

"No!" she shouted. "Get back! *Get back!* She is mine!"

"What will happen to your children when I've killed you?" screamed Bellatrix cruelly, practically dancing as she leapt and skipped to avoid the rain of curses Molly levelled at her. "When Mummy's gone the same way as Freddie?"

Hermione tightened her grip on Ginny's arm.

"You...will...never...touch...our...children...again!" screamed Molly, and as Bellatrix threw back her head and laughed in response, Molly added, *Adava Kedavra!*

The flash of green light slipped below Bellatrix's defences and hit her directly on the chest. She froze and then crumpled. When the crowd roared with delight, Hermione spun around. Only then did she realise how many people were crammed into the room.

Voldemort, she thought and started forward, eager to finish off the now-mortal creature, but as she did so, he screamed. His rage at Bellatrix's death exploded out of him as pure force, and Hermione, like everyone in the room was pressed back towards the walls. McGonagall, Kingsley, and Slughorn, who had been closest at the time, were thrown backwards, their limbs spread eagled outward by the power of the Dark Lord's anger. Molly Weasley was knocked to her knees.

Voldemort's red eyes blazed with fury, and he spun towards the spot where Molly scrambled to push herself back to her feet.

"*Protego!*"

The voice was Harry's, and as his Shield Charm blossomed in the centre of the room, protecting Molly from Voldemort, he tore off the Invisibility Cloak and turned to face his enemy.

"YES!" shouted Hermione. She tore her eyes from Harry's straight, proud form just long enough to seek out Ron in the crowd. He met her gaze with a grin and fisted the air in triumph. Hermione beamed back. She was smiling so hard that she thought her face might split in two.

"I don't want anyone else to try to help," instructed Harry. His voice sounded deeper and more sure than Hermione had ever heard it before. "It's got to be like this. It's got to be me."

"Potter doesn't mean that," sneered Voldemort in response, though his voice lacked the surety of his younger opponent. "That isn't how he works, is it? Who are you going to use as a shield today, Potter?"

"Nobody," replied Harry coolly. "There are no more Horcruxes. It's just you and me. Neither can live while the other survives, and one of us is about to leave for good. . . ."

"One of us?" sputtered Voldemort. "You think it will be you, do you, the boy who has survived by accident, and because Dumbledore was pulling the strings?"

He's loosing it, thought Hermione, tracking the two carefully as they began to circle each other. *What's Harry waiting for?*

Harry continued to taunt Voldemort, claiming to have weapons and knowledge that the snakeman did not.

"You think *you* know more magic than I do?" screamed Voldemort. "Than I, than Lord Voldemort, who has performed magic that Dumbledore himself never dreamed of?"

"Oh, he dreamed of it," retorted Harry, "but he knew more than you, knew enough not to do what you've done."

"You mean he was weak!" was the screeched reply. "Too weak to dare, too weak to take what might have been his, what will be mine!"

"No, he was cleverer than you: a better wizard, a better man."

"I brought about the death of Albus Dumbledore!" screamed Voldemort, spittle flying from his lips.

"You thought you did, but you were wrong."

Hermione heard the crowd around gasp with surprise. *The memories*, she thought with sudden certainty. She bit down on her lip. *Tell everyone the truth, Harry*, she willed silently. *Tell them the truth now, while they're all paying attention.*

"*Dumbledore is dead!*" screamed Voldemort. "His body decays in the marble tomb in the grounds of this castle, I have seen it, Potter, and he will not return!"

Harry shook his head slightly and smiled. "Yes," he said, and his voice was pitying, "Dumbledore's dead, but you didn't have him killed. He chose his own manner of dying, chose it months before he died, arranged the whole thing with the man you thought was your servant."

"What childish dream is this?" Voldemort's words were dismissive, but his tone was hesitant.

"Severus Snape wasn't yours," said Harry, and Hermione exulted.

Someone behind her staggered and caught at her shoulder for balance. Hermione glanced back into the stunned face of Professor McGonagall.

"Sweet Merlin, Severus!" the woman whispered.

Hermione's mouth dropped open with surprise, but she wrenched her face back towards Harry and Voldemort.

"Snape was Dumbledore's, Dumbledore's from the moment you started hunting down my mother. And you never realised it, because of the thing you can't understand. You never saw Snape cast a Patronus, did you, Riddle?"

Hermione's heart beat uncomfortably hard. What did Snape's Patronus have to do with it?

"Snape's Patronus was a doe," Harry continued, "the same as my mother's, because he loved her for nearly all of his life, from the time they were children. You should have realised, he asked you to spare her life, didn't he?"

Voldemort sneered. "He desired her, that was all, but when she had gone, he agreed that there were other women, and of purer blood, worthier of him..."

Someone who had just kissed her best friend didn't have the right to feel as stricken as Hermione did at the knowledge that her teacher had once loved her other best friend's mother. Yet Hermione felt the truth of Harry's words slip up under her breastbone and slice into her heart.

Get a grip, Granger.

Only when she realised Harry was shouting at Voldemort did she manage to force her attention back to the scene before her.

"Aren't you listening?" he shouted. "*Snape never beat Dumbledore!* Dumbledore's death was planned between them! Dumbledore intended to die undefeated, the wand's last true master! If all had gone as planned, the wand's power would have died with him, because it had never been won from him!"

Harry didn't quite have his facts straight, but it wasn't exactly the moment to correct him.

"But then, Potter," retorted Voldemort, his face twisted with glee, "Dumbledore as good as gave me the wand! I stole the wand from its last master's tomb! I removed it against its last master's wishes! Its power is mine!"

"You still don't get it, Riddle, do you? Possessing the wand isn't enough! Holding it, using it, doesn't make it really yours. Didn't you listen to Ollivander? *The wand chooses the wizard*. . . . The Elder Wand recognised a new master before Dumbledore died, someone who never even laid a hand on it. The new master removed the wand from Dumbledore against his will, never realising exactly what he had done, or that the world's most dangerous wand had given him its allegiance. . . ."

Hermione realised where Harry was going, and she thrilled to the brilliance of his logic, her inexplicable heartache momentarily forgotten.

"The true master of the Elder Wand," exclaimed Harry loudly, "was Draco Malfoy."

For a long moment, Voldemort said nothing at all, his face a blank mask of shock.

"But what does it matter?" he whispered eventually. "Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. You no longer have the phoenix wand: we duel on skill alone . . . and after I have killed you, I can attend to Draco Malfoy. . . ."

"But you're too late," replied Harry, quirking one corner of his mouth. "You've missed your chance. I got there first. I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took this wand from him." Harry jerked his wrist slightly to indicate that the hawthorn wand he held was the wand he meant. "So it all comes down to this, doesn't it?" he whispered. "Does the wand in your hand know its last master was Disarmed? Because if it does . . . I am the true master of the Elder Wand."

Every person in the room held their breath, every atom seeming to hang from the end of Harry's last proclamation. As the silence stretched between the two enemies, the sun rose above the horizon, and the enchanted ceiling reflected a sudden blaze of light.

At precisely the same moment, Voldemort yelled, "*Avada Kedavra!*" and Harry shouted his perennial favourite, "*Expelliarmus!*"

The spells collided in midair with a deafening crash of noise and a blaze of golden flames. Voldemort's wand flew into the air, spinning like a boomerang towards Harry, who plucked it from the sky with the unerring hands of a born Seeker. At the same moment, Voldemort's body shrivelled in on itself and toppled backwards.

For a second longer, the whole room hung in that same moment of suspense; then they shouted with joy. Hermione leapt forward, her legs pushing and her arms pumping. She closed the short distance between her and Harry at the same moment as Ron, and the three of them were suddenly wrapped so tightly around each other that she couldn't tell which boy's cheek she was kissing, which shoulder she was patting, which arm she wiped her tears on. All she knew was the incoherent feeling of joy and delight as she screamed Harry's victory to the glowing ceiling of the Great Hall.

It was almost an hour later that Hermione stood with Ron in the headmaster's office and watched Harry repair his wand and explain his plans for the Deathly Hallows. She had begun to fret about Snape, but knew somehow that it was important not to leave until everything here was sorted out and Harry was ready for bed.

"Are you sure?" asked Ron. He clearly couldn't wrap his head around the justice of abandoning the Elder Wand.

"I think Harry's right," she answered quietly. Dumbledore beamed at her.

"That wand's more trouble than it's worth," sighed Harry. "I've had enough trouble for a lifetime."

Ron laughed at that and clapped Harry on the upper arm. "You'll be bored in a month," he teased. "Mark my words."

Harry pulled a face, but was suddenly serious again as he looked at the Pensieve on the desk. Ron noticed the direction of his gaze.

"What should we do with them, Harry?" he asked.

"Actually, I want you two to see them. You were there for everything else. It's only fair that you understand the reasons behind it all."

Ron looked as uncomfortable at that suggestion as Hermione felt.

"I don't think Snape would want..." she began.

"Look," interrupted Ron, "it's not like we need convincing. We realised ages ago that the greasy git had to be on our side."

Hermione smacked Ron on the upper arm for his rudeness, but Harry just gaped in surprise.

"You...what? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, yeah right," retorted Ron. "That would have gone down well. You were always such a big fan of his work."

"The point is," said Hermione, cutting across the discussion, "I don't think we need to see his memories."

Harry looked disconsolate.

"I, on the other hand," remarked Dumbledore's portrait, "agree with Harry. I think it would be a very good idea for you both to know where Harry was coming from. In the long run, it might prove extraordinarily useful."

Even in his painted form, Dumbledore was hard to disobey, and shortly Hermione found herself bending over the curious bowl and its shimmery, silvery contents. As she touched the tip of her nose to the surface of the liquid, she tilted forwards and fell into Snape's memories.

Watching Snape's blossoming love for Lily Evans was even more painful than hearing about it second hand, yet when Dumbledore forced Snape into the promise to send Harry to his death, Hermione subsumed every other emotion in a burning ball of fiery rage. She shook off Ron's attempt at a comforting embrace and was still furious as she emerged back into the study.

Hermione turned instantly and glared at the portrait.

"You bastard," she exclaimed.

Ron and Harry both stared in shock at the unaccustomed expletive.

"Hermione? You alright?"

Hermione was already at the door when she spun back to look at Ron.

"Look after Harry," she told him. He nodded obediently. "And your mum, too."

Hermione ran down the staircase and out into the corridors, leaping over various pieces of broken stonework and other obstacles. She was out the door and streaking across the grounds before she remembered that the anti-Apparation wards were still down. By that time, she was nearly at the school boundary, and the run was doing her good.

At the Apparation point, she took several deep breaths to steady herself. She fixed the words "Spinner's End" carefully in her mind and Apparated away.

Hermione emerged from the crushing grip of Apparition into a grimy sitting room, lined with books. A thin grey light seeped through a window so dirty that most of the room's illumination came from the bare bulb suspended from the ceiling. Stretched on the couch was the lanky form of her one-time Potions professor. Numerous phials of medicinal potions sat on the coffee table near his head: some full, some empty. He hadn't stirred at her arrival.

"Snape?" she asked. Her voice sounded odd in the quiet room.

He didn't move.

Hermione stepped closer. As she noticed the blood on his clothes, and all over the couch, her heart thudded painfully and her stomach turned to ice.

"Snape!" she was shouting his name now, and she leant over him, fisting her hands in the front of his robes. There was blood everywhere, and it stained her hands with a fresh film of awful red. "Snape! Don't die! You can't! Not now! Not now!"

A/N: Did you think I was past the point of cliffhangers? Not quite! *smirks evilly*

Phoenix Song

Chapter 23 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song or, Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Twenty-Three : Phoenix Song

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 want once again to thank my lovely and highly intelligent betas for their invaluable help! Thanks, LAxo and WriterMerrin.

"Snape! Don't die! You can't! Not now! Not now!"

Dimly, the words penetrated through the blinding white fog that blanketed Severus' brain.*Granger*, he thought. He felt her hands on his chest and fought to open his eyes and look at her. He wanted to see her.

As he left behind the oblivion into which he had sunk, the pain rushed back.

"Granger," he groaned, squinting up at her as she knelt beside him. The odd raspy sound of his own voice helped to propel him back to consciousness. "You're babbling."

"Oh my god," she gasped. "Don't ever...I thought..."

"Blood-Replenishing . . . Potion."

She froze for a second, then whirled towards the table and scrabbled among the bottles.

"How many of these have you already had? No, no, don't answer that!"

Granger spun back towards him with an open phial in hand. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth, and she pressed the bottle to his mouth, tilting it carefully. With difficulty, Severus managed to swallow.

He felt the extra surge of blood as it expanded through his capillary system and, from the sudden widening of Granger's eyes, knew that the quantity of blood pouring from the gaping wound in his neck increased dramatically. Her eyes flew back to his.

"What next?" she asked urgently.

"I need . . . you . . . to . . . heal . . . the wound." It was difficult to talk.

"But why didn't the antidote..." she broke off abruptly, pressing her lips and eyes tightly shut. "I'm sorry," she continued, opening her eyes once more. They glistened with tears. "Just tell me what to do, I'll ask questions later."

"Phoenix . . . song . . ."

Granger blanched. The sudden white edge to her skin made the sooty smudges and singe marks that dirtied her face stand out clearly.

"But you never..."

"I can . . . show . . . you."

She nodded; her eyes were huge in her strained face.

"The trick . . ." Severus broke off and tried to swallow. An enormous tear bulged at the edge of Granger's eyelash, but she blinked it away.

"Yes?" she breathed, urgent to know more.

". . . Strengthening . . ."

Before Severus managed to finish the instruction, Granger had a bottle of Strengthening Solution pressed to his mouth. He swallowed it down.

"Antivenom?" she asked.

He shook his head minutely in reply. He gave the Strengthening Solution a couple of seconds to work, then he tried again.

"The trick is that you have to mean it." His voice was still scratchy and hoarse, but the Strengthening Solution gave him the means to speak through the agony that wracked his body. "You have to vibrate the flesh with your song, tune to it and feel its pain. Though the body has been violently rent in two, you have to believe in its wholeness more than it believes in its separation."

Granger looked terrified, but she nodded obediently.

"It might not work," he warned gently.

"But you'll let me try?"

Severus had never heard her sound so bleak. He nodded.

"Do you have a wand?" he asked.

"I have three, but I don't trust any of them." Granger fumbled in her pocket and pulled out a handful of wands. "I have Bellatrix's wand, my own...which doesn't really work for me now that I've got it back, and that of an unknown Death Eater."

The pain was pushing back up against the rather temporary defences of the drug.

"Use mine," Severus managed, gesturing slightly with his wand arm so that Granger would realise the wand was tucked into his sleeve.

Wide-eyed, she pulled it free. The length of it looked ungainly in proportion to her body.

"Look at me," he instructed. As Hermione Granger stared into his eyes, he called up the memory of him healing the wound she'd received from Dolohov. He concentrated on the details of the wand movement and the odd leaps of the angular melody. He heard Granger humming along.

"Whenever you're ready," he ground out. The pain was once again reaching an unbearable peak.

Softly, tentatively, Granger began to sing. At first, her voice was too weak to be effective, but after the first repeat she became more confident. She sucked in a deeper breath and sang louder. Severus felt his body tremble. On the next round through, she got it, and furthermore, she realised it. He felt her confidence grow, and he felt the music respond to her.

Her voice soared out, enveloping him, comforting him. His heart seemed to swell, and the pain in his body was pulled from him, leaving nothing but a thin golden thread of regret...that his current pleasure was but a temporary state. Severus felt the music, not only in his flesh, which vibrated in perfect consonance with Hermione's song, but also in his bones, which melted towards her like soft wax.

His throat, he realised suddenly as he stared up into her eyes, really was melting. His skin was moving, his tendons were knitting back into each other, and they sang with the joy of their wholeness; his body resonated delight.

With the sharp edge of rueful self-deprecation, Severus reflected that his own desire was so attuned to this particular woman that it was no surprise that his body moved at her command. No doubt she could have just bossed his neck back together or healed it by the force of her determined will alone.

He felt suspended in time...cut off from his surroundings and yet desperately trying to hold onto the present moment as it slipped, inexorably, away. When Granger finally stopped singing, he felt its loss like an ache.

Gradually, the room around her eyes came into focus, but still he stared at her.

"Did it work?" Granger spoke in a whisper.

The pain, he realised suddenly, was gone, though his body felt weak and exhausted. Slowly, almost apprehensively, he reached a tentative hand up to his throat. The skin beneath his fingers was smooth and firm. He pressed against it hard, poking at it. It gave like skin: pliable, warm and real under his attack. It felt completely normal.

"It . . ." Severus paused, clearing his throat. "It worked," he said finally. His voice was back to normal, too.

At his words, Granger's lower lip trembled. The tear that had threatened earlier broke ranks and ran down her face, forging a trail through the dirt and dust.

"What's this?" he asked gently, reaching up with his near hand and wiping away her tear with the ball of his thumb. "Phoenix tears?"

With a sob, Granger buried her head by his side and wept into the heavily soiled fabric of his robes. Severus let himself thread his hand through the curls at the back of her head and rubbed gently against her skull behind her ears.

He almost made a quip about her evident delight at his return from death's door, but bit it back at the thought of what she must have endured through the last few hours. He waited until her tears eased up before he ventured to speak.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I'm sorry about Potter."

Granger's head shot up. Her face was a mess of tears and dirt; she was streaked with his blood.

"He didn't die," she said firmly.

Severus' eyebrows shot together in confusion. "But he's..."

"...a Horcrux, I know. Or, at least, he was a Horcrux." Granger took a deep breath and then pressed onward. "Dumbledore lied to you," she explained. "That's why he closed his eyes."

It took a moment for Severus to piece together the inferences of her statement.

"So, you saw the memories?" It meant that she knew about Lily. He felt his heart twist a little at the thought.

"I didn't want to," she replied quickly, evidently concerned about his reaction. "Dumbledore and Harry insisted."

"I complied them with you in mind," he replied. "I never had much expectation that Potter would believe me, but I thought you might."

Granger blinked at him for a moment. For a second, he thought she might start crying again.

"So," he prompted. "Dumbledore lied to me. You're right: he closed his eyes; I was too distraught at the time to notice. Potter thought he had to die, but he didn't?"

"Voldemort had to kill him, but then Ron and I kept his body alive using Artificial Breathing and Chest-Compression Charms. Harry himself did something about his soul...he claims he went to King's Cross Station and talked to Dumbledore." Granger wrinkled her nose: clearly this was a far-too-fanciful explanation for her liking. "Anyway, he lived through the experience."

"So then Potter killed Voldemort."

"Yes...after pretending to be dead for awhile and then jumping out from behind his Invisibility Cloak."

"Sounds like a riot," remarked Severus dryly.

Granger sucked in a breath that was half gasp, half snort of laughter. "It was, actually. You'll never guess which curse Harry used," she challenged.

Severus raised one eyebrow. "The Entrail-Expelling Curse?"

"No!"

The way that her unexpected smile pulled against her tear-swollen face was heartbreaking.

"A Trip Jinx?"

"No!"

"I give up."

"Guess again."

"Hmmm," Severus ran one finger along his lower lip. "Avada Kedavra?"

"No! E...e...ex..." Granger was choking on slightly hysterical laughter and couldn't form the words, but Severus knew Potter well enough to extrapolate from the first letter.

"Expelliarmus?" he asked, honestly incredulous. Granger could only nod. She was clutching at her side, and an entirely different form of tear was running down her face.

"Ye gods." Severus shook his head, staring off into the distance.

So, Potter isn't dead. It was a little odd to acknowledge how relieved he felt at the thought.

Granger's laughter stopped as abruptly as it had arrived.

"Lots of people died," she said guiltily.

She looked appalled at herself for having laughed in such circumstances; Severus felt a pang of regret. *Would the dead begrudge your laughter?* he wondered. He felt the words hover on the tip of his tongue, but couldn't bring himself to say them. They felt trite and foolish.

"Who?" he asked instead.

"Fred. Tonks. Remus."

There were others, too; the list was longer than was bearable. Good people had died...ordinary, innocent people...and yet he, Severus Tobias Snape, had cheated death.

Severus felt guilty and desperate and panicked and grateful. And it only happened because Granger had saved him twice over. Once with the Portkey, which had given him access to the medicines that prolonged his death agonies; once because she'd come after him and sung him back together.

The silence that followed the naming of names was awkward.

"After such a litany, I feel we need a toast."

Granger looked relieved at his suggestion. Severus picked up his own wand and felt the tingle of his magic wash over him. He Summoned the bottle of Firewhisky from the mantelpiece and conjured two clean glasses. He poured them each a bare finger of the smoky amber liquid and settled the bottle down on the floor.

"To those who sacrificed their lives to remove evil from the world," he declared, raising his glass.

"And so that those who remain don't ever forget the cost with which the victory was won," added Granger.

They both drank.

"Snake?" she asked, after a moment, running one finger along the seam of the couch. She still knelt there, her whisky cradled against her face, and one elbow propped beside his hip. "Why didn't the antivenom work?"

"Don't be stupid," he replied dismissively. "Of course it worked. If it hadn't, I'd be dead."

"Then why," she persisted, "didn't the wound heal?"

"The antivenom wouldn't heal the wound; it just neutralises the poison."

"Yes, but..." Granger broke off to yawn...a huge, jaw-cracking mouthful of air that displayed her tonsils and the back of her teeth.

"You," he informed her, seizing the opportunity readily, for the conversation had made him distinctly uncomfortable, "need to get some sleep."

"Agreed," she replied, staring down at her blood-soaked hands. "Though first, I'm going to clean up."

Reaching into an inner pocket, she pulled out her battered, pale-pink handbag. The remnants of some rather intricate beadwork clung to the sides. Opening it, Granger inserted her arm to the shoulder before extricating a large wooden bowl and a couple of flannels.

"May I?" she asked, her hand hovering over his wand.

Bemused, Severus nodded, then watched as Granger filled the bowl with a conjured stream of warm, soapy water and proceeded to wash her hands and face.

"I think you'd be better served by a shower," he remarked dryly. "I do have one upstairs."

"Eventually," she replied. "Right now I'm so filthy that I'd make the entire house dirty in the process of getting to the shower."

Granger conjured an entire pile of fluffy, pale blue towels and thoroughly dried her hands and face.

"Right," she said, turning her attention to him. "I'm afraid these robes have had it."

Severus was forced to agree.

"If you would be kind enough to return my wand, I'll summon something clean to wear."

Sheepishly, Granger handed it back. Severus was utterly and completely exhausted, and still covered in copious quantities of dried blood, but under it all, he felt well. He felt tempted to stand up, but the moment he tried, Granger pushed him back down.

"Don't even think about it," she warned. "You may feel healed, but your body's going to need a little time to get used to the idea."

He knew she was right. Even the mere effort of thinking about standing up had left his legs trembling. He didn't feel like admitting it, however, so he ignored her, extending his wand and Summoning a complete new change of clothes...exactly the same as those he always wore. They landed, neatly folded, on the end of the coffee table.

When he next looked at Granger, she had risen to her feet. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and her colour was slightly heightened.

"What is it?" he demanded suspiciously.

"I, er, need to wash the blood from your neck and shoulders," she replied, staring intently at a spot about a foot to the right of his face.

"What is this, Granger? Retribution?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"When I sung your body back together, you had to take your clothes off. Now you've sung me back together you want to level the playing field entirely?"

Granger snorted. "If you'd taken your clothes off before the snake bit you, you wouldn't have destroyed a perfectly good set of robes."

The corner of Severus' mouth twitched, but he managed to cover it with a sneer. With a gesture of his wand and a murmured charm, he sent the top half of his clothing...robes, jacket, waistcoat and shirt...wriggling undone and out from under his body to fly across the room and fold itself neatly on the floor.

"Don't throw them away," he warned, "there are things I require in the pockets." In order to cover his embarrassment, he changed the topic entirely. "Please tell me someone killed the snake," he remarked. Every nerve ending was standing to attention. He wondered if she would notice that the Dark Mark was gone.

"Certainly," she responded cheekily. "Someone killed the snake."

"Potter?" he asked, insistent on distraction as Granger ran a warm, wet flannel over one shoulder and across his chest.

"Worse." She threaded a hand into his hair and pulled it out of the way in order to wipe up the side of his neck. "Neville."

Severus' eyes were pressed closed, and he tried to focus on the memory of Neville Longbottom. It wasn't helping. Every fibre of his treacherous body leaned in to her touch. Trust Granger to have read up on magical medicine enough to know not to Scourgify or Tergeo newly-healed skin. Couldn't she have left this till later?

"Snake?" The teasing tone was gone from Granger's voice. She sounded completely serious.

"What now?" He didn't dare open his eyes.

He felt her bare hand run across his neck. He shivered.

"I think you need to see this," she replied.

Only when she removed her hands did he open his eyes. His shoulder was wet, and a lone rivulet dripped down over his chest and over onto the couch. He watched Granger take up Bellatrix's wand, grimace, and then conjure a hand mirror. She held it out to him.

Severus took the mirror and tilted it. He glimpsed a flash of his pale chest, of his shoulder...now mostly clean of the blood that had coated it, and then his neck. He stared at it and, after a minute, raised his other hand to let the tips of his fingers trail over the newly-healed skin.

There was a scar, but you had to look carefully to find it: thin as the edge of a piece of paper, the tiny lines traced two three-pointed puncture marks. Even his fingertips could barely feel it.

"Snape?" Granger hovered anxiously.

Slowly, Severus dragged his eyes from the sight in the mirror and turned them towards her. *What does she want?* he wondered. *Surely she can see the results of her work as clearly as I can?*

The visible results of her completely successful attempt to sing his body left him shaken. *Was it her or me?* he wondered. Was the incredible degree of completeness testament to her magical prowess or to the undeniable physical responses her very presence called from his body? Had it helped that she used his wand? Did it help that he'd previously used the same technique on her?

So many questions, and no scientific method with which to sort through the possible answers.

"Is everything okay?"

"Everything is as it should be."

She let out a breath of relief, then smiled tentatively.

"Right, I'll just finish up here then," she said briskly.

Granger did her best to make short work of washing the rest of his body. To Severus it was both far too long and not long enough. He sat through it with gritted teeth and clenched hands. At one point, she had run one hand right up into his hair and clucked her tongue reprovably: dried blood stuck the thin strands together into clumps. With his heart in his throat, Severus had thought Granger might wash it...that her thin fingers might massage his scalp. When she spelled it clean, the wave of mingled relief and disappointment left him slightly nauseous.

By the time she was done, he was clean and dry, the couch had been Scourgified, and he'd dressed himself in his usual garb. Granger was packing things away, sorting the empty potion bottles from the full and arranging them in neat rows on the coffee table.

"What's this?" she asked suddenly, holding up a bottle of thick black liquid and tilting it against the light.

"Careful," he warned, holding out his palm. Granger passed it to him at once. The bottle was cold to the touch and it seemed to pulse slightly in his hand. He couldn't help the slight grimace of distaste that twisted at his mouth. "The last time the Dark Lord fell," he explained, "the Dark Mark faded, but it never completely disappeared. This time, it was different. I felt a searing pain, and when I pulled back my sleeve, this liquid was bubbling from my arm. It burnt like acid. I managed to siphon it off into one of the empty bottles I had to hand, but ultimately, I think, it would be best to destroy it."

"I saw that the Dark Mark was gone," she stated.

He nodded, not looking at her. "You can still see where it was." Impulsively, he pulled back the sleeve of his robes, unbuttoned the wrist of his jacket and shirt, and pulled them back too. He stared down at the pale skin of his inner arm. Where the Dark Mark had been, the skin was slightly different. It wasn't really the colour, but more that the texture of the skin itself had changed. If he tilted his arm against the light, he could just make it out.

"That's how you knew we had won?"

Severus nodded. He looked across at Granger where she was perched by the coffee table. Her efforts to wash her face had only emphasised the dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was a bushy mess, snarled and knotted up behind her head; it was still as filthy as her clothes.

"Enough," he said suddenly. "You need to shower and then you need to sleep. Go upstairs. There are only three rooms: a bathroom and two bedrooms. I suggest you sleep in the larger room, which is where I normally sleep. The other room has been host to a variety of different people, most recently Wormtail and Draco. Go!"

Pointing his wand at the bookshelf that concealed the staircase, he jogged the spine of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and it swung open.

Obediently, she collected her bag and one of her several wands and disappeared up the stairs. Severus found himself listening to her movements, mapping her location by the familiar creaks and groans of the aging house. He tried, and failed, not to imagine her naked in his shower; he wondered how he was going to fall asleep thinking of her in his bed.

He need not have worried on that front. Twenty minutes later, Granger was back in his living room. She was dressed in stripy pyjamas and a decidedly un-sexy terry-towelling dressing gown. Her hair...clean and dry...was neatly plaited down her back, and she held a couple of pillows and the coverlet from his bed bundled in front of her.

"Snape?" she asked tentatively, hovering just inside the doorway.

"Granger?" he replied wearily.

Pursing her lips, Granger walked to the armchair and dumped her pile of bedclothes. Extricating a pillow, she performed Geminio on the blanket and brought them over to him.

"Lift up," she ordered and proceeded to arrange the pillow under his head. Then she spread the blanket over him.

"What are you doing, Granger?" he asked reprovably.

"I...er, if it's all right with you, I thought I might sleep down here. . . . It's just that I haven't slept by myself since those few nights at my parents' house almost a year ago, and I don't think tonight is a good time to try it. I'll transfigure the armchair...I promise not to bother you."

"Do make yourself at home." He meant it, but he pronounced the words with his customary sarcasm.

Granger looked unaccountably relieved. Abruptly, she sat down on the near edge of the coffee table.

"Also," she began a little nervously, "I wanted to show you this."

With fumbling fingers, she undid the top button of her pyjama top and pulled the collar aside and down to reveal her shoulder.

"Look," she said unnecessarily, for Severus couldn't have looked elsewhere if he'd tried.

The scar he'd given her was still there...but only barely. Rather than the thick, ropy line of angry red that she'd had at first, or even the faded, lumpy scar he'd seen the night of Slughorn's party, nothing but a thin, silvery line remained. As he watched, she ran the tips of her fingers over it wonderingly.

"It wasn't like this before," she added.

Snape's mind spun. He'd never seen anything like it. Had she done that? Had he done it, somehow? He didn't know.

"Well," he managed finally, "it's an improvement on the original."

"I didn't mind it before," remarked Granger, twisting her neck to look down at her own shoulder.

"Go to sleep," he said.

To his inordinate relief, she did as she was told, re-buttoning her top and moving away from him and over to the chair. She transfigured it into a chaise longue, switched off the overhead light, and made herself comfortable.

Lying there, watching her in the dim light that seeped through the grimy windows, it took Severus a long time to follow her into sleep.

Scoop

Chapter 24 of 25

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. ****DH SPOILERS****

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Twenty-Four : Scoop

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 marked with an asterisk is quoted from the original HP stories.

My heartfelt thanks go out to LAxo and WriterMerrin for the extraordinary work they do for me and others.

It had been nine or ten in the morning by the time Hermione fell asleep. When she woke, some hours later, she felt safer and more rested than she had in a very long time. Even before she opened her eyes she recalled the events of the previous night and the early morning, and she woke with a very clear sense of what had to happen next.

The first task involved food. Following Snape's instructions, she found a loaf of bread in the bread crock held under a Stasis Charm. Toasted and spread with Marmite, it was perfectly edible.

Snape was still too weak and exhausted to move. She quizzed him on his pain levels, but received only non-committal or rude answers for her trouble. She wasn't too concerned: having Snape checked out by a qualified healer was third or fourth on her list of important tasks for the day.

Once she had eaten, changed, brushed her teeth, re-transfigured her chaise longue back into a chair, and fussed over Snape, it was almost five in the evening. Hermione was ready to tackle her second task...and for that she required the assistance of Harry and Ron.

Hogwarts seemed the most logical place to track them down. Hermione Apparated there directly from the living room at Spinner's End. Walking up to the front doors in the late afternoon light gave her ample time to take in the full extent of the damage done to the school. Huge chunks of stonework were missing from the walls, and all of the visible windows were smashed. The ground was scarred with deep grooves and burn marks, and a number of trees had been torn from the soil, roots and all.

The Great Doors still swung on their hinges, as they had during the night, but Hermione was relieved to see that some effort had been made to clean the entrance hall: someone had swept all of the debris to one side, and though it wasn't much, the gesture cheered Hermione immensely.

She heard noises coming from the Great Hall and poked her head around the door. The room was crowded with people eating: it seemed that most of the participants in the battle had stayed around. Like earlier that morning, people were dispersed haphazardly among all four tables rather than respecting the house divisions. Even the teachers, she noticed happily, were seated down at the student tables.

Scanning the rows, though, she saw no sign of Harry or Ron. Almost by accident, she caught Neville's eye, and he got up with a smile and came over to say hello. He walked with a confidence she'd never noticed in him before, and his grin when he saw her was broad and uncomplicated.

"Hey, Hermione!" he said, enfolding her in a hug.

"Hey, Neville. You haven't seen Harry and Ron, have you?"

"Far as I know, they're hanging out in the common room. I think they needed a bit of space."

"Thanks, Neville."

"See you 'round, Hermione," he replied, waving her off with another smile.

It took Hermione some time to make her way up to Gryffindor tower. At times she had to climb over piles of broken stonework or fallen suits of armour. Once she had to turn back and take a new route entirely because a hallway had completely fallen in.

Many of the portraits were damaged, and she saw their occupants huddling together in less-damaged frames. The Fat Lady, though, was in her usual place, accompanied, as she often was, by her friend Violet.

"Um," said Hermione, "I'm not actually sure what the password is. . ."

"You're alright, love," said the Fat Lady, far more friendly than she'd ever been in the past. "It'd be a sad state of affairs if I refused entry to a war hero, wouldn't it?"

Hermione blushed, but clambered through without complaint. To her relief, the common room looked much as it always had, and there, in the far corner, were Ron and Harry. They were seated in their favourite squishy chairs, leaning forward over a low table which was spread with the remains of a full English breakfast, and it seemed they were arguing over something: Ron was waving a salt shaker for emphasis.

Both boys turned towards her at her arrival, and Hermione felt suddenly awkward. Did Ron expect her to kiss him hello? She felt suddenly guilty about the thoughts she'd had about Snape in the few hours since she'd last seen Ron. *It didn't mean anything*, she reassured herself. *He's in love with Harry's mum and always has been. I was just saving his life.*

"Hey, 'Mione," Ron remarked a little absently, "I'm just explaining something important to Harry here."

Harry, to Hermione's surprise, stood up as she got closer and pulled her into a fierce hug.

"Hey," she said, pleased by his action, "you okay?" She patted him on the back.

"Yeah, just happy to see you. Ron told me what you did when I was . . . er, dead."

"Yeah, well, don't die on us again, all right? Once was enough." Reaching up, Hermione ruffled his hair and grinned at him.

"Pull up a chair," instructed Ron. "I'll start over."

Hermione moved a third chair closer and realised that Ron was using the salt shaker as an explanatory aide. She hoped she wasn't about to hear the details of a complicated Quidditch manoeuvre.

"So," said Ron, holding up the salt shaker, "this is Dumbledore, and this," he pointed to a toothpick that he'd stuck into one of the small holes in the top, "is the Elder Wand."

Ron cleared a space in the middle of the table and put "Dumbledore" down. Hermione sat up a little straighter, her interest well and truly piqued.

"So Dumbledore is the master of an all-powerful wand, which just happens to be one of the Deathly Hallows. The second of the three Hallows is also accounted for: an incredible Invisibility Cloak!" Ron picked up his serviette and plonked it down next to the salt-shaker representation of Albus Dumbledore. "Then, one day, Dumbledore's like, you know, walking along"...to Hermione's amusement, Ron picked up the salt shaker and mimed it walking over the table top to the sugar bowl..."and he just happens to find the Resurrection Stone."

Ron picked up a sugar cube and laid it and the salt-shaker Dumbledore back in the middle of the table.

"For the first time in living memory, somebody knows where all three Hallows are! Foolishly, however, Dumbledore puts on the ring...not knowing that it has been cursed by Lord Voldemort."

Ron grabbed the pepper shaker and added it to his tableau.

"But he didn't die, because Snape saved his life," interrupted Harry.

"Right!" confirmed Ron. "And lucky, too, because if Dumbledore had died then and there, mastery of the wand would have passed directly to His Peppery Lordship, long before Dumbledore had even had a chance to give you any of the information about how to defeat the bastard. You following?"

Ron shot a look at Harry, who was watching the proceedings intently. Harry nodded.

"Good. Dumbledore is a smart man, though, and he comes up with a cunning plan. What he really wants to do is pass the wand to our young hero..."

Harry made a strangled noise, but Ron quelled him with a glare. Realising that Ron's hand was hovering over the table indecisively as he tried to choose an implement to represent Harry, Hermione picked up his fork. Turning it over, she tapped it with Bellatrix's wand, engraving a small lightening bolt on the back and, for good measure, twisting the tines together in a remarkably accurate representation of Harry's messy hair.

"Brilliant, Hermione!" Ron beamed at her, and Hermione couldn't help flushing a little with pleasure. "Right, so Harry here already has one of the Deathly Hallows"...Ron balanced the Harry-Potter fork on top of his piled-up napkin..."but Dumbledore wants him to have all three of them. That way, when he goes up against his dark-and-scary lordship for the last time, Harry'll be master of death. The fact is that Harry's going to have to die temporarily in the process, so being master of death is going to come in rather handy."

Harry tried to interrupt but Ron cut him off.

"Shut up, mate, I'm not done yet. Point being that Dumbledore can't count on Harry to kill him...which would be the fastest way to simultaneously prevent ownership of the wand passing to Lord V and make sure that Harry instead is its master.

"Sure, there are plenty of Death Eaters who'd be delighted to kill Dumbledore, but that would mean handing over the world's most dangerous wand to the wrong side of the war. What he really needs is someone who is loyal to Dumbledore, but doesn't necessarily seem it: someone who Harry hates."

Unerringly, Ron plucked his sharp-edged steak knife from the table and held it up.

"Severus Snape," he announced. "Dumbledore makes Snape promise to kill him before the curse does. Snape does as he's told."

Almost gleefully, Ron swooped down with the knife and pretended to stab the salt shaker. Then he laid the salt shaker on its side, pulled out the toothpick, and laid the toothpick and the knife down on the table, side by side.

"But..." protested Harry.

"I know, mate, it didn't work like that, but I'm not talking about what happened, I'm talking about Dumbledore's plan."

"You're saying that when Snape killed Dumbledore, he saved my life, I get it." Harry sounded strained.

"I'm not finished, yet. Hold your horses." Ron held up the palm of his hand pleadingly, and Harry subsided grudgingly. "Right, so that's half the problem dealt with, but Dumbledore also wants to be sure that Harry has *all three* Hallows. The ring is easy: he leaves to him in his will, carefully hidden inside the snitch."

Ron slid the Resurrection-Stone sugar cube from its place by "Dumbledore"'s side, to lie next to "Harry Potter." The real Harry Potter, Hermione saw, was gripping the edge of the table so hard that his knuckles stood out pale against his skin. She marvelled at Ron's brilliance. Somehow, by reducing the discussion to the level of every man and the off-side rule, he was making something very complicated, very clear.

"But," Ron continued, "Dumbledore still has to make sure that Harry and Snape will cross paths exactly at the correct moment, so before he dies, he makes Snape promise something else: he makes Snape promise that when the snake is protected, he will go and find Harry."

"Think about it, Harry," added Hermione, jumping into the conversation. "It made no sense to have given Snape that task...Dumbledore could have asked anyone to deliver that information. Me, or Ron, or Professor McGonagall."

"Yup," corroborated Ron. "Anyone who was more likely to see you and in less danger of being killed would have been a far safer and more logical choice."

Harry turned his gaze from one friend to the other then back, a horrified, apprehensive look on his face.

"Dumbledore even had to lie to Snape about what exactly was happening to you," said Hermione as gently as she could. "That's why Dumbledore has his hands over his eyes in the memory: because Snape is a talented Legilimens. If he'd made eye contact with Dumbledore at the time, he would have realised that Dumbledore wasn't telling the truth."

"Yeah, if Dumbledore's plan had worked, Snape would have come to find you, and you . . . well, you probably would have killed him, or something."

Ron put his finger on the toothpick and slid it across the surface of the table to lie next to the Harry-Potter fork.

"Harry Potter, master of the Deathly Hallows, is master of death. Even though the pepper shaker here AKs him, Harry's soul is fine, and the bit of Voldy's that he's been carrying around dies instead. Harry beats Voldy...who no longer even has any Horcruxes."

Ron paused again, grabbed the Voldemort pepper shaker, and tipped it, too, over on its side.

"Game over," he pronounced.

Harry was terribly pale. Convulsively, he pushed his chair back slightly from the table and dropped his head to rest on the knuckles of his hands; his hands still gripped tight to the tabletop. Without raising his head, he took several gasping breaths.

"I...I would have done it, too," he whispered. "I really wanted to kill Snape." Harry sounded absolutely horrified.

"But you didn't, mate. It didn't work out that way."

"Dumbledore was very good at convincing people to do things they otherwise wouldn't do," replied Hermione comfortingly. She reached out and laid a hand between Harry's shoulder blades. They were shaking, and she realised he was crying.

"But he's still dead!" Harry burst out. "He died, and we didn't do anything to stop it!"

Ron coughed, and Hermione glanced up at him to find he was looking back at her, half sceptical, half curious.

"Hermione?" he asked pointedly. "Do you have anything to add?"

Hermione took a deep breath.

"Harry, Ron," she began, "Severus Snape is still alive."

Harry shot upright immediately. There were tear streaks down his face, and he was so white that his scar stood out on his face, even though it was no longer the angry, Horcrux red it had once been.

"He...what? Where? I have to see him!"

"I will take you to see him...but first, there's something we need to do."

Both boys were looking at her, Ron with attentive interest, and Harry with a desperate urgency.

"At the end of the last war, Dumbledore managed to make sure Snape wasn't convicted as a Death Eater. This time, that's going to be up to us. Firstly someone...and I think you'd be the best choice, Harry...has to go and talk to Kingsley. I don't know what charges were laid against Snape before the Death Eaters took over the Ministry, but you have to make sure they're all dropped and that none of them are reinstated. You also have to make sure that he isn't prosecuted for anything he might have had to do to keep his cover during the time since You-Know-Who returned."

Harry was nodding as she spoke, a fixed, almost savage look on his face.

"You should probably take Snape's memories and show them to Kingsley...that should ensure he comes down on the right side."

"Yeah, I wouldn't show them to anyone else, but," added Ron. "I can't imagine Snape'd be particularly impressed." Ron punctuated that piece of advice by picking up a rasher of bacon and biting into it.

"Right." Harry nodded once again.

"There's another thing, too," added Hermione. "You, Harry, took an important first step announcing Snape's loyalty to Dumbledore in front of all those people last night, but we have to make sure that no-one can pass that off as a story concocted to needle You-Know-Who. We have to make certain that it's our version of the story that everyone knows, *our* version that gets talked about over the breakfast table.

"Dumbledore's plan worked as it did," she continued, "because everyone was ready to believe the worst of Snape. There are plenty of people that will think Snape was working both sides of the fence the whole time and has somehow managed to fool you in order to save his skin."

"But what...?"

Harry looked blank, but Ron had caught on. He finished Harry's sentence for him: "...Rita Skeeter."

"Precisely." Hermione nodded.

Harry's face cleared. "Of course! You, Hermione, can make her write whatever you want!"

"I can, of course, but she would resent it. I think she'd do a better job if we offer her something for her trouble: I suggest we offer her your story for Snape's."

"The stick and the carrot," agreed Ron around a mouth full of bacon.

"I offer her an exclusive of my story on the condition she write Snape's, too?"

"Precisely. It's a win-win situation for her really. We can insist that they get equal billing in the *Prophet* and that we check over both stories before they go to print. I also thought that the more people we can get to come out publicly in Snape's defence, the better. We could provide her with a list of people who'd be willing to be interviewed: us three, of course, Professor McGonagall, Professor Vector, Madam Pomfrey and Hooch, maybe?"

"Dumbledore's portrait."

"Phineas', too."

"Viktor, Jocelyn Smith..."

"Who?"

"Hmm . . . ? Oh, Jocelyn's a Slytherin student, a Muggle-born. She was in first year last year. Right. I'll start making a list now, as we find other people to add to it, let me know. Once the truth starts getting out, people might start seeing things he did in a different light and be willing to talk in his favour."

"Yeah, like Ginny, Luna and Neville and their detention with Hagrid."

Hermione had conjured a piece of paper and was scribbling furiously.

"Then there's the issue of Draco Malfoy," said Harry.

Hermione glanced up at him. The colour had returned to his face, and he looked much better.

"Do you reckon he'd talk about Snape for the *Prophet*?" she asked.

"Probably, yeah. But that's not what I meant. I mean, he was a Death Eater, too, but he tried to save our lives."

"Twice," agreed Hermione. "I'd wondered if you'd noticed."

"What?" demanded Ron. "When?"

"First at the Manor and then in the Room of Requirement."

"Are you kidding? He nearly got us killed!"

"Not exactly," replied Harry. "Crabbe and Goyle were trying to kill us, but Draco was different. He was trying to get them to stop."

"He didn't do a very good job of it," responded Ron disgustedly.

"No, but still. His mother lied to Vol . . . "...no-one was really sure if the taboo had been lifted yet, and Harry awkwardly swallowed the last half of the word..."on my behalf. We wouldn't have won without her intervention." Harry looked determined. "I'll speak to Kingsley about the Malfoys, too."

Ron was still making unimpressed faces about the idea of Draco as an ally, but as Hermione looked from one to the other, she felt inordinately proud of her two best friends.

"Right," she said briskly. "Harry, I think you should go and find Kingsley straight away. The new Ministry's pretty likely to do anything you ask right now; you'd best make the most of it. Ron, I think you should go and spend the evening with your family. Though I wonder if you could find Rita on the way and make a time for us to meet with her tomorrow?"

"Consider it done."

"Ron..." she said, reaching out to take his hand. "I'm so so sorry about Fred."

He nodded and squeezed her hand reassuringly. Tears prickled dangerously at the back of her eyes.

"Right," he said, changing the subject, "let's meet back here tomorrow morning...say, nine?"

"Nine it is."

With one last glance at Ron's tableware tableau, Hermione followed the boys to the portrait hole and climbed out. Then they set off on their separate ways.

When Hermione slipped into the Hospital Wing, she was surprised to find Luna there.

"Everything alright?" she asked with concern.

"Oh, yes, I'm fine," replied Luna. "Just helping where I can. If you're looking for Madam Pomfrey, she's in her office."

"Thanks, Luna." Hermione touched the other girl's arm lightly as she passed. Luna was dressed in the same bright yellow colour that she'd worn to Bill and Fleur's wedding, with a matching flower tucked behind one ear. As Hermione walked away, Luna began humming quietly under her breath and went back to stacking piles of clean bandages.

Madam Pomfrey's office door was slightly ajar, but Hermione knocked anyway before going inside.

"Come in!" was the called instruction.

Hermione did so, to find not only Madam Pomfrey, but Hooch as well. Pomfrey sat behind her desk, head resting on her hands; Hooch had been pacing back and forth, though she froze for a second at the sight of Hermione.

"Where the hell is it?" Hooch snarled unexpectedly, striding across the room and seizing Hermione by the shoulders.

Hermione had her wand out, and the tip pressed against Hooch's throat, without even thinking about it.

"Let go of me," she ordered.

Hooch ignored both the instruction and the weapon pressed to her neck. Instead, she gave Hermione a little shake.

"Where's Snape's body?" she demanded.

"Oh." The tension drained from Hermione, and she tucked the wand away. "Let go of me and I'll tell you," she offered.

Reluctantly, Hooch took a step back. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Miss Granger?" asked Madam Pomfrey gently. "Do you know where we can find Severus' body?"

Hermione closed the door and then cast a Silencing Charm for good measure.

"I do," she replied finally. "In fact, I came in order to take you there."

"Let's go then," said Hooch immediately. Pomfrey was already getting to her feet.

"But before I do, I need to be sure of your intentions. I know that you were friends of his once, but the last year was difficult for everyone."

"We went to the Shack, young lady," snarled Hooch. "And his body was gone. There was blood everywhere. Severus Snape was a goddamn hero, and his body deserves the respect that people denied it in life."

"Madam Pomfrey?" asked Hermione, turning her attention to the other woman.

"I wish Severus only the very best...wherever the poor man's soul has ended up."

"Very well, then," replied Hermione firmly. "Madam Pomfrey, you might want to bring some medicinal supplies."

Both women jerked their faces back towards Hermione in surprise.

"He's alive," breathed Hooch, hope and disbelief warred for supremacy on her face.

"I hope so," answered Hermione. "At least he was an hour or so ago."

Armed with that knowledge, the two women got ready incredibly quickly and followed Hermione out through the school and across the grounds to the Apparation point without further questions.

Taking a firm grip on the upper arm of each woman, Hermione spun herself and both of her passengers away into nothingness.

As before, Hermione Apparated directly into the living room at Spinner's End. If Snape was surprised by the sudden appearance of the three women, he gave no indication of the fact.

"Severus!" exclaimed Pomfrey with palpable relief.

With an elaborate sigh, Snape placed the journal he'd been reading on the coffee table.

"I should have known the peace and quiet was too good to last," he commented.

"Listen here, you bastard," retorted Hooch, "next time you fake your own death, don't expect me to go looking for the body!"

"I didn't 'fake my own death'...as you so inelegantly put it...I merely removed my injured body from a dangerous situation in order to recuperate."

"Oh, shush now, the two of you," ordered Pomfrey as she smoothed a hand over Snape's brow. Already, she had her wand out and was taking complicated diagnostic readings.

Hooch crossed her arms and turned her attention to the potion bottles arranged on the table.

"How many of these Blood-Replenishing Potions did you take? What the hell happened, Severus?"

"The snake bit me," replied Snape in a flat, even voice.

"Where?" demanded Pomfrey, frowning at the shimmering display of lights her spells had conjured over the length of his body.

Without speaking, Snape turned his head and pointed to the exposed skin of his neck. Hermione hovered anxiously, her bottom lip between her teeth.

Pomfrey pointed her wand directly at Snape's neck and, from what Hermione could tell, repeated the same set of charms...some multiple times. The silence grew longer as Hooch and Hermione waited for her to clarify the results.

"Explain, Severus," said Pomfrey finally, sounding confused. "The diagnostic says that you've been completely healed.

Hermione let out a breath she didn't realise she'd been holding. A warm rush of satisfaction and relief suffused her from head to toe.

"Miss Granger healed it," replied Severus in that same neutral voice, his eyes fixed directly in front of him. "She sung the flesh back together." He sighed. "You'd better check her scars, too."

Pomfrey's attention swivelled to Hermione.

"Come here, young lady," she instructed, brandishing her wand.

Hermione stepped closer and watched, with interest, as Pomfrey conjured a similar set of shimmering lights over the length of her own body.

"Hmm, where's this scar?"

When Hermione pointed at her chest, Pomfrey conjured a screen and set it between them and the room's other two occupants.

"Shirt off," she ordered.

Hermione stripped down to her bra and jeans and watched Pomfrey's face as she examined the scar. On the other side of the screen, she could hear murmured snatches as Snape and Hooch conversed.

"This is the same scar Severus sung together in the Hospital Wing two years ago?" asked Pomfrey.

Hermione nodded.

"And I assume it only started looking like this after you returned the favour by singing to Severus' flesh?"

Hermione nodded again. "I don't know whether it makes a difference," she offered, "but I used Snape's own wand to perform the spell. Maybe because it was already accustomed to his body, it had more effect?"

"Hmm, perhaps. Put your clothes back on."

Hermione dressed quickly before Pomfrey banished the screen.

Hooch, she saw, had seated herself in one of the two armchairs and had her feet up on the coffee table.

"Sit," said Pomfrey, pushing Hermione gently towards the other armchair. The matron conjured a stool for herself and positioned it near Snape's head. Everyone was looking at her expectantly. "Sympathetic magic," she began, "which includes sung magic, is difficult and unpredictable. Few people are capable of empathising reliably enough with others that they can take the results of such magic for granted.

"It may be that Miss Granger here happens to be one such person. More likely, the highly unusual circumstances of knowing what it felt like for Severus to sing her own flesh made it easier for Miss Granger to sing him. No doubt using his wand helped, and almost certainly, the highly stressful situation of the battle played into it. You were both working towards the same end, after all, and that probably helped you tune to each other.

"The results, though, are quite remarkable. Indeed," she paused for a moment, an odd, quizzical look on her face, "I've never seen anything like it."

When Hermione met Harry and Ron the next morning, Harry was bursting with news.

"Guess what?" he exclaimed. "Fawkes is back! Pretty much as soon as I began to explain things to Kingsley, there was a huge bang, and Fawkes appeared out of nowhere. He dropped a roll of parchment and a feather on to Kingsley's desk and instantly disappeared again!"

"Blimey! Dumbledore!"

"Exactly. Dumbledore wrote the letter before he died...it explained all about Snape's promise to kill him."

"So I guess Kingsley believed you then?"

"Absolutely. He swore that under no circumstances would he let Snape be charged with anything."

"Excellent!" Hermione beamed at him.

"Plus, guess what else? He offered all three of us jobs as Aurors! Starting right now! We don't even have to finish our NEWTs or anything!"

"Seriously? But that's beyond brilliant!" exclaimed Ron. "No more school! And we'll be in it together..."

"Speak for yourself, Ron," interrupted Hermione. "Firstly, I have no intention of becoming an Auror, and secondly, I think you'd be foolish...both of you...not to finish your NEWTs."

"But Hermione," insisted Harry, "there's an intensive two-month training camp over summer. By the time we'd completed that, we'd be on the same level as any other newbies...NEWTs or no NEWTs. And it's not like our last year doesn't count for something!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows and thinned her lips disapprovingly.

"It's your decision, Harry, but this is the same organisation, remember, that did nothing to stop the Muggle-Born Registration Committee: we all have first-hand experience of how fickle the Ministry can be. Do you really want to take a job that you only got because you're Harry Potter? You'll always have people who resent your fame sniping that you got the job as a favour."

"Hey! That's not fair! I didn't ask to be famous!"

"I know! But if you take a job you're not qualified for, you don't really make that point very clearly to anyone else, do you?"

Harry looked like she'd slapped him.

"Ron?" he said suddenly, appealing to a third party. "What do you think?"

Ron ran an hand through his hair, his eyes flickering from one friend to the other.

"I, er, think you've both got a point. I'm all for joining the Aurors, and I'm all for taking a job when it's offered. But . . . maybe we should think about it for a few days before we commit to anything. We don't have to decide right now, right?"

"Right," said Harry slowly. He looked bothered.

"Fine," snapped Hermione.

"Listen, here." Ron reached out and placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "Whatever happens, we three have to stick together. The important thing is that we're all still here, not what we do next."

He didn't need to actually mention Fred's death; the very fact of it hung heavy in the air.

"One of the stupidest things I ever did," he added, "was walk out on you in that tent. I let my dumb insecurities get the better of our friendship. And I reckon we shouldn't any of us make that same mistake again."

Ron had managed to make Hermione feel desperately ashamed of her behaviour. She looked across at Harry and saw that he was wearing a sheepish expression that pretty accurately matched how she herself felt.

"Come on, then," encouraged Ron, "let's have an awkward three-way hug, and we'll head off to the Three Broomsticks, ready to show a united front to the world's most evil reporter."

Hermione laughed and let Ron propel her and Harry together. She looped an arm around the waist of each boy and squeezed.

"I just want what's best for you both," she whispered.

Harry and Ron just hugged her more tightly in reply.

"What do you think we should tell Rita?" asked Harry, before they broke apart.

"The truth," replied Ron.

"Me, too," added Hermione.

"Yeah," sighed Harry. Hermione felt his head nodding beside hers. "I think we've had quite enough 'secrets and lies' to last us for the rest of our lives."

A / N : I know that none of this stuff happens in canon, but I can't help thinking that this chapter and the next are the most canon thing I've ever written! I don't think people make enough of a fuss about the fact that Dumbledore meant for Harry to murder Snape, but I certainly intend to!!

A couple of other announcements: Firstly, this is the penultimate chapter of this story. That's right! The next chapter will be the last. You will let me know what you think about that, won't you?

And SECONDLY, to my utter and great delight, this story and Phoenix Song were both nominated in the SS/HG awards!! PS under Epic and Action/Adventure, PT under WIP, and I was nominated as Best New Author. I can't tell you how thrilled I was, and how delighted I am to appear in such august company--the other nominations are of terrific quality and you should go and use the list as a set of recommendations for what to read, even if you don't vote. The voting is open, though, so do check out all of the stories.

Sequel to *Phoenix Song* or, *Hermione Granger and the H-BP*. By the time of Dumbledore's death, Hermione and Snape had worked together for a whole year. Now, however, they both have very different and very difficult tasks ahead of them. **DH SPOILERS**

Phoenix Tears, Chapter Twenty-Five : The Daily Prophet

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.

As always, I want to thank my incredible betas, who have stuck by me through thick and thin: LAXo and WriterMerrin; this story would be the poorer without your assistance. I also want to thank my readers, particularly those who have taken the time to review: your encouragement has been a joy and a delight; you have made posting this story as pleasurable as writing it!

And now, the final chapter . . .

Severus was well aware that Poppy and Granger were collaborating on some elaborate plan to keep him housebound for the foreseeable future. Yet since he didn't have any desire to actually leave his house, he didn't bother to protest. Though he wouldn't admit it, spending time with Granger and his other friends was the only thing he wanted to do.

They had, it seemed, also kept his survival quiet...or at least his location, as there had been no visit from Rita Skeeter, no crowds of avenging parents throwing bricks through his windows, no Aurors to whip him off to Azkaban.

He caught Granger crying only once...when she thought he was asleep. He'd opened his eyes to see her sitting there, bent over the *Daily Prophet*, tears rolling silently down her face. These were not the violent sobs of the morning after the battle, but gentle tears that poured unchecked and unforced; she had the paper open to the list of the dead.

Severus felt awkward watching her and had lowered his eyelids at once, observing her through the narrowest possible slits and under the cover of his hair. He wanted to comfort her, but couldn't think of anything but the most maudlin of phrases. Instead, he kept his mouth shut.

The rest of the time, Granger alternated between an exhausted, grim silence and a brittle, too cheerful optimism marked by frantic activity...lists, tidying, complicated plans for the future. He liked it best when she talked to him about what she was up to...a fairly rare occurrence...or when she slept and her head fell back against the wing of his battered old armchair, her book or notes forgotten on her lap. In those instances, he could watch her without interruption, storing away memories of her proximity for the all-too-soon moment when she'd stop nursing him back to health and go on with her own life.

At other times, she brought a steady stream of visitors through the house, carefully chosen from among the few people he actually liked and masterfully spaced to tire him out, keep him in conversation, let him rest and otherwise dissuade him from attempting to leave his couch. Poppy and Granger were frequent nursemaids, and Hooch seemed to have been assigned the task of minding him whenever everyone else was busy.

On the second day, Granger arrived with Jocelyn in tow. The young girl had her arm in a sling, but otherwise, looked remarkably well. She'd grown several inches over the last year, he noticed with a start, and someone had provided her with a set of Muggle clothing.

"Professor Snape!" she exclaimed on seeing him, with evident delight.

"What happened to your arm?" he asked in response.

"Oh, a stray hex during the battle. Madam Pomfrey says it will be fine in a few days." She spoke flippantly, but in a manner that underscored a certain nervousness; she sounded every bit the thirteen-year-old that she was.

His eyebrows shot together with surprise, and the realisation of the danger she'd been exposed to flooded him with belated anxiety.

"Please explain what you were doing participating in a battle, Miss Malfoy. I was under the impression that I sent you to Bulgaria!"

"Don't call me that!"

"Legally, it's your name." Draco, Lucius and Narcissa, he'd heard from Granger, were under house arrest. He wondered how their association with Jocelyn was affecting them and how it was affecting her. Not for the first time, he regretted having linked them together.

"Not for long," replied Jocelyn defiantly, crossing her arms. "Professor McGonagall says that a simple paternity test will be enough to undo their claim on me. She says that you can brew the potion as soon as you're better."

"And so I will." Severus remembered his promise to Lucius on the very same issue. *There's no way they're related*, he reassured himself. He'd made up the story himself; Lucius' suspicions that the story were true were nothing but the fruits of the Malfoy desire for more children. "But you're avoiding my question about the battle."

Jocelyn huffed out a breath before answering. "Well," she began, sounding a little defensive, "when we got the message from Dumbledore's Army that the fight was about to begin, everyone who wanted to participate came back. I don't think anyone stayed behind, actually."

"Sit!" ordered Severus, pointing at the stool beside his couch. "You'd better start from the beginning." His fury at Vector and Krum (and also, tangentially at Lucius) was building steadily, but he did his best to keep it tightly controlled...he had little desire to take his anger out on Jocelyn.

Jocelyn sat obediently. Granger wandered off into the kitchen, no doubt to make something for lunch, but she left the door ajar and clearly intended to listen in on the entire conversation.

"Well, like you said, the Portkey took me to Ledeno ezero, and Professors Krum and Sedenova were really nice."

Professor Krum?

"Even though I was only there for the last month, I went to school with the other students. Professor Krum taught Transfiguration, Defence Against the Dark Arts and Charms, Professor Sedenova taught Arithmancy, Astronomy and History of Magic. We also learnt Potions from a boy called Mr Zelenogorski. He wasn't really old enough to be a teacher, but he was really good at Potions. Apparently he learned from his great-grandfather."

"Hmm." Severus knew precisely who the boy's great-grandfather must have been. "You still haven't explained about the battle."

Jocelyn looked at him with a very serious expression on her face.

"We were all Mudbloods, Professor. We had to run away; most of the others had left their families behind. It meant that everyone took Defence classes very seriously.

Often we practiced twice a day. And when the time came, we all wanted to participate."

So Vector and Krum trained up a Muggle-born army.

"Did you have any idea of the danger you put yourself in?"

"Of course we did!" she retorted. "Some of us died. But Professor Sedenova said that as the persecuted, we had a right to fight if we wanted to. It wasn't just students, you know; there were parents and other refugees as well."

Severus intended to have serious words with Sedenova-Vector when he next saw her.

"So you thought yourself capable of fighting a battle after a month of training?"

"Actually, Professor," she replied with a bright smile, "Draco has been training me for battle pretty much since the start of the year."

Severus blinked at her. He was going to have words with Draco, too.

After Jocelyn left, it was just him and Granger. He knew this was the time she and Poppy had scheduled for him as "quiet rest" time, because she lowered herself into the armchair and buried herself in a book. Though he tried to keep his attention on his own journal, he found himself positioning it so that he could keep an eye on her at the same time. He couldn't help but notice that she kept checking the time on her watch. Was she planning to rush off?

"What is it, Granger?" he said after fifteen minutes or so. "Please tell me you're not planning a surprise party."

"No!" she replied, the corners of her mouth twitching upwards at the idea. "I certainly am not. But I do have an appointment at five p.m., and I don't want to be late."

Severus scowled to cover the pang of regret that she was leaving again so soon.

Thus, at five to five, she disappeared, to return only moments later with yet another visitor. This, too, was someone he desperately wanted to see, but he was also nervous. Severus found himself swallowing hard in an ineffectual attempt to wet the back of his throat.

His guest stared at him, one hand pressed to her chest and a rather anguished look in her eyes.

"Severus," she gasped at last.

"Minerva," he replied stiffly. "You will forgive me, I hope, for not rising to greet you. I find myself a trifle indisposed."

"Severus," she said again. Moving jerkily, she stepped towards him and dropped to her knees beside the couch. She took his hand in both of hers and pulled it towards her chest. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. A lone tear dropped from the corner of one eye. "My poor, poor boy, I am so sorry. I was . . . awful. Truly awful."

"Don't be sorry." Severus felt tears prickling at the back of his own eyes. "Quite honestly, your behaviour helped. After all, Minerva, arguing with you is one of the true pleasures in my life."

Minerva looked up at him, her eyes wet with tears, and gasped. The sound was so close to a small meow that he blinked at her in surprise. In that very second, she transformed, leaping up lightly onto the couch in her feline form. She meowed again...much more effectively this time...and then set herself to kneading his stomach.

"Blasted cat," stated Severus gruffly. With one hand, he reached out and ran his hand down her back. Unerringly, his long fingers found the particular spot behind her ear that she really liked. Within moments, she was curled up, purring, on his lap.

Only then, did Severus remember Granger was present.

"Don't mind me," she said awkwardly, when he glared at her. "I'm just going to make a cup of tea."

Several hours later, Poppy and Hooch turned up bearing a basket of food courtesy of the Hogwarts house-elves. All of them...Severus, Poppy, Hooch, Minerva and Granger, sat around the living room and ate their fill. Deep in his chest, Severus felt a fragile joy. Surrounded by his best friends, and Granger, and still alive while Voldemort was dead; he couldn't entirely comprehend his good fortune.

"Now, Severus," said Minerva in an ominously businesslike voice, having finally laid her plate down on the floor and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. "I hope you don't find me presumptuous, but it really would be quite useful for me to know whether you intend to return as headmaster next year."

Severus almost choked on his mouthful of treacle tart. He forced himself to swallow and take a deep breath before he answered her.

"I'd rather be bitten by the poisonous, serpentine familiar of a crazed megalomaniac and left for dead in the abandoned abode of a miscreant werewolf," he said coldly.

"Hmm," replied Minerva. "That already happened once and you seem perfectly fine to me; was that a yes or a no?"

"That, Minerva, was a resounding no. If there remains any possibility that I might still have a claim to the position, let me make myself clear: I resign."

"Very well, Severus. I am sorry to accept your resignation. You acquitted yourself well under trying circumstances, and if you ever find yourself in need of a reference, please don't hesitate to ask. I do hope, however, that I can prevail upon you to return to teach at Hogwarts. I find myself in need of both a Potions professor and a Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. I consider you supremely qualified for both positions, and I would be happy to let you take your pick."

Severus' blank face gave no indication of the turmoil that raged within. *Teach? At Hogwarts?* From the moment he promised to murder Albus, he hadn't dared to consider the possibility that his life might return one day to such a plane of normality.

But that was exactly it: the thought of Albus was like a bucket of cold water on a small smouldering flame of hope.

"Don't be ridiculous, Minerva! Even assuming that my role in the war becomes widely known, no parent in their right mind would willingly send their students to study under the man who killed Albus Dumbledore!"

"You're the one being ridiculous, Severus," retorted Hooch. "I left a wizard brain damaged after a bludger to the head in a league game in 1973. They have no trouble with me teaching their children Quidditch!"

Minerva quelled the response that rose to Severus' lips with a single raised palm.

"Enough," she said sternly. "The choice of staff is the responsibility of the headmistress or headmaster of the time, and I have offered you the job. Please let me know within the week which of the two positions you would like to take...I will need as much time as possible to fill the other spot." She sighed heavily. "Particularly since I'm going to have to find a new Transfiguration professor as well as someone to teach Muggle Studies."

With a wave of her wand, Minerva sent the dirty plates and cups soaring back into the picnic basket they'd arrived in.

"Actually, Severus," she added as if struck by a sudden idea, "a possibility you may want to consider is to teach the upper year levels of both subjects; we could find someone younger and less experienced to teach the lower years."

"Absolutely not!" Severus exclaimed at the very thought. "To the uninitiated, the lower years of Potions may seem boring or repetitive, but the possibilities for error are legion! It is particularly important that children are taught the correct methods from the very beginning!"

Minerva gave him the smug smile of a cat who'd got the cream.

"Very good, Severus," she noted slyly, "I'll put you down for Potions, shall I?"

"I haven't agreed to anything yet!"

"No, dear, not yet," she agreed, still smirking.

He scowled at her. He wanted to teach. He wanted to go back to Hogwarts. He wanted to walk the halls without wondering where the Carrows were and what they were up to. He wanted to stand in front of a class full of cauldrons and to stalk up behind students who were planning mischief and scare them. He wanted to shepherd Slytherin house without having to feign loyalty to a crazed lunatic who held the minds and politics of his students' parents hostage. Hogwarts was his home and he wanted to go back.

But he didn't dare believe it would be truly possible.

"You'll have to come back at least once, though," commented Poppy calmly. When he glared at her, too, she elaborated. "The Death Eaters broke through the Founders' Charms, and we're going to have to renew them."

"I didn't know they could be renewed," remarked Granger, wide-eyed at the possibility.

"Well, it's no simple matter, Hermione," replied Minerva. "You need four strong witches or wizards, one from each house, and if the four are not firm friends, the wards won't hold."

Severus watched Granger look from Minerva to himself. He could literally see her brain ticking over. She turned then towards Hooch.

"Hufflepuff," confirmed the older woman.

"Ravenclaw?" inquired Granger, turning to Poppy.

Poppy nodded.

Severus tried not to dwell on it, but Minerva's words, "firm friends," seemed stuck in an endless loop through his brain.

Granger disappeared to an unspecified rendezvous not long after dinner, though the others remained and played poker for several hours. Thus when Granger reappeared, bright and early the next morning, Severus wasn't at all prepared.

"Snape! Wake up, this is important!"

Severus squinted up at her, narrowing his eyes against the light she'd just turned on.

"Unless you're bearing a double espresso," he growled, "I don't want to talk to you."

"Luckily for you, I am."

He sat up a little straighter and took the proffered beverage eagerly.

"You brought me espresso in a paper cup?"

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Snape. I also brought you the paper."

She held it out to him with such barely suppressed excitement that Severus felt a shiver of panic deep in his gut. With mounting trepidation, he drained the espresso...he had an awful feeling he was going to need it. Banishing the cup, he took the paper, and unfurled it.

EXCLUSIVE! screamed the headline, *SEVERUS SNAPE: SPY*

In only slightly smaller type, the line below read:

"DUMBLEDORE'S MAN"

Then, in ever decreasing font sizes:

Rita Reports on the True Tale of Severus Snape, p.3

Harry Potter's Route to Victory, by Rita Skeeter, p.5

Severus felt dizzy. Only after a long moment did he dare raise his eyes to Granger's hovering, expectant face.

"Are you responsible for this?" he asked. She grinned back.

"Absolutely not," she lied. "Next you'll be suggesting that I held Rita Skeeter captive for months at a time and only let her out on the condition that she write stories to my specifications."

Severus felt sure that he was missing the key to that particular conversational gambit.

"Indeed," he replied.

"Listen, I'll be back in a few hours...with guests. Until then, enjoy the paper!"

With a last grin, she disappeared. Severus stared back down at the paper in his hand, overwhelmed. Hermione Granger...perennial overachiever...had just done her level best to restore his reputation; he almost couldn't bear to read it.

Rita's article was the same kind of unadulterated tripe she normally wrote...though the bare facts held true. Much of the material she'd rehashed from her book, although this time his childhood was presented as terrible and unfortunate, with him as the embattled victim, not the delinquent waiting to happen. He grimaced as he read her saccharine-sweet depiction of his enduring, undying love for Lily Potter née Evans. She'd also more than overdone the section on his bravery in "realising the error of his ways," blathered on about his "repentance" and overemphasised the day-to-day danger of his position as a spy. He itched to attack the article with a red pen; though, to be

honest, he'd have to mark all but the prepositions as hyperbole.

It was the interviews that actually threw him for a loop. Somehow Rita...or more accurately, he concluded, Granger...had corralled an extraordinary list of Order members, students and other professors into talking about him. There was even a letter from Dumbledore himself, delivered...so they claimed...by Fawkes, after Voldemort had fallen.

Potter...Harry-goddamn-Potter...had called him "the bravest man I have ever known." Kingsley had "refused to confirm" yet "hinted heavily" at an Order of Merlin, First Class.

And Granger, she was quoted as saying, "No matter how hard the choice is, Severus Snape always does the right thing."

Severus read the interviews through several times. He felt like the blood in his veins hummed with an excitable energy; never before had he felt so right. He couldn't help but think of parents at breakfast tables around wizarding England, of commuters on their way to the Ministry, of his colleagues at Hogwarts...all reading about Severus Snape, hero.

He could teach at Hogwarts, he realised. Indeed, with this extraordinarily public accounting of events, he might finally be free of the suspicions and ill-will that had dogged his step his entire life. The possibilities were almost terrifying.

In this unexpectedly optimistic frame of mind, he turned to page five, curious to read the "official" version of Potter's year on the run. If Rita hadn't started with a blow-by-blow description of the final showdown with Lord Voldemort, Severus' good mood might have lasted a little longer. As it was, all hope dissolved rapidly, and by the point of Potter's now-legendary Expelliarmus, Severus had reached a towering rage.

And he hadn't calmed down, even the slightest, when Hermione Granger Apparated back into his living room with one hand holding Ronald Weasley and the other, Harry Potter.

"You complete and utter idiot," he snarled at Potter, gesturing with the *Daily Prophet* to emphasise his invective and twisting his legs all the way off the couch so that he could lean forwards.

"Oops," said Weasley. "I told you he might not like it."

Granger's face fell.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" he demanded, still talking directly to Potter.

"I...I did it for you," responded Potter defensively. "Hermione said that we had to make sure that..."

"I'm not talking about the article on me, you dunderhead! I'm talking about this!"

Twisting the paper around, Severus pointed directly at the offending paragraph. Granger stepped forwards and took the paper from his hand. The two boys leant over her shoulder, confusion writ large upon their faces. All three looked apprehensive.

"I suppose you think Expelliarmus was a sign of weakness..."

"Harry *James* Potter," spat Severus, "you have always been slow on the uptake, but this display of blatant stupidity throws every previous attempt into the pale." Pushing up from the couch, Severus got to his feet for the first time in several days. He swayed a little, but if felt good to be upright. It felt wonderful to loom.

"Do you really mean to tell me that you have no idea what might be wrong with that scene?" he persisted, stepping forward towards the boy. Potter's glasses, he noted with irritation, were crooked.

"Um, no," replied Potter, with an attempt at confidence.

Granger was reading and re-reading the paragraph, clearly desperate to solve the puzzle he had posed.

"What imbecile," he asked, ready to make his point, "declares his mastery of an unbeatable wand to the assembled hordes of a crowded room?"

Potter blanched, and his eyes widened in shock.

"What cretin," shouted Severus, leaning into Potter's face for emphasis, "makes it known that a simple disarming spell is sufficient to master the wand?"

Granger and Weasley had stepped up behind Potter like bodyguards, each one with a hand on his bicep. Panic edged all three of their young faces.

"What complete and utter nincompoop publishes the story in a national newspaper, and goes on to say that...AND I QUOTE!!...'The wand has been returned to its proper resting place'?"

"Oh, shit," whispered Harry; his expression of comprehension was indistinguishable from terror.

"You do realise, don't you, that every wannabe Dark Lord in the world will dog your steps? That every minor thug will attempt an ambush? That Dumbledore's grave will be the target of the wizarding world's most dangerous criminal minds?"

Severus paused for breath and stepped back a pace.

"Your life might turn out to be short, Potter," he sneered, "but at least it won't be boring."

"S...sir?" stuttered Potter. "What should I do?"

The unexpected question took the wind from Severus' sails. He felt suddenly exhausted and turned back towards the couch with none of his usual snap-and-billow. Being careful not to collapse entirely, he sunk back onto the cushions.

"Sit," he ordered finally.

Potter still looked frozen with shock, but Granger pushed him towards an armchair. Weasley and Granger squeezed into the other. The sight of them pressed together prodded at the dying fires of Severus' rage.

"The first thing to do," he said, reflecting on how odd it was to have Potter listen to him for once, "is to collect the wand and place it somewhere safe. We also have to work out how to keep you safe. It may require help from the Aurors; you may have to reconstitute the Order of the Phoenix."

As Severus finished speaking, there was a loud bang. Instincts sharpened by years of war meant that all four of them instantly drew their wands. A blink of an eye later, they found themselves pointing at Fawkes, who sailed calmly across the room.

The scene was surreal: the enormous red and gold bird looked completely out of place in the dirty, book-lined living room of Spinner's End. He glowed so brightly that Severus had to squint.

Albus! he thought automatically, only to curse himself for his weakness.

Fawkes' huge wingspan was awkward in the small room, and the bird banked slightly as he dived low over Severus' lap. At the base of the curve, he let something fall, then swung back up and around to land on the cheap antenna that sat atop the old TV. There, Fawkes made himself comfortable, clucking twice and setting to the task of grooming his chest feathers.

Where on earth has he been? wondered Severus.

Only then did he look down at the thin strip of wood Fawkes had dropped in his lap: the bird had delivered the Elder Wand.

A / N : Mwahahahah! It's the cliffhanger of all cliffhangers! But I couldn't help myself: "trilogy" has such a nice ring to it, don't you think?? *grins* It will, I'm afraid, be a little while before I have time to write and to post the next installment, but it is growing inside my head. :) "Phoenix Tears" has come to an end, but keep an eye out for "Phoenix [insert word here], (or, Hermione Granger and the Elder Wand)." [At the current moment, "Phoenix Reprise" is the running favourite as title, but I'm open to suggestions if you have one.]

Thanks again to everyone for reading (and even more so for reviewing!!); don't forget to vote in the SS/HG awards (you have until dec 5th!); and don't forget about me or about this story, for I will be back!

xo grangerous.