

Pursuit

by Nyxx

HBP compliant. What began as Snape's mad pursuit of Hermione through the dark alleys of her Muggle town, transforms into the pursuit of their destiny, and the fate of the entire wizarding world.

You Can Run

Chapter 1 of 4

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Disclaimer: Would JK Rowling write fanfiction based on her own creation? Hmmmm... I think not... Therefore, I write some in her stead!

We are all inspired by things we read and see everyday, and this fic is no exception.

Although the plotlines differ, my inspiration for this fic was fueled by "*The Unfortunates*", an engaging fanfic written by grill... Which I highly recommend to anyone who enjoys action/suspense oriented fanfiction!

My sincere devotion to my *excellent* betas! Fervesco and Vanityfair!!!

Chapter 1

You Can Run

Only the dead have seen the end of war. -Plato

Sweetie, it's much too late to be going out! We can pick up the necessary items in the morning," her mother called from the other room.

"I'll be right back, Mum! The store's only three streets away!" Hermione shouted towards the sitting room, then closed the front door behind her before her mother could protest any further.

The night was dark and crisp, forming her warm, exhaled breaths into soft puffs of iridescent clouds.

She walked swiftly across the front yard to the footpath, making a quick left towards the small all-night store. At this hour, the street was completely deserted; not even a breeze troubled the sleeping trees.

The unearthly silence and gravity surrounding the neighborhood caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end, a small sense of foreboding poking at the edges of her consciousness. Suddenly wishing she had brought her wand, she scanned her wary eyes over the expanse of dark, brick buildings, staring dubiously at the shadowed side alleys, before whipping her head around to peer behind her. Nothing but serene lawns and lurking shadows met her gaze. She turned and picked up her pace, trying to ease the inexplicable disquiet seeping into her subconscious.

She arrived to the all-night store without incident, letting out a relieved sigh as she entered the brightly lit store. As she walked down the aisles, she had an eerie sensation that she was being observed. Shooting a glance at the attendant confirmed that he was absorbed in the magazine currently obscuring his features from view. She hunched down and bent her head, as though inspecting an item on a lower shelf, then looked through her veil of hair to scan the street outside the large plate glass windows of the convenience store. Not even the shadows wavered under her close scrutiny.

Dismissing her odd premonitions as paranoia, she raised herself from the ground and proceeded to the counter. After purchasing her goods, she clutched the tiny paper bag to her side and made her way resolutely back outside. Squaring her shoulders and controlling her breathing, she swallowed her unease and began the short walk home.

A sudden sound, like the crack of a twig snapping behind her, startled her. She whirled frantically around, her eyes widening in fright. Her heart rate escalated as her suddenly acute vision was unable to detect what, or who, was stalking her in the heavy gloom. Deciding that flight was her best defence against the unseen, she turned on her heel to flee. Hermione stopped, frozen stiff with terror, at the sight that stood before her. The small, brown paper bag she had clutched in her fist dropped to the ground with a muted thud.

Severus Snape, in his Death Eater robes, stood a mere foot in front of her. His hard expression and sudden appearance shook her to the very depths of her soul. It took precious seconds for her shock to dissipate before she inhaled deeply as if to scream. Snape, seeing this, swiftly raised his hands to her mouth and the base of her neck, muffling her initial shriek of terror.

"Quiet, girl, before I am forced to silence and bind you," he hissed, his hatefully twisted face just inches from her own.

Hermione could not allow herself to be taken captive. She was privy to information that would devastate the Order if it were to be extracted from her. Her mind decided at once what she must do: she threw her right leg behind her, arching her back gracefully, as though about to pirouette, and flung her knee back up with all her might- straight into his groin.

He let go of her instantly, doubling over in pained anguish and dry heaving over the cement. The instant his hands were off Hermione, she fled towards the nearest house. She turned her head as she ran to gauge the speed of his recovery, witnessing as he uttered a spell to ease his injury.

His eyes darted to her as he launched himself into a frenzied pursuit, running with a swiftness that belied his years. Hermione recognized the snarl etched upon his face in the house's dim entryway light. With renewed vigour, she flung her head back around and pushed her legs to a greater speed, veering her direction from the front door of the home towards the darkness separating the houses.

How did he find me? a panicked voice within her thoughts intoned. *It must be a location spell. He has no means of gaining access to my address* her mind supplied quickly in response.

Hermione sensed the distance she had put between them closing. The sound of his footsteps seemed thunderous in her ears, as though he was directly on her heels, and a mad rush of adrenaline shot through her body.

The instinct to survive propelled her unathletic body to heights beyond its normal endurance level. It seemed to her that she glided rather than ran over the alley's gravel floor.

Hermione didn't slow her steps as she approached the backyard of her house. She could not return home and expose her family's whereabouts to him, although she yearned to dash inside and ensconce herself within the comfort and safety of her parents arms, as she may have done in her more youthful, naive past.

"Accio wand," she stated lowly, enunciating as best she could through the hitches in her breathing as her feet pounded the uneven ground.

The sound of shattering glass reverberated through the alley's quiet stillness, keeping the exact origin of the noise a mystery. Her wand flew within her sight a mere moment later, and she held her hand out to retrieve it, feeling an immense sense of relief as the cool wood touched her fingers.

Knowing her mother would be up shortly to investigate the source of the broken glass, she veered her course once more towards the opposite street, hoping to lure Snape away before her mother began flicking on the lights, pinpointing their home.

As she passed under the street lamps she flung another hurried look over her shoulder to gage his proximity. Seeing no sign of him emerging from between the houses, she leapt into the shrubs of the house directly facing the gap she just emerged from, when Snape had been close on her trail.

Holding her wand as steady as she could, she crouched with bated breath, waiting for him to tumble out completely exposed from within the shadowy void. After ten seconds, she grew impatient, knowing he wasn't far enough behind her to take this long in appearing.

Perhaps he does know where I live and decided it would be more efficient to take my parents hostage in exchange for me? her mind questioned worriedly.

She was about to move when a subtle, flickered movement registered in the corner of her eye, just in front of the house to the left from where she crouched in the shrubbery. Turning her head just a fraction, she was able to discern what it was she saw.

He's Disillusioned! she shrieked inwardly.

Snape had obviously reasoned that she had summoned her wand and decided that she would be much easier to capture by surprise; therefore, he took an alternate route in order to skew her coordinates of his location. From the way he crept unhurried and stealthily in her direction, she deduced that he knew exactly where she was. *Either I flee now or I face him*, she thought, rather calmly, when compared to her mental distress a moment ago.

Having made her decision, she rose slowly from her position with her eyes still trained on the location he should have emerged from behind her, seemingly oblivious to his approach. Stepping free of the shrubs, she snapped her wand up suddenly, pinning his exact location before he had any inclination that she was aware of his presence. Her eyes looked directly at him, and through him.

"Drop the charm," she bit out, turning her body to fully face him. "Not that you had much to begin with," she added mockingly, as an afterthought.

"Perhaps Potter is a distant relation of yours, Miss Granger, as you seem to have inherited his impetuous cheek," he sneered, while removing the Disillusionment Charm.

He stood before her, breathing normally, as though he had not run at all, while she stood with lead weights as legs and a stitch in her side from her physical overexertion.

"What is it you want with me?" she asked, shifting into a more defensive stance.

"I wish only to speak with you." He began to crouch slowly, lowering his left hand to place his wand on the ground. Leaving the wand to lie in the grass, he rose quickly, keeping his eyes trained on her every move.

Hermione, extremely wary of his suspicious behaviour, scoffed in disbelief. "I have nothing to say to you, nor am I inclined to befriend or sympathize with Death Eater scum," she hissed.

He shifted on his feet uncomfortably. "The death of Albus was due to circumstances beyond my control, which is the reason I am here tonight." His features looked strained, as though he was speaking through clenched teeth.

"I don't believe you," she whispered, pausing to wipe a silent tear from her cheek.

Snape took his chance at that moment to catch her off guard. *'Stupefy!'* he exclaimed suddenly, watching with no small degree of pleasure as Hermione crumbled to a heap on the ground.

He Disillusioned his real wand, which had been tucked safely in his right hand the entire time, then he Vanished the wand decoy laying on the ground in front of him. "I sincerely regret to inform you, Miss Granger, that you have no choice in this matter," he sneered, before hoisting her prone figure into his arms and Disapparating with a loud *crack*.

Jane Granger stood, thoroughly confused, in her daughter's bedroom. She stepped closer, inspecting the shattered glass, when a gunshot resounded throughout the night. She started reflexively, slicing her palm on the jagged edge protruding from the sill.

"Dammit!" she cursed, as blood welled within the gash. She fisted her palm to stem the flow and peered into the darkness once more *That was no gunshot. I've heard that sound before*, she reflected, as the memory fluttered on the outskirts of her mind.

Jane Granger inhaled sharply, her strong sense of intuition supplying what her memory could not. "Hermione," she gasped, breathless, and fled from her daughter's room.

That Which Is Lost

Chapter 2 of 4

HBP compliant. What began as Snape's mad pursuit of Hermione through the dark alleys of her Muggle town, transforms into the pursuit of their destiny, and the fate of the entire wizarding world.

Disclaimer::: *Points to self* Not JK, nor famous, nor rich!

My betas!

~Fervesco~

And introducing...

~Wartcap!~

Chapter 2

That Which Is Lost

"Look at Madam Bones, look at Emmeline Vance...It could be me next, couldn't it? But if it is," he said fiercely, now looking straight into Dumbledore's blue eyes gleaming in the wandlight, "I'll make sure I take as many Death Eaters with me as I can, and Voldemort too if I can manage it."

"Spoken both like your mother and father's son and Sirius's true godson!" said Dumbledore, with an approving pat on Harry's back.

Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince

Pg. 77 (Amer. Edition)

Jane Granger streaked from her daughter's room towards the study where her husband lounged, stumbling over her own feet in her haste. "Eric!" she shrieked as she neared the entryway.

Mr. Granger sat comfortably in the study, reading over his wide selection of newspapers from various cities. He started violently at the shout from his wife, spilling tea down his crisp, white shirt.

His heart leapt into his throat as his wife stumbled frantically into the room. He forgot all about the scorching tea as it seeped through his shirt and lunged to his feet, rushing to his wife's side. "What in blazes is going on?" he demanded, clutching at his wife's shoulders in desperation.

His sudden hold on her seemed to startle Jane back to some semblance of reason. "Hermione's... in... danger..." she gasped. Convulsively, she pushed him away and stumbled blindly across the room. Falling to her knees in front of the fireplace, she demanded, "Where's the powder!"

Mr. Granger opened his mouth to say something, but his voice failed him. Hermione, his darling daughter, was in peril. Dread, anger and a sense of incompetence roiled deep within his core. *Oh, God...*

"Where's the bloody powder!" she repeated, her voice hysterical. Jane clawed around the fireplace, searching desperately for the only answer she had to help Hermione. Grasping a small box she spotted on the mantle, she ripped off the lid, bronzing the burnished silver with the blood from her mangled hand. Frantic now for her daughter's safety and totally oblivious to pain, she shoved her injured hand into the box and scooped out a huge handful of the ashy substance, dashing it onto the grate.

Green, smokeless flames erupted as the ash made contact, blasting a wave of cool air into her face and fluttering her frizzy mane behind her. She leaned forward, enveloping her head within the flames and pleaded, "Harry Potter!"

The blur of light, objects and darkness were barely discernible as the Floo network swooshed through numerous Wizarding households. The blur came to an abrupt halt and, disoriented, Jane found herself gazing into Harry's home.

"Harry!" she cried out as doubt and panic knifed through her mind. *Please be home. Please...*

Seconds ticked by as her pulse thundered in her ears. "Harry!" she screeched again as a side door burst open, revealing a dishevelled and sleepy-eyed young man. Rubbing at his eyes, Harry muttered something incoherent through a yawn, before he took a decent look at the fireplace. "Mrs. Granger?" he asked uncertainly.

"Hermione's gone! Get over here, now!" she blurted out.

Recognizing the immediacy in her voice, Harry didn't hesitate. Reacting instantly, he disappeared from the doorway and reappeared a moment later with his wand and a long, Muggle trench coat. "Step back," Harry ordered. He grabbed a handful of his Floo powder just as the flames and Jane's face disappeared from his grate.

The flames reappeared in the Granger's fireplace not three seconds later, revealing a wildly spinning Harry. Finally, his form slowed and he stooped over to remove himself from the small confine. "What happened? And where did you last see her?" Harry questioned before they had a chance to speak, already pulling on his trench coat.

Jane interlaced her hands in a tight fist at her waist, attempting to still the icy chill snaking through her. "I was in her room inspecting the window that broke for seemingly no reason at all when I heard a loud gunshot crack from the street behind our house," she pronounced as clearly as possible through the tremor in her voice, pointing to the houses behind them.

Harry frowned, knowing Hermione wouldn't simply disappear and leave her parents to worry needlessly. "Apparition," Harry whispered, his features grim. "How do you know it was her?"

"I don't know exactly," Mrs. Granger whispered shakily. "I feel it. She went out to the corner shop, which is only a ten minute trip, well over thirty minutes ago and then I heard the..." Jane broke off abruptly, her smooth face taut and pale.

Harry nodded. "Mr. Granger, you trace her steps to the store. Mrs. Granger, you reconnect to the Floo and contact Ronald Weasley. It will lead you to the Burrow. Tell anyone that answers to warn the Order of Hermione's capture. I'll go check the street for any trace of Apparition." He stood resolutely, gazing between the two of them for any sign of question.

Both parents nodded in unison, aware of Harry's training, but his efficiency did nothing to remove the edge of fear curling around their senses.

Jane knelt once again, tossing more Floo powder into the grate as her husband and Harry rushed from the room, all intent on finding what was most precious to them in the world.

Severus Snape was a cautious and methodical man, a fact for which he was renowned. Knowing that his movements would be traced by the Order, he had carefully planned his escape, taking all precautions to ensure privacy with Miss Granger.

He erased his trace from the Grangers' street as he Apparated. Popping back into existence on the outskirts of her town, he quickly placed numerous anti-tracking charms to thwart the Order's early arrivals.

Fully aware of Potter's power and his new-found ability to harness it, Snape was under no illusions that, eventually, Harry would pick up their trail. Therefore, his best option was to leave no trail at all.

It was a simple solution really. Nothing a charmed broom, ten miles distance from his current position, and a Portkey couldn't accomplish. Snape sighed dramatically. Potter always had been the proverbial thorn in his side.

He casted a weightless charm on Hermione, mounted the broom, and hoisted her limp form onto the handle facing him. His left arm anchored her securely to his chest as her head lolled limply on his shoulder. A second Disillusionment charm was performed before ascending rapidly, and unseen, over the town's surrounding wood.

Speed was imperative. He flew low over the treetops, an acceleration charm boosting the old broom's performance. Jettisoned roughly through the air by the charm's added propulsion, he bent low on the broom; streamlining their bodies, he prevented the battering rush of air from hurling himself and Miss Granger to the forest floor below. The position was awkward, having to cradle her helpless body to him in a suggestive fashion, the juncture of their hips pressed tightly together, as her weightless legs flailed like ribbons in the wind behind him.

Snape's breath deepened instinctively at the pseudo-intimate contact with Hermione. He tensed his body in silent protest, refusing to acknowledge that he was becoming aroused by the unconscious woman's warm, pliant body pressed firmly against his chest and groin. *Do not compromise the mission*, he berated himself harshly.

Gritting his teeth, he refocused on the task at hand and noted that his destination was rapidly approaching. Slowing his speed, he descended gracefully, touching ground in the small, obscure clearing where he swept Hermione off the broom.

To make matters easier, he shrunk the broom and placed it in his pocket. Laying Hermione on the soft grass, he knelt down at her side and swept his wand across the clearing to rid any lingering evidence of magic. Grasping her hand, he guided it to the small rock and simultaneously touched their fingertips to its smooth surface. They disappeared at once, vanishing along with any trace of their existence.

Hermione startled awake, swathed in the meagre rays of a single candle that hovered above where she lay on the uneven, stone floor. The candle's weak light illuminated a radius of no more than five feet within her range of vision; what lay beyond her sight remained shrouded in complete darkness.

With her hands bound securely behind her, she used her legs as leverage to slowly swing herself into a sitting position. Hermione blinked groggily, disoriented by the spell's aftereffects.

Shivering from her contact with the cold ground, she hugged herself as best she could, pressing her arms tightly against her back.

Her confusion began to subside as the cool air sharpened her awareness. Remembering her peril, she froze. Holding her breath, she tried to make out any hint of sound. Absolute silence, only interrupted by the frustrating thumping of her heart, rang in her ears.

Hermione's heart rate quickened as she sensed a presence looming somewhere in the black void surrounding her. Terror began to grip at her heart, clutching her within its icy fingers.

"Hello?" she called into the black abyss, her voice trembling. The call echoed around her, giving her an idea of the vast expanse of rock that was imprisoning her. The answering silence pressed thickly against her ears, so tangible it seeped into her pores.

Growing angry at her own cowardice, and the man toying with her, Hermione forced her fear aside. "Answer me!" she shrieked into the room.

Unable to use her hands for support, Hermione planted her feet firmly on the ground and hoisted herself up. She stood resolutely, facing her dread as the furious echo reverberated and died once more.

She stood within the light's circumference, hesitant to explore the unknown beyond the flame's reach.

As she debated internally with herself, a low, animalistic growl penetrated the silence. Eyes widening, her head whipped around frantically, searching for the origin of the ominous sound.

In the distance she spied a swift, multifaceted flash, resembling the lick of light captured and reflected within the orbs of some night-vision creature, peering at her from the dark recess. Her chest heaved as panic overrode her senses. *They mean to have me consumed by their beasts!* she thought, horrified.

She backed up unconsciously, stumbling over her own feet and into the darkness. She struggled to find tenure as her feet slid on the jagged shards of slate littering the floor, rattling like dry bones with the smallest movement. "Help me! Someone help me, please!" she screeched, mad with fear.

A resounding roar answered her plea. Her widened eyes bulged as she detected the sound of claws tapping against the stone floor, predatory, stalking her. Hermione, senseless now with fear, turned and fled, with an ear-splitting scream tearing from her lips.

Totally blinded by the black shroud of darkness enveloping her, she ran frantically through the maze of jagged rocks strewn haphazardly upon the craggy ground. She was utterly defenceless without a wand her hands bound helplessly behind her back, and no sense of her attackers whereabouts. Escape was Hermione's only chance for survival.

Unexpectedly, her foot sunk into a thick puddle of tarry substance. Catching her foot mid-stride, her gathered speed and velocity pitched her face first onto the fluid and sharp rocks littering the ground. The substance squished against her body, as warm and sticky as coagulated blood.

A moment later, a huge eruption of fire lit the centre of the immense cavern, illuminating the cavern's dark, glistening walls.

Panting erratically, she kicked herself onto her back. Her eyes searched frantically for the ravenous beast that intended to pounce on her at any moment. The stone walls of the empty cavern met her vision, but the beast had vanished with the eruption of flames.

Bracing her legs beneath her and pushing herself to her feet once again, she twirled around, inspecting every direction. As her gaze settled on the giant flames leaping high into the chamber, she caught the sight of a black form materializing from behind the inferno. Snape emerged fully into her view, a sadistic smirk twisted on his features.

His eyes flashed a muted shade of green as the light rebounded off his nocturnal eyes. She gasped, taken aback that he would play such a cruel trick on her. "Yosick, demented BASTARD!" she roared as he approached her, sauntering with an air of superiority.

"*Finite Incantatem*," he murmured, waving his wand casually at his face and halting before her as the predatory gleam vanished from his eyes. "It would seem that failure is not your only fear, my sweet. Surely, your rational mind could have foreseen the fact that you are of much more use to me alive."

His expression of smug satisfaction at provoking her distress only served to infuriate her further. Violence surged into Hermione's bloodstream, blazed across her impossibly heightened senses and crackled through every raw nerve ending. Seething outwardly, she bared her teeth in a disturbing rendition of an ecstatic grin.

"I always suspected that psychological warfare would be your drug of choice, with physical torture being so messy, that is," she spat, visibly quaking.

He sneered delicately in response, broke eye contact with her and feigned boredom with the current conversation. "If you're quite finished...? I have something of greater importance to discuss with you."

"If that was your method of persuading me to be co-operative, prepare to be disappointed. You may as well end it now, you know. I'll be of no use to you." Hermione tilted her face up in defiance.

"Such self-deprecation from the pride of Gryffindor. Tsk, tsk, tsk. What makes you think you are of no use?" he asked, curving his eyebrow.

"Training," she stated tersely.

"Ah, so you honestly believe that prattling in your little 'club' makes you above any method of persuasion, do you?" he said sceptically, doubt evident in his tone.

"I will endure whatever torture you subject me to, even die, rather than betray the Order," she said, meeting his eye and stressing the emphasis on betrayal.

Unbeknownst to Snape, the D.A. had made great strides in readying themselves for the future after the inevitable had become apparent. During the eighteen months since Albus's death, the members had tirelessly sought ways to improve their defense, inoculating themselves against Veritaserum's persuasion and training extensively in Occlumency, and advanced defensive magic. Their success or failure would decide the fate of the Muggle and Wizarding worlds... With the fate of humanity riding on their shoulders alone, it was a battle they couldn't afford to lose.

He held her gaze intently. "How very impressive, but I betrayed no one. Do you understand? I obtained all of my directives from Albus," he hissed, his calm facade deteriorating rapidly.

"Oh, yes, your honour cannot be questioned," she hissed back sarcastically, equally incensed. "Obviously, cold-blooded murder and binding a helpless woman only to subject her to such cruelty are simply unconventional displays of heroism... Forgive me if cannot find it within myself to believe your *lies*. You, of your own volition, have extinguished every shred of faith I had left in you," she spat ferociously.

He was still for a moment, looking at her askance, as though sizing her up. "My sincerest apologies, Miss Granger," he said smoothly, insincerity dripping from every syllable. He raised his wand in her direction, noting the deliberate relaxation of her muscles in preparation for the *Cruciatus Curse*. He flicked his wand once, vanishing the mucky debris clinging to her body and removing the binding across her wrists.

She gaped for a moment, shocked at the removal of her bonds. Collecting herself quickly, the initial disbelief morphed into suspicion, wary of his unpredictable tactics.

"Attempting to lure me into a false sense of security, are you?" she questioned, finding his sudden 'hospitality' far more disturbing than his unique form of sadism.

Snape ignored her question, concentrating on a jumble of large boulders near the blazing fire. Transforming the boulders into two, thin cushioned couches facing each other, he gestured towards them. "Sit," he commanded, gritting his teeth when she failed to comply. "Please, sit. We have much to discuss."

She glanced at him, then back at the couches, her discomfort rising. A movement glimpsed out of the corner of her eye caught her off-guard as a graceful, swift swipe of his wand arm caused her to leap a foot off the ground. Her full attention now riveted on him, she noticed he held the wand by the tip, openly outstretched for her to grasp.

His amusement at her reaction was evident...for a small, condescending smirk pulled at his sharp features. "I prefer dueling, Miss Granger, as opposed to murdering unarmed opponents..." he cut off abruptly, the sentence dying in his throat at the look she shot at him, noting the unvoiced accusation in her eyes. "If I recall correctly, I've explained that that particular situation was beyond my control... The wand is safe, I assure you," he finished lamely.

With reflexes honed from hours of training, she shot out her hand, catching the wand's hilt securely in her small fist. She pointed the wand directly at him, her eyes narrowed.

"Your trust in me is so very... charming," he said snidely.

"If I recall correctly, I've explained that you've extinguished every shred of faith I had left in you," Hermione said sharply. "Now get on with it."

She wasn't so dense as not to realize that his every action had a motive; that the surrender of his wand was to manipulate her perception of him. And she was fully aware of his desire to placate her in order to suit his own personal agenda.

Snape, as though sensing her thoughts, turned without further comment. He walked to the second couch and took a seat, watching as Hermione quickly followed, seating herself opposite him.

"Continue," she said, gazing at him expectantly.

A look of distaste crossed his features, as though he detested the thought of her giving him a direct order. He did not act on it, choosing instead to deal with the matter at hand. "As you already know, Albus is gone, but not before he laid the fundamental groundwork necessary to accomplish his task, which is ultimately, the defeat of the Dark Lord."

He paused, choosing his words carefully, "You must understand his position, Hermione, that in order to defeat a Dark Wizard, you must think like one. To Albus, his decisions and actions were justified because they contributed to the 'greater good'."

"It wasn't until some time later that I realized Albus had allowed me to leave the Hog's Head un-Obliviated, and with partial knowledge of a prophecy, because he fully intended for me to deliver the information I had overheard. Sharp as he is, Albus deduced that the Dark Lord would seek to destroy his destroyer, and in doing so... make the only weapon capable of defeating the Dark Lord clear."

"Once Voldemort pinpointed Harry as the 'Chosen One', Albus was free to tuck him away, ensconcing Potter under his wing and ensuring that his tool would be wielded and guided as he saw fit."

Hermione's skin was flushed from the fire's heat, her face impassive except of a small tick that fluttered her left eye momentarily, yet she remained silent.

"Potter was never difficult to manipulate... Nor was I, apparently, since Albus' keen ability to see five steps ahead ensured that I would have no choice but to comply with his wishes..."

"What do you mean by 'No choice but to comply'?" Hermione cut in, interrupting her silence for the first time.

"Meaning, that the life debt I owe to James Potter was violated when I inadvertently supplied the snippet of information that eventually lead to his death. I've no choice but to protect his offspring, or I risk my immortal soul."

Slightly uncomfortable by his revelation, he shifted his gaze from her face, looking anywhere but at her eyes. This was a weakness so damning that, since James' death, none but Albus had been aware of.

"So," Hermione began, "you haven't actually switched sides then, have you? You merely have no choice but to protect Harry from your Master, whom you really wish to serve. No wonder you despise Harry so..." she broke off, pensive.

"I'm afraid it's more complex than that, you silly girl," he sneered, "I can see where, in your inexperience, the world is defined by shades of black and white. Reality, on the other hand, is dominated by varying shades of gray." His tone was scathing, rasping slightly in his urgency to correct her.

She fixed her eyes on him harshly, her face pinched. *So, battling Death Eaters at age 16 is inexperienced, is it?* she fumed internally, but wisely, made no move to speak.

"As I was saying," he continued, "the Headmaster's manipulations run deep. He is clever, subtle, and extremely persuasive... Lily and James' deaths were no accident; Albus refused the position of their secret keeper on purpose, knowing they would be betrayed."

"Sirius," he continued smoothly, "was also a sacrifice..."

Hermione inhaled sharply, her brow furrowing.

"...meant to rouse Harry into action against Voldemort. The finer details reveal the truth: Albus collected Lucius Malfoy and numerous other Death Eaters with a mere flick of his wand... and yet Bellatrix Lestrange managed to escape his grasp while Sirius managed to fall through the Veil to make a lasting impression on Harry's soul, while taking care not to break him..." Snape hesitated before continuing, "and Albus planned his own demise as well, using me as the final catalyst to propel Harry into action," he whispered.

Hermione uttered no response, merely dropping the black wand limply onto her lap. Something was amiss; he had expected a different reaction from her. Denial, anger, sadness... anything other than the look of resignation and dejection currently distorting her soft features.

Studying her face carefully, he realized she may have already come to these conclusions on her own. "I am merely confirming your suspicions, am I not, Hermione?" he whispered cautiously.

She did not answer, nor meet his eyes. She sat motionless, as though in deep thought, breathing deeply through parted lips. "Hermione," he whispered, encouraging her gently. "Answer me."

Her eyes refocused and slid slowly to his face. "Yes," she croaked through the emotion bundled tightly in her throat. "I..." she hesitated a moment before continuing, "I've thought of it. The careful manipulation, the rearing of a generation that must be prepared to fight, to commit atrocities, while still keeping their humanity intact.... Yes, I've thought on that... I understand his reasoning, however detrimental it may be to those involved."

"Yes," Snape answered. "'Sacrifices must be made,' Albus mentioned once, 'but only when unavoidable, or absolutely necessary.'" He stood quickly, gazing into a void of darkness in the distance that the inferno's blaze couldn't reach.

"I've someone to introduce you to," he said, clapping his hands together sharply. Immediately, a clashing gong resounded throughout the cavern, and by the feel of it, travelled deep into the rock's core.

He parted his hands slowly as the sound of grinding stone assaulted her ears. Uncertain of his intentions, she followed the direction of his gaze hesitantly. *Upon his command, the Gates of Hell parted*, she thought as an eerie chill crawled up her spine.

A/N I stand by the manipulation of Albus, for although it's very subtle, to me it glares as harsh as the sun. For reader reference, I've compiled a list of short, canon dialogue with my interpretations that this conspiracy theory is based on. If anyone is curious to see them, feel free to leave your email address in your review or email me.

The behavior of Severus is odd in this chapter to convey his penchant for mild cruelty on those he disapproves of... and she did knee him pretty hard in his tender bits after all. He needs the aid of Hermione, but for his own petty reasons he dislikes her (at the moment), and we know how childish he can behave at times. He already respects her intelligence, ('Harry gets by on more talented friends' in Spinner's End for example) which is why he chose to go to her for aid in the first place, so it won't take him long to respect her as a person after they work closely together in the future.

This story doesn't revolve around Albus. These first few chapters are only informative tools about Albus to set the stage for the rest of the fic. Chapter 3 will round off the information.

With Mortal Hands

Chapter 3 of 4

HBP compliant. What began as Snape's mad pursuit of Hermione through the dark alleys of her Muggle town, transforms into the pursuit of their destiny, and the fate of the entire wizarding world.

Disclaimer: I don't own any of the Potterverse characters or locations. My only claim is on the places and objects etc that you don't recognize. All else belongs to JK Rowling.

Kisses to my illustrious Betas, without whom I would be completely lost:

Fervesco, wartcap, and introducing.... Vaughn!!! (P.I. Accredited)

Chapter 3

With Mortal Hands

Horrible deeds not done in ignorance, but done deliberately. The cruelest evils are those that we embrace with open eyes.

-Sophocles "Oedipus the King" vs. 1178

Ron banged through the back door of the Grangers house and sprinted towards the direction Mrs. Granger had pointed out. He ran swiftly over the alley's gravel and jumped over the neighboring house's fence. Emerging from between the homes, he scanned the opposite street, locating Harry kneeling beside a large hedge. "Oi!" Ron called out lowly as he jogged to where Harry crouched in the lawn. He handed Harry a cordless headset as he crouched down next to him. "Have you found a trace?" Ron asked, as Harry absently situated the small device over his head.

"It's very faint. The spell residuals have been erased. I can't gauge the distance or the direction. They left few clues behind," said Harry, brushing the blades of grass through his fingers.

"What do we do now? Search the entire area and..." said Ron, stopping when Harry looked at him sharply.

Harry stood, pressing the earpiece further into his ear and frowning in concentration.

After a few seconds, Harry turned to Ron. "Tonks has found something. Follow my trail," he said and Disapparated.

"It's too faded to track," sighed Tonks, tapping her foot on the field just outside of Hermione's town. "And I don't see why they would Apparate just to the edge of the city. If I had to guess, I'd say she was taken to their destination using an illegal Portkey from this point on. Any other method of travel would be too time consuming."

"Do you think it was Death Eaters?" Ron asked.

Tonks scrunched up her nose. "I'm not sure. This was too clean and covert for a Death Eater. They usually enjoy taking the credit for such a daring feat, but leave much more of a mess behind in their haste. It seems to me to be the work of a professional criminal," she said, looking over at Harry. "Know anyone who would take her for ransom?"

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "All of this reeks 'Death Eater' to me. Probably one of the smarter ones, like Malfoy or Snape, and most likely not for a ransom either. They would milk her for all the information she has... then kill her," he added angrily, balling his fists.

"How was this even possible?" Ron asked Tonks. "Dumbledore put protection charms over our homes before his death. Even the Ministry added extra security after Dumbledore was murdered and the Death Eaters escaped Azkaban."

"Location Charm?" Tonks suggested. "It would have had to have been done at the exact moment she was outside her home though, and within that exact ten minute time frame... and in the middle of the night... and when she didn't have her wand..." she said, trailing off. "What are the odds of that happening?" she asked incredulously.

Harry's hard eyes caught her gaze. "Zero, because there was no way for her to be found by any means. I charmed her and Ron with anti-location spells myself. Her address must have been known for a long time... and the kidnapper laid in wait for the right moment."

"When she was without her wand and alone," added Ron gloomily.

"Exactly. Which means the Grangers are no longer safe in their home. We need to get them back to headquarters."

Harry moved the mouthpiece of his headset to his lips. "Phoenix: Regroup at Grimmauld, over." He turned to Ron and Tonks. "Set up a map of the area within a fifty mile radius. I'm going to help the Grangers gather their belongings and send them through the Floo. I'll meet you there."

Hermione followed Severus' gaze, fixing her eyes on some unknown point in the darkness. She rose to her feet hesitantly, still processing the information. His words and revelations were still affecting her, and he was giving her little time to fully absorb it. And his insistence that he never betrayed the Order was hard to digest all at once, after believing him inhuman for so long... She was more willing to trust him after he validated her fears concerning Albus, but a sense of unease remained. Hermione gripped his black wand tighter and stood on guard, frowning as this strange development unfolded.

"I hear you obtained a position at the Ministry," he said as they waited.

"Yes," she responded absently, her attention still focused on the darkness ahead.

"An Advanced Charms Research and Development Specialist. What made you decide on that position?"

The genuine curiosity in his tone caught her attention. Hermione looked up at him, her eyebrows arched. "I found the subject fascinating. I can utilize all aspects of my Hogwarts education to achieve my goal. Arithmancy and Transfiguration play a large part in developing new spells, both of which I enjoyed immensely..."

She quit the conversation as small flame guttering in the distance caught her attention. An invisible figure approached rapidly as the candle sputtered against the draft that walking forced upon it. A broad shouldered woman with a square-jaw and a monocle glinting on her eye became more visible as she neared the towering blaze.

Walking into the infernos radius of light, the woman extinguished her candle and walked hurriedly towards Snape, glancing curiously at Hermione as she did so. She called out to Snape in a strong, booming voice. "Severus, we became worried when you took so long to return!"

Her appearance was striking. The long black robes she wore shone and rippled like satin at her feet. Her short gray hair contrasted sharply with her thick, black eyebrows. She halted before Severus as Hermione struggled to recall her face, positive she had seen the woman somewhere before.

"My apologies, Madam, I had to collect Miss Granger from her home," Snape said, turning his head to look at Hermione. "Miss Granger, allow me to introduce you to Amelia Bones, the former Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Hermione's lips parted in shock, her eyes bulging slightly. Recollection sparked in her mind, illuminating a memory of this woman's face in the *Daily Prophet* almost two years ago. She backed up unconsciously, putting more space between them. "This isn't possible," Hermione whispered shakily. "Madam Bones was murdered by Death Eaters... It's been documented..."

Hermione raised Snape's wand at them threateningly. "What are you playing at, Snape?" she asked, her eyes never leaving Amelia Bones' replica.

Madam Bones bristled slightly. "I'm very much alive, as you can plainly see. Perhaps you should allow an explanation before you come to any more premature conclusions?" said Amelia, her brow furrowed.

"All right then, now would be the time to explain," Hermione replied tightly, refusing to let her guard, or the wand, down.

Severus turned to face Hermione fully, his voice hard as though he were explaining something simple to an exceptionally dense student. "She is alive because I was able to remove her from danger before the Death Eaters arrived at her home. They succeeded in executing a full-fledged doppelganger of Amelia, believing it to be her. By all means, feel free to perform any revealing charms that you wish. She can remain within your sight for an hour, without imbibing any fluids, so you can be certain that Polyjuice Potion has no hand in this."

"And Emmeline Vance?" Hermione asked, remembering the attacks on both women were almost simultaneous.

Severus held her gaze, unfazed. "The Dark Lord's order to eradicate Emmeline was to be carried out immediately. I had no time to forewarn her or anyone from the Order. The command to remove Amelia's threat, however, was given more time for planning for she is a formidable adversary and well protected by an assortment of security charms as the Head of Magical Law Enforcement."

"I see. So you are holding her here for her own protection," said Hermione skeptically. "And if this is true, why wasn't the Order informed? And why keep her here? I would think headquarters would be more suitable and safe."

"There are spies other than myself in the Order, Hermione. Would you think it wise to parade a known dead woman around them openly?" he said, pausing to let the fact set in. "I brought her here to demonstrate to you where my loyalties lie, for it was not necessary for me to protect her. I could have told Albus I knew nothing of the plan to have her ambushed... As for these caverns, Albus located them himself, and where he would have hidden Draco and Narcissa had they agreed to go into hiding. There are few places as safe and secret as these mountains we hide under. It's a natural barrier of magic, completely impenetrable. No spells we perform while ensconced within these walls will leak through and betray our presence, nor will the most powerful location spell find us." He swept his arms jerkily in an exaggerated arch around the room. "This mountain, called Jura, is a sparsely populated Scottish Isle and will suit our purpose nicely."

Hermione shifted restlessly on her feet. She knew that for him to have gone to such lengths to convince her of his trustworthiness... that he was either telling the truth, or this was a well devised tactic by Voldemort to regain the Order's trust... only to betray them once more. "Madam Bones, perhaps you would be more comfortable on the couch?" she asked, wishing to speak with Severus alone.

Hermione saw Severus nod, almost imperceptibly, as Amelia glanced at him. Sighing resignedly, Madam Bones gathered her robes about her and sat on the couch nearest Snape, her eyes still trained disapprovingly on the outstretched wand in Hermione's palm.

Hermione flicked the wand towards the far wall, signaling for Snape to lead the way. He understood her silent request and obeyed without comment, snapping his robes in irritation. She was exceptionally difficult to convince, despite his best efforts to prove his honesty, and he was growing weary of her stubborn distrust.

She walked around where he halted to retain a visual of the woman on the couch, and cast a localized Silencing Charm around where they stood, ensuring their privacy.

She leveled her gaze at him, utilizing her peripheral vision to monitor Madam Bones. "What purpose did you intend to serve by bringing me here?" she asked, willing herself calm.

"You can think of nothing?" he asked sarcastically. "Or did you believe it was the pleasure of your company that drove me to you?"

She flushed at his insult. "Where's my wand?"

"Ask and you shall receive," he said cryptically.

Hermione lifted her other hand level with the one grasping Snape's wand. "Accio my wand!" she yelled, expecting her wand to come flying out of the distance. Much to her surprise, however, Snape's front robes fluttered as something sharp and invisible poked at her unsuspecting palm-- then fell harmlessly to the floor. "Clever," she said, repeating the charm and grasping her wand as it hit her palm. She Disillusioned it and placed it in her pocket.

Snape waited patiently for her to collect herself. His expression calm, he took control of the conversation. "Have you located the remaining Horcruxes?" he asked unexpectedly.

Hermione's eyes snapped up to his face in distress. "How... how'd you know about the Horcruxes?" Hermione stammered, shocked that he would know the very information she would die to protect.

"Funny, isn't it? That I should know of something so crucial to your success, and yet the Dark Lord was not informed that you are attempting to harvest them? That he's not seeking to protect his precious assets?" he said dryly. "I knew what ailed the Headmaster when I healed the wounds he acquired by destroying the Dark Lord's ring. Is that proof enough of my 'loyalty' for you to relax your wand hand?"

Hermione glanced at Amelia, who sat quietly on the couch. After a moment's deliberation, she lowered her arm, which was aching with the effort to keep it level with his chest.

He held out his palm towards her. "My wand, if you please?" She handed it to him, no longer doubtful of his intentions.

"In case you aren't aware, being a member of the Order, I had access to the residence of each member. A fact I have withheld from the Dark Lord for some time. I merely had tracking spells surrounding the perimeter of your home to inform me of when you left unattended and unarmed, for my safety.

"That I mean you no harm should be clear by the fact that you are not currently standing before the Dark Lord and *alive*," he stressed emphatically.

"Of course," answered Hermione, her response sincere.

"What progress has been made on the Horcruxes? Have you located any of them?" he pressed.

It was her turn to feel uncomfortable. She shifted her weight restlessly. "Yes and no," Hermione admitted reluctantly.

"A year and a half, and no progress? Have you even given the search any effort?" he asked, his tone condescending.

"Perhaps you'll recall that it took Dumbledore himself years of searching to find the ring and the locket, which turned out to be a hoax!" she said huffily, irritated he would imply that her research capabilities were lacking. She crossed her arms indignantly. "I've made plenty of progress, theoretically speaking..."

"Very well, we'll deal with that issue later," he said. "At the moment we must return you to the Order while you can still claim to have escaped. You have been here for little over an hour; any longer and they will suspect foul play. Tell them that either your defensive skills were underestimated and you escaped your captors, or that you cannot recall the events of the past twenty-four hours, and your Occlumency training will do the rest. I will contact you within twenty days."

He focused his gaze on her, the tone of his voice deepening with the severity of his words. "Also, it is absolutely imperative that our collaboration be kept secret; it would not do for Potter to learn the delicate nature of the situation."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You mean I am not to tell him of the 'sacrifices' made in his honour?" she asked accusingly.

"Yes, but don't let that trouble you."

"If you expect me to keep such a secret, then you've made a terrible mistake."

Snape deliberated with himself for a moment. "It could be said that you've already betrayed him when you suspected the truth and did not inform him of it then. Which would already make you guilty of deceit."

"How dare you," Hermione seethed. "I'm guilty only of trusting Dumbledore. I couldn't have gone spouting off about betrayal and manipulation when I wasn't positive my suspicions were correct. I'll not reduce myself to that level by conspiring with you."

"You must," he hissed.

"I won't betray our friendship!" Hermione shouted, her hair flinging helplessly about her face as she shook her head in refusal.

He stepped closer to her. "Don't force me to Obliviate you, Hermione. I will do it if necessary. Do not doubt that. I'll not let you leave here and destroy years of careful planning." His whisper was forceful, yet barely audible. "You are saying they died for nothing. Black, Albus, and his parents... all of them. If you speak of this to anyone and all of our efforts will have been in *vain*..."

"No, it is possible that they needn't have died at all. To not tell Harry the truth would seal my betrayal against him and betray everything I hold dear," she argued, instinctually resisting his persuasion.

"Think logically, Hermione," he said. "Turn your emotion off and focus. Do not let your sentiments cloud your better judgment."

He raised his hands to her arms, stroking them soothingly to help calm her. "If they hadn't perished by the Dark Lord's treachery, what would have motivated Potter to fulfill his destiny? Purity of heart, which Albus proved he has, does not compel one towards murder. Vengeance is the only motivational vehicle capable of vanquishing someone as strong as the Dark Lord. You know the prophecy; you've heard it yourself. Deep down you know this was necessary to prepare him for what must be done," he said softly, convincingly.

"But fate isn't so concrete," she whispered, "it's complex and ever-changing. Something of that nature isn't meant to be manipulated by mortal hands. The consequences for misinterpreting a prophecy, so deceptive in its ambiguity, are too great. And for all we know, it was interpreted wrong by Albus *and* Voldemort."

Hermione turned her head, staring blankly towards the woman who sat idly on the couch. "Harry's heart is pure, and he'll not become their sacrifice," she said lowly, her voice breaking.

"Listen to me; you cannot change what is beyond your control," he said evenly, resisting the urge to yell at her in his exasperation.

He felt her body shudder under his hands, as though suspended on a fine string. "Relax," he coaxed, pulling her lightly to his chest. "It is not my intention to harm Potter. I am required by binding magic to protect him, even if it means my life. Trust me, he will not be unprotected when the time to fight comes."

Hermione closed her eyes, trying to make sense of her conflicting thoughts and emotions. She understood his logic, but intuition told her it was flawed. Unwilling to acquiesce, her face contorted as though in pain.

"Close out your emotion," Snape's smooth voice interrupted her thoughts. His tone was hypnotic, comforting. The outcry of her soul wavered as doubt began to puncture her intuitive resolve.

Snape, sensing his goal was near, pressed on. "It would destroy Potter to know the truth, and he could turn his back on Wizardkind forever. It must be kept secret, or we become responsible for the Dark Lord's victory." He rubbed her lower back as her irregular breaths evened out, his fingers brushing at the ends of her long mane.

He drew her closer, hiding his face in her hair. "Aid me in finding the Horcruxes, and we will give Potter the tools necessary to defeat the Dark Lord," he said, his silken voice wooing her into complacency.

It was then that Occlumency came into effect. Hermione understood the process in which the mind shuts itself down for protection against outside forces, but never had she considered the alternative... That Occlumency could be wielded to protect oneself from their own thoughts. She began to feel drunken, a heady sensation of grounded sobriety that was completely detached from her own emotions.

Snape pulled away slightly to look down at her face. She opened her eyes and frowned at her reflection in his black-glass mirrors. The vision was disturbing, haunting, like a premonition.

Hermione absorbed his words, his rationality. Like a flicking switch, the turmoil within her soul ceased, pressing her emotion into the lowest abyss of her heart. It churned helplessly, simmering just beneath the surface. *I'm so sorry, Harry*, she whispered internally as tears welled in her eyes; pools of utter despair lingered with her pupils, then fell to their deaths with a bat of her lashes.

Snape's cool eyes flashed as he raised his hand and wiped the tears away from her expressionless face with a soft swipe of his palm.

The Search

Chapter 4 of 4

HBP compliant. What began as Snape's mad pursuit of Hermione through the dark alleys of her Muggle town, transforms into the pursuit of their destiny, and the fate of the entire wizarding world.

A/N: **Smoochies to my betas, Wartcap, Fervesco and Vaughn**, without whom my chapters would never see the light of your computer screen. Their talent with the English language, wonderful advice, and brilliant ideas are not taken lightly ... I'm grateful for every moment of their time they spend improving my chapters! ...Which is arduous work, believe me. You'd understand if you saw my pre-beta drafts. Yikes =)

Disclaimer: I don't own them. Yes, the disappointment hurts a little, but I'm coping quite well.

Chapter 4

The Search

But I know somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars. -Martin Luther King Jr.

Harry stood over the large table, scrutinizing the map of Hermione's city as the enchanted parchment churned through all possible escape scenarios. An adaptation of the Marauder's Map by Minerva, the map itself was immense, covering the width of the table. It was fully dimensional, every hill, home, and valley rising and revolving as the map readjusted its coordinates. The Granger's home and the last known Disapparation point were marked by a faint red glow. Remus pointed to the forest jutting up from the edge of the map. "They may have used the woods for cover; otherwise, I see no need in Disapparating from that side of town. Request: Highlight forest clearings over five square feet within a five-mile radius of Disapparation point A," ordered Remus as the map began to transfigure, coming to a halt at the forest outlying the city. Fourteen blue squares hovered above the map at different points. "Those mark the clearings large enough to land a broom or Apparate without splinching into a tree," said Remus.

"Get their coordinates and I'll notify the search parties," said Harry, searching his pockets for the small radio.

As his fingers wrapped around the device, a chair clattered against the ground. Harry's eyes shot up, scanning the room before finding the source of the disruption: a chair lay upended on the other side of the room. "Shhh!" he snapped irritably, his mind not registering the soft swooshing in the room that followed his outburst. He'd just resumed tending to his radio when a strangled cry of mingled joy and relief rang throughout the room.

Everyone huddled around the table turned simultaneously as Mrs. Granger raced by them, their cloaks fluttering in her crosswind. Their eyes reeled across the room towards her destination, settling on a tousled Hermione, the last remnants of ash from her journey via Floo wafting through the air. Mrs. Granger hurriedly joined her husband, who already had Hermione engulfed in his arms.

"Oh, my sweet baby," he choked, stroking her hair. "Shhh, it's all right. I'm here. Daddy's got you." Her father clutched his arms around her so tightly that he began lifting her to the tip of her toes. And, unfortunately for Hermione, her mother reached their side a moment later and pressed herself forcefully into their embrace as well.

"Mum, Dad, I'm all right. Honestly," came the distinct sound of Hermione's voice from within the huddle. The tension in the room dissipated as soon as Hermione's even voice broke the silence, reassuring the Order that she was physically unharmed. By the time Hermione began to protest, her mother was kissing her forehead like a possessed guppy and showing no signs of relenting. "Mum! Dad!... I can't breathe!" she gasped, pressing her way frantically out of their arms and appearing before the room more red-faced and dishevelled than she had after escaping Devil's Snare in first year.

She took a deep, calming breath and faced the room.

Hermione lay sprawled face-up on her bed at Grimmauld Place, gazing at the stained ceiling, utterly exhausted and suffering a throbbing headache. The image of her mother ensconced and trembling within her father's arms as she stepped through the Floo kept appearing in the forefront of her thoughts. She squeezed her eyes closed, rubbing her temples rhythmically.

The pain pounded more insistently in her ears, growing more and more excruciating. Sighing in frustration, she leaned onto her side and plucked a small bottle from the nightstand. Lying back down, she raised it up to her eyes, studying the fluid as it wavered gently, sparkling in the dim light. *Thank you, Mrs. Weasley*, she thought, grateful that the woman had the foresight to fetch a Calming Draught for her.

Hermione, resisting the impulse to soothe her forehead with the bottle's cool glass, placed her fingertips on the cork just as a brisk knock sounded on her door. She let out a low breath that caught in her throat, morphing into an irritated growl. She knew that knock and didn't attempt to disguise the irritation in her voice. "Go away, Harry."

"No, we haven't finished talking about this yet," came his muffled response.

"Yes, we have. I'm unharmed and I've already told you all I can. So, please, just leave me alone." Hermione knew it was useless to reason with him; that the hard note of determination in his voice meant he wasn't going to give up the interrogation until he was satisfied with her answers. Consequently, she wasn't surprised when her wards were forcibly removed and her door creaked open, despite her request to be left alone.

She sat up quickly on the bed, wincing as fresh pain sliced through her frontal lobe. She groaned softly and bent her head, cradling it gently in her palms. "Don't you have any respect for my privacy?" she asked dejectedly.

"Not today," he said and stepped into her room, closing the door quietly behind him. Harry replaced the Locking Charms and crossed the room to her bedside, perching himself sideways on the edge.

"Hey," he said quietly, reaching up to tug lightly on one of her wrists. She resisted him, raising her palms back to her face each time he succeeded in pulling one away. "C'mon, Hermione. Whatever you're holding in will only be harder to talk about if you wait 'til later," he said. "The night Cedric died, I didn't want to speak about it to anyone. But Dumbledore insisted that I talk, and I felt better after I let it out."

At the mention of his name, Hermione shuddered slightly. Opening her eyes, she peered unseeingly through her fingers out the window opposite her. It was still night outside, and the velvet galaxy twinkled mockingly before her, like one of Dumbledore's magnificent, midnight-blue robes.

Unnoticed by Harry, her fingers trembled ever so slightly as she lowered her hands to her lap, keeping her mental shield in place. "There is nothing else to tell you," she said calmly, staring off into the distance. At this point, his proximity alone was making her anxious, and she could feel the scrutiny of his gaze on her cheek.

"I see," said Harry, his disbelief clear. "Then explain to me again how you were found."

Hermione snapped her eyes to Harry, temper flaring within them. "I told you already that I've been Obliviated! So obviously I wouldn't know how he found me!" she huffed, her voice rising.

He narrowed his eyes, his voice accusatory. "Then why would you say *he* found me'? How do you know it wasn't *they* found me'?"

"I don't... It was only a figure of speech, Harry," she sighed quietly, knowing it was in her best interests to diffuse the situation.

Harry exhaled and rose from the bed, looking down at her worriedly. "That's funny, because your body language tells me different. Ever since you arrived here, you've been acting strangely. Now what is it you're hiding?" he demanded softly.

"Nothing!" she cried, leaping from the bed and glaring back at him. "After what I've just been through, how would you expect me to act? I'm shaken, and tired, so I just want to be left alone. Honestly, Harry, have I ever given you reason to doubt me before?"

He looked away, his expression troubled. "No, you haven't..."

Hermione sighed, flopping back on the bed. "I'm fine, honestly. Everything's all right. I've just been through a lot tonight. And although I don't remember it, I'm exhausted. So, please, just leave me alone for a while, okay?"

Harry lowered his head, his expression cloaked behind the shadows of his tousled black hair. "I understand how helpless you must feel right now, and I'm sorry for that. But I only want to help you..." He trailed off, feeling he should hold her; comfort her, but some second sense stopped him.

Hermione lay back down on her side, presented her back to Harry, and whispered, "I know."

An uncomfortable silence slid over their customary camaraderie. Harry fumbled awkwardly with his hands, a sense of foreboding compelling him to stay with her, to offer assurance where she felt there was none.

When no words to ease the tension found him, Harry reluctantly rose from the bed and headed for the door. With one last desperate look at Hermione's turned back, he departed.

A few days later:

Hermione jumped in her seat suddenly, yelping as her fork clattered to her plate.

"George!" Mrs. Weasley reprimanded, as the accused raised his palms in supplication.

"I didn't touch anything, Mum. I swear," George pleaded innocently, further convincing the woman of his guilt.

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips angrily, but before she could retort, Hermione pushed violently away from the table and squeaked that she needed to visit the loo.

She could hear Molly demanding to know what he had slipped into her pumpkin juice while he distracted Hermione as the door of the kitchen thwacked shut behind her.

Pushing George's plight from her mind, she dashed towards the loo, pulling the small, shiny compact from her back pocket as she ran. Whipping inside the room, she flung the door shut and hastily opened the mirror. The image of Severus glinted on the surface, his pale reflection surrounded by a nimbus of ornate pure silver. She raised the mirror to her lips, whispering urgently, "Hang on!"

She turned back to the door agitatedly and cast a few simple Locking and Silencing Charms, then relaxed, perching herself on the bathtub's edge. "Okay, I'm ready," she said, setting the mirror on the counter.

"Have you acquired the necessary items?"

"Yes," she answered breathlessly. "I've made duplicates so nothing is noticed missing."

Severus nodded his head in assent. "We must meet and discuss our plans. Tonight at midnight will suffice. If you have plans, I trust you'll break them," he said as he faded from the mirror.

"Wait!" she whispered agitatedly, but he had gone. Huffing exasperatedly, she snapped the compact closed as she rose from the tub and released the Charms. Anxiety pumped adrenaline into her system and hurried her step as she made her way to her room, intent on arriving prepared.

"Aw c'mon, Hermione. A night in Muggle London sounds brilliant," whined Ron, "it's only ten o'clock and we haven't gone out in ages. Besides, I deserve a break after the loads of work I've done all year. We're not animals, you know. We need to blow off steam!"

Hermione shot Ron a withering look as he gave his speech, recognizing his flailing arms as dramatic sign language to emphasize their dreary plight... fighting tirelessly against the forces of evil while leaving no time to frolic merrily about themselves.

"And what exactly is it that *you've* done this past year besides make yourself an attractive lump on the sofa, Ronald?" Hermione scoffed, turning her attention back to tidying up her desk.

Ron's ears went a bit pink as he crossed his arms over his chest and sputtered indignantly, "I've done plenty, I'll have you know!"

"Taking credit for everything Harry's done just because you were standing at his side when he does it doesn't count as accomplishing anything!" she snapped waspishly, straightening her back and planting her hands firmly on her hips. "I've told you, 'No, I'm not going out,' a hundred times. And that's final. So give it up already!"

"I do a lot for the Order, Hermione, if you'd ever care to notice. I'm in charge of Strategics, and it's not an accident that my ambush strategies have captured so many Death Eaters," said Ron, his face a livid shade of crimson.

Hermione growled in frustration, slamming a large folder onto the desktop. "I know!" she huffed, and paused, taking a few breaths to calm herself. "Listen, Ron, I didn't mean what I said... I've just been tense the past few days, is all. Honestly, I'm sorry I've been taking it out on you and Harry." She sighed heavily, rubbing her temples again.

With the color draining from his face, Ron walked over to Hermione, placing his hands cautiously on her arms, as though he feared she would strike out at him. "That's why I wanted you to go out, to try and help you relieve some stress," he said more confidently, certain a night out would benefit all of them.

Hermione looked up at him, recognizing the warmth and uncertainty in his eyes. Although she smiled affectionately up at him, his body jerked in fright when she raised her arms to hug him, thinking her intentions were much more sinister.

"Seems you'll never forget the day I clocked you," she said, smiling into his shirt, "but you deserved it, you prat."

Ron snorted in response and grinned cockily. "It was really your fault, you know. I'd call any girl a floozy that has the likes of Krum and McLaggen both pining after her, and who enjoys it to the degree that you do."

"Oh? You joined the club then, did you?" said Hermione, slapping at his back playfully as he jumped away from her and bounded for the door, making mock shrieks of

terror. As Hermione closed the door behind Ron, she giggled lightheartedly, then sobered, noting how alien her own laughter sounded in the quiet room. Leaving the memory of laughter behind, she sat in tense silence, awaiting the moment she was due to depart.

When the clock chimed eleven thirty, she stood and bound the large file securely, shrunk it, and placed it in her pocket. Ascending the hallway stairs stealthily, she prayed that her departure would go unnoticed. Explaining why she was leaving, but refusing to go out with Ron, was not something she looked forward to doing.

Thankfully, she met no one on her way out, nor did the portrait of Mrs. Black give away her great escape. She closed the door ever so delicately and sped to the street. Hermione stopped at the center, where the street lamp's dim rays barely reached, and disappeared into the night.

Severus stood at the mountainside entrance awaiting Miss Granger's arrival. He resisted the mild urge to sneer when she appeared, predictably, on the stroke of midnight. Instead, he nodded respectfully and ushered her inside, promptly sealing the entrance.

Her stance was rigid and mechanical as she passed him, wafting the delicate scent of lavender towards his long nostrils. Pleased by the scent and her nervousness, a small smile touched his lips as he followed her into the cave's depths.

The cavern was lit the same as before, only now a massive table stood adjacent to the blaze. Hermione could make out numerous sheets of parchment as she approached and narrowed her eyes, trying to make out the shapes.

"Gringotts?" she asked incredulously as she stooped at the table's edge. "Where did you get these blueprints?"

Severus paused at her side. "I found them in an ancient tome at Hogwarts. But the question is not where I received them, it's why I have them," he answered, pulling a chair out for Hermione.

She pulled the file from her pocket and restored it to its normal size as he took a seat next to her, looking at her fully for the first time since her arrival. Her eyes were red and slightly puffy. "You look awful," he said bluntly, but without a trace of malice in his voice.

"Gee, thanks," she said sarcastically, and opened the file cover with a bit more force than was necessary.

He cleared his throat, realizing his mistake. "What I meant to say was that it's perfectly natural to experience a certain... disquiet so soon after adjusting your thought processes. Turning Occlumency upon oneself demands an exhaustive amount of self-discipline. Equilibrium will come in time."

"Mm," was her noncommittal response, deciding she'd rather change the subject. "It may not be necessary for me to know, but I'd like to have some idea of where you got these blueprints. There is no record of them ever being written that I know of. They shouldn't even exist, and especially not in such a public location as Hogwarts."

"Ah, and just because *you've* never known them to exist means they've never existed, does it, Miss Know-it-all?" he asked.

Hermione turned to face him, holding his gaze. "If we are working on this together, we can have no secrets between us."

"And yet, for you to question everything I say is acceptable? I suggest you take what information I give you on the basis of trust and faith."

Without glancing at it, she lifted a page from the table. "It's funny you should say that, because the ink on this page is still fresh."

Severus turned his eyes to the print slowly, forming the explanation in his mind as he noted the telltale glint of moist ink on the parchment. "So it is. I've made a few adjustments." He sat for a few more moments, shifting uncomfortably when her glare narrowed and she made no move to speak.

Tapping his fingers on the wood impatiently, he spoke. "Very well, Miss Granger. There is a goblin family that the Dark Lord marked for death currently residing within this mountain that have requested total anonymity. Which, by the way, is the reason I evaded answering your inane questions truthfully," he said quietly, pausing for a moment to savor the barb and her resulting flush. "They have assisted me in mapping Gringotts' basic layout to the best of their knowledge, but there are miles of corridors under that building that haven't been explored in centuries. Much of what awaits us down there, we won't know until we've encountered it. I've made a list of things we should pack to carry with us just in case the unexpected should occur. If we are lucky, we will encounter nothing."

"Dragons..." she whispered apprehensively. "Er, shouldn't we take them with us? It would be safer, and we'd need their magic to open anything secured by goblins."

"No, we do not need them to accompany us," he said, shifting on his seat to lean across her. She tensed at his proximity as he pulled a sheet from the table and placed it before her. "I've had a theory for months that a Horcrux may lie deep within Gringotts. I also think Voldemort may have ensured its safety when he breached Gringotts security with the aid of Quirrell. I've gone over every possible method of entry and exit with the goblin family. A successful breach can be achieved without them present."

Hermione nodded hesitantly as she skimmed over the parchment, though not fully convinced that the goblins could have possibly informed Severus on centuries worth of magical security measures. "How are we to gain entry without detection? There is only one way into the bank, and we're sure to be noticed entering through those doors."

"The Dark Lord infiltrated the bank undetected as nothing more than vapor beneath Quirrell's turban. If he could direct that bumbling fool inside without detection, we can accomplish the same task."

Hermione sat back and exhaled a puff of air, fluttering the tiny hairs above her brow. "All right, when do we go in?"

He sat back and looked at her. "You'll need time to familiarize yourself with this information. And we may be down there for days. You'll need to arrange for a holiday."

She looked at him incredulously. "You can't be serious! What if... What if you're summoned?"

Severus leaned back in his chair. "It isn't unheard of for Death Eaters to go on holiday. We lead our own personal lives as well. All I need is an acceptable alibi, which I already have." He withdrew his wand, bundling his notes together and handing them to her. "You'll need at least one week to commit these to memory. If you need more time, inform me through the looking glass. And you'll need to shower before you return to me," he said, leaning forward and visibly inhaling her scent, "but use nothing perfumed."

Hermione scrunched her nose in consternation as she placed the parchments Severus had offered her into her pocket. "And why not?" she asked curiously.

"Because I've a gift for you," he said, pulling a small phial of murky fluid from his pocket and setting it on the table before her. He watched quietly as she lifted the fluid to her nose, sniffed the fluid experimentally then wrenched the phial away from her face, sputtering in disgust. He tsked mockingly. "Careful now. The sweet ambrosia you hold in your palm took months to accumulate."

"What in the blazes is this?" she gasped, corking the tube hurriedly. "It smells like wet dog."

Severus stood, a crooked smile pulling at his features. "It's goblin sweat."

A/N: There're no specifics regarding Severus and Hermione's Horcrux theories, or where they will be searched for, because I thought it'd be more fun to reveal them as we get there.