

To Put Him Out Of His Misery

by septentrion

How he wished he could bring Dumbledore back from the dead. This act had cost him much, not in his conscience or in his self-esteem, but in his life as a whole. Never, ever before had Severus felt so utterly alone.

Prologue: Introspection.

Chapter 1 of 7

How he wished he could bring Dumbledore back from the dead. This act had cost him much, not in his conscience or in his self-esteem, but in his life as a whole. Never, ever before had Severus felt so utterly alone.

This story is based on a seven drabble series that I've written for the livejournal community grangersnape100. Snapeophile advised me to write a long story out of them, and here it is. This chapter had been beta'ed by somigliana, with all my gratitude.

Once more, Severus reflected on the wretched circumstances which had led him to this depressed state. The outline of his life was rather simple: a bitter adolescence, where he featured as the Ugly Duckling for all of his contemporaries, except for a small group of his fellow Slytherins. He'd gained recognition of his worth by the Dark Lord, by being inducted within the Death Eaters' ranks. Disenchantment followed quickly when he realised he was being used, and that that wasn't real power. The Dark Lord was feared, but not liked. Dumbledore was both. Reading Machiavelli's book, *The Prince*, had opened his eyes about this reality. That's why Dumbledore was so sure of him; he knew Severus Snape would be where the power was.

His life under Dumbledore's wing wasn't unpleasant. The great wizard was an agreeable man, demanding in his own way, but when he hired him, he let him teach as he saw fit. Severus never managed to be loved, except perhaps by his mother, but he was feared. He wasn't suited for being the main leader, but he could exert power in the background. As long as his influence was acknowledged ...

When the Dark Lord came back to a "human" life, his allegiance for Dumbledore hadn't wavered immediately. The duel between his two masters in the Ministry had, however, introduced doubts in his mind. The Dark Lord had then made Dumbledore feel his power. It meant that he, Severus, could be on the wrong side. Potter was still alive, but he didn't count on that arrogant teenage boy to defeat such a great wizard.

A short while afterwards, Dumbledore encountered one of the Dark Lord's nasty hexes, which had blackened his hand. Severus had saved his life in extremis. He couldn't help but think that the old man may not be that powerful after all. The Unbreakable Vow he made with Narcissa sealed his decision: if he had to kill Dumbledore, he would do it without hesitation or remorse. His life was at stake, and the Order would be on the losing side without the Headmaster.

However, he couldn't hide that his life was forfeit in the Dark Lord's eyes from Dumbledore. That had gained him the much wanted Defence Against the Dark Arts teaching position – it had been a bribe from the old coot. Well, he'd taken the bribe, but killed him nonetheless.

Now, more than ever, he was the Dark Lord's favourite, and he found that he didn't like it one bit. How he wished he could bring Dumbledore back from the dead. This act had cost him much, not in his conscience or in his self-esteem, but in his life as a whole. He was reviled by the wizarding community; a price was on his head, and he wasn't free to wander wherever he wanted anymore. The Death Eaters were too jealous of him to be trusted. He knew that he'd had to murder the old man, lest his Unbreakable Vow killed him, but now, after months of being cautious to extremes, he craved companionship. He wanted someone in his life to whom he could speak freely without fear of being backstabbed. Never, ever before had Severus felt so utterly alone.

Thanks for reading this. Constructive criticism is welcome.

Chapter One: Chance Meeting, or Lucky Meeting?

Chapter 2 of 7

Severus is given a task by the Dark Lord. He will find on his way Harry, Hermione and Ron

Disclaimer: see prologue.

Chapter reread by the very efficient Somigliana. She's a real support for authors.

Severus entered the room where the Dark Lord spent most of his time with his usual silent and gliding gait. He didn't feel particularly happy about being summoned, but it was a reprieve from his dull, everyday life. Perhaps his Lord would tell him something, or give him an assignment that would pull him out of his stupor, that would prevent him from thinking too much about his state of mind.

"My Lord." He bowed to the scarlet-eyed man who was standing near a velvety armchair. "Bellatrix." He nodded to a dark-haired woman standing on the other side of the armchair.

"Severus," the other man greeted him.

"How may I be of service to you, my Lord?"

This was the clichéd question a Death Eater was expected to ask his master when summoned, especially when summoned before such a thin audience.

"Severus, I have a task for you. I need you to retrieve an object, an object that is very precious to me."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Bellatrix glaring daggers at him. It meant that the mission was important, and that she was jealous. It also meant failure would be sanctioned by death. Well, he wasn't depressed enough to serenely consider his own demise, so he paid close attention to what the Dark Lord told him next.

"I suppose that you do remember, Severus, what I have told you about the steps that I have taken to guard myself against mortal death? You and Bellatrix are the only ones who know what it was that I did to ensure my survival, whatever happened." He waited for a sign of acknowledgment from his servant and then resumed. "One of Potter's friends, a Mudblood girl, was spotted near the place where I have hidden one of my Horcruxes. I have therefore checked every location where I put them. I found, to my greatest displeasure, that two of them were missing. Bellatrix guards Helga Hufflepuff's cup, Nagini is quite safe at my side. I need you to retrieve Rowena Ravenclaw's codex from the orphanage where I grew up. It is concealed by a charm amongst the rafters, so that it looks like wood and a part of the roof structure."

The Dark Lord headed towards the hearth, interrupting his speech for a few minutes to answer Nagini's hisses, then took back his place near the armchair and resumed speaking in human fashion.

"The building itself looks abandoned and is protected by Muggle-Repelling Charms. Once inside, do not let yourself be distracted by the female singing that you will hear; it emanates from the paintings of sirens hanging all over the place. If you ever follow their song, you will touch the paintings and be absorbed into them. Climb up the stairs until you reach the door of the attic. You must cut your palm and let it bleed, and only with your hand bleeding will you be able open the door, or else you will be glued to the handle until you die from starvation. Be careful in the attic; I have placed several Runespoors there, and they might have reproduced. Do not kill them, but do not let yourself be bitten either. The codex is hidden near the second rafter on the right. With your still bleeding hand, you will be able to touch the rafter until you find the codex. It will regain its normal appearance then, and you will be able to pick it up. Do not dally and bring it back to me straightaway."

"I'll do as you ask, my Lord," was Severus' answer. Then the Dark Lord turned to Bellatrix; it seemed to be the cue she was waiting for.

"I believe, as I have already suggested to you, my Lord, that it would be more efficient if Severus didn't go alone. What if he's caught in a trap in spite of all your warnings, my Lord? If I were with him, I could help him to get out of it."

His master's eyes were on him. "I believe, Severus, that she has made a good point. What say you? Do you think that you need support to fulfil your mission?"

Severus pondered what his answer would be. He didn't want Bellatrix with him; he was sure that she was plotting to get some harm come his way. She may even be plotting a way to get rid of him permanently; she wouldn't have any more rivals for the Dark Lord's right hand job if that were the case.

"My Lord, those traps that you set are clever, but you know that I am very proficient at this sort of thing. And too much attention could be drawn to us if we both went. Let's not forget that I know the Muggle world rather well, and I have the ability to blend in that Bellatrix, however gifted she is, doesn't have."

"I agree, Severus," the Dark Lord answered. "You will go alone no later than tomorrow."

"As you wish, my Lord." Severus bowed and withdrew. He wanted to smirk at Bellatrix, but the way his master was placed, he would catch his silent taunting.

So Potter was after the Dark Lord's Horcruxes? He would never have thought the boy would be clever enough to be able to find and destroy them and remain alive. Or more probably it was Dumbledore who had found the two which had been destroyed. That would explain that strange black hand of his. He had wondered at the time what had led the Headmaster to come across such a powerful jinx. It had obviously been the Dark Lord's work; only he had the power and knowledge to use such magic. Severus had just never made the connection between his master's Horcruxes and Dumbledore's injury until now.

He sighed inwardly. He didn't like this mission one bit. It would be only too easy to get caught either by the Dark Lord's traps even for someone forewarned or by the Order, if indeed Potter was interested in the old orphanage. Not to mention that those pieces of Dark Magic were responsible, in a way, for his current state. If you thought about it logically, if the Dark Lord had contented himself with being mortal, he would have died when he'd tried to kill the brat Potter, and he, Severus, would still be a respected Hogwarts teacher. He'd even begun to miss the dunderheads; they'd be better than the wall of his house! And his fellow Death Eaters were too preoccupied with their own ambitions to be reliable acquaintances. At least he had been able to converse with McGonagall not to say quarrel and in all honesty, she would never have used what he let her see of himself against him. That was it, he needed a Gryffindor in his life, but currently there was only Wormtail.

With a mental jerk, he straightened his thoughts and got prepared for his foray in the Muggle world.

In the chilly air of the March evening, dressed in black trousers, jumper and jacket, and looking just like an ordinary Muggle, Severus was treading to the orphanage. The outside door was easily opened. He slipped in the dark and damp corridor and shut it behind him. As soon as it was done, he heard the sirens' chant. He put his hands on his ears and reached the end of the corridor as quickly as possible. Once in the next room, he breathed with relief. For a short while. The outside door was being opened, and he could hear voices, young voices. Potter and his friends. He dashed into a closet nearby and stood still.

Hermione just had time to grab the boys by their collars and to shove them forwards to the door at the end of the corridor. The trio came into the room where the closet hiding Severus was situated.

"What was that for, Hermione?" whined Ron. He was rubbing the nape of his neck. Harry was doing the same in silence.

"I saved your necks, Ron. Those paintings were enchanted to attract people. Had you touched them, you'd probably have died."

"And you were miraculously immune to them, of course?" Irony was dripping from Ron's words.

Hermione rolled her eyes with annoyance. When had her very attractive best friend turned into an irritating boyfriend? He had taken to contesting everything she said. If that went on, he would soon go back to his place as her best friend, and no more. Well, now wasn't the moment to ponder her love life.

"That enchantment was a very usual one in Antiquity. It was used in wizarding households to distract strange men from the gynaecium, or if you prefer, the harem. That's why only men are sensitive to it."

This time, it was Ron who rolled his eyes, wondering why his girlfriend felt the need to be such the show-off. He didn't realise that, had he held his tongue a bit more, he would have escaped the lecture. In the meantime, Harry had already reached the staircase and was calling for them. Ron joined him at once, but Hermione claimed that she wanted to have a closer look at the enchantment of the paintings, and that she would join them later. She soon found herself alone on the ground floor, but she didn't make it to the sirens' corridor, for a flash of red light had struck her.

A/N:

"I suppose that you do remember, Severus, what I have told you about the steps that I have taken to guard myself against mortal death?" Adapted from Chapter 33, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

A codex is an ancient text in the form of a book (Oxford OAD).

Thanks for reading and/or reviewing this story.

Chapter Two: An Improbable Alliance

Chapter 3 of 7

A deal, a success and a quandary.

Disclaimer: see prologue.

Thanks to Somigliana for correcting my mistakes and giving her input in this story.

When she woke, Hermione found herself seated on an old chair, tied with ropes, in what looked like a basement. By the look of it, it was probably the basement of the orphanage. Only two candles were lighting the place, giving it the dim and fearful atmosphere of a horror film. She thought that she wouldn't be surprised to see a masked man holding a big knife suddenly appear in front of her. Indeed, a man appeared in front of her, but he wasn't masked he was holding a wand.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," Severus said in that silky voice of his.

Hermione's eyes grew as big as saucers, showing her fear to her captor. He was going to extract information from her, then kill her and her friends, and she couldn't do anything to prevent him from acting. She remembered what she knew of Legilimency, and she averted her eyes. Her ex-professor cupped her chin with a bit of brutality and forced her to look at him. She shut her eyes in hope that he would only kill her ... she didn't want to be tortured she had no idea if she could keep Harry's secrets in such circumstances, and she wasn't eager to find out. She heard him sigh deeply.

"I'm not going to kill you, Miss Granger, unless you leave me no other choice. We don't have much time, so I'll get straight to the point. I want to make an agreement with you, one that would be beneficial to both of us."

He sighed once more; her distrust in him was so blatant.

"Don't even think to scream for help. I put an Imperturbable Charm on the door; no one outside the basement can hear us," he told her, when it was obvious that she had regrouped enough and was thinking of this. "I know why you and your friends are here. You want to get the Dark Lord's Horcruxes and destroy them. I know what they are, and where they are. My information could help you to gain some valuable time in your quest, don't you think?"

Hermione was horror-struck. If Snape knew what they were doing here, then Voldemort also knew. And it had taken them nine months to find only one Horcrux while the tyrant wasn't in the know. Her mind became frantic. On one hand, they could do with Snape's information, but on the other hand, he could be misleading them. It struck her as odd, however, that he hadn't killed her, or tortured her, or tried to extract information from her. She wasn't in a situation where she could make demands; she was at his mercy. Perhaps she could stall a bit ...

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing much, Miss Granger. If the Dark Lord is defeated, I want you to testify in my favour in front of the Wizengamot."

"That's all?" she asked, incredulous.

"It is more than you think. You are one of Potter's best friends, and you will be a hero; your word will weigh heavily in the decision of the court. You will help me to spend as few years in Azkaban as possible."

"You don't want to escape, hide, or something?" She really had a hard time believing that he would content himself with something so easy, so undemanding.

"And pull a Pettigrew? I think not. I want to walk in the outside unimpeded and as myself." He realised then and there that power wasn't as important as it used to be to him.

A slight trace of weariness could be heard in his voice. That and her weak position of the moment made Hermione accept his terms. Yet she wouldn't let him know of her decision too quickly.

"I still need reassurance that you're not going to betray us." The words 'like you did with Dumbledore' were hanging in the air between them.

"That won't be too difficult, Miss Granger. The first proof of my good-will will be to allow you to leave alive. But before that, I'll have to duplicate Rowena Ravenclaw's codex and take it to the Dark Lord. It will be your responsibility to give me access to the object for five minutes, and to keep your friends otherwise occupied while I do so. If I let you leave alive AND with the original codex, will it be proof enough?"

"I think so," Hermione said slowly. "However, how will you explain the lack of a piece of soul in the codex to ... You-Know-Who?"

The question was a very valid one. How indeed? The Dark Lord would have a way to check. He'd have to do some quick research before he went back to his master.

"I'll find a way. That question shouldn't bother you, Miss Granger," Severus answered quite abruptly.

Hermione then did something very impulsive: she volunteered information to a Death Eater.

"I know the incantation to check if there's a soul or a piece of soul in an object or a living being. It's the same to make a Horcrux."

Later, she would call it 'gut instinct'; her rational mind would never wrap itself around the fact that she had told him this, although he'd had no idea she was in possession of such knowledge. She would always be satisfied, however, to have rendered him speechless and gobsmacked. He managed just in time not to look like a fish.

"How such a prim and proper girl like you could ever know such foul magic?"

"The library at Grimmauld Place," she whispered.

Trust the swot to put her nose in any library, no matter how unsavoury it might be.

"And what would this incantation be?"

"*Anima Dispergere*. The only difference between making a Horcrux and checking if there's one somewhere is the wand movement. You speak the incantation while moving the tip of your wand from your heart to the object to make a Horcrux, and you tap the object with your wand to check for the presence of a Horcrux."

Severus had listened to her intently and memorized what she'd said. It was now time to set her free.

"Well, Miss Granger, I will now let you go. Do you agree to testify in my favour, should the Dark Lord be defeated, in exchange for information from me to help you defeat him?"

"I agree," she answered simply.

Severus wished a third person was with them, so that he could have bound the girl with an Unbreakable Vow. He would just have to trust her Gryffindor tendencies of honour instead. He waved his wand, and the cords which were tying her fell apart. He literally thrust her wand into her hand and took a step back from her. She got up slowly, unsure if she would be able to stand, and she found she could feel her limbs. She didn't quite turn her back on him when she reached and climbed the stairs. She went into the room where she had left the boys not a moment too soon, for they emerged from the staircase leading to the upper floors a few seconds after. Harry was holding Ravenclaw's codex in his right hand.

"Where've you been?" Ron asked without preamble, an accusatory edge to his voice.

"Sorry, I've been taking in the enchantment on the paintings, it was so fascinating ..."

"Never mind, we could have been killed, and Madame was examining an enchantment."

'That was it,' Hermione thought. Ron would be back to his place as a best friend no later than tonight.

"You can't exactly reproach me for studying something that could be useful to ward us against Death Eaters!"

Harry felt it was high time that he intervened.

"There's no need for quarrelling. Actually, it was a good thing you didn't come with us, Hermione. I had a hard enough time keeping the Runespoors away from Ron. The codex itself wasn't that well concealed; it was more of a game compared to that expedition in the cave last year."

"Harry," Hermione said, "don't you think it'd be a good idea to search Voldemort's old room, just in case? I can stay here and check the codex for any further traps. You shouldn't need more than a few minutes, and then we'll go."

"That's a very good idea, Hermione. Ron and I will just do that."

Ron sent her a dark look before going with Harry.

The boys had barely disappeared from the room, when Severus was at Hermione's side. He snatched the old book from her hands before she could say anything and put it down on a dusty table. Silently, he waved his wand above the codex, chanting some spell under his breath, and a duplicate appeared next to the original. It was nothing more than a dim whitish light at first, then the light darkened, became solid and took the form of Ravenclaw's possession. He checked the copy and put it in the inner pocket of his cloak.

"I will now take my leave, Miss Granger. I'll let you know as soon as I have useful information for you. For now, I can only tell you that Bellatrix Lestrange is responsible for the safety of Helga Hufflepuff's cup."

Hermione blinked, and he was gone. 'What a strange meeting,' she thought. She looked at the innocent-looking codex on the table; it was an illuminated Bible. Even though the current wizarding world wasn't very religious, she remembered that it hadn't always been the case. The proof was the existence of a monk's ghost at Hogwarts. She gingerly poked the sacred book with her wand and uttered the dreadful incantation, "*Anima Dispergere*". A rainbow-like light emanated from the object; the Bible was proved to be a Horcrux.

Ron and Harry arrived just in time to see the light fading into nothingness. Hermione had told them about the incantation, and they knew at once what she'd been doing.

Harry shivered at the idea of the spell escaping his best friend's mouth; Voldemort had intended to speak it, had he succeeded in killing him all those years ago.

Ron stammered, "So, this is a ...?" He couldn't bring himself to speak the word, as if the reality of it had just sunk in his mind.

Hermione nodded. "Perhaps we shouldn't linger, now that we've found what we were looking for?"

A few minutes later, they were at Grimmauld Place. The Horcrux was tossed in the hearth where it burnt quickly. Hermione felt a pang to destroy such a fine artefact, but so many lives were at stake; she couldn't afford to be sentimental. She had some thinking to do, especially how to use the information she got from Snape without raising the suspicions of her friends.

For his part, Severus was in a quandary. He had to bring his master the fake codex before the night ended if he wanted to live, but it lacked something essential: a piece of soul. How to pull off this charade?

Thanks for reading, and for leaving your opinion if you want to.

Chapter Three: Traps For A Dark Wizard

Chapter 4 of 7

How Severus fooled the Dark Lord.

Disclaimer: see prologue.

Chapter re-read twice by somigliana. Thanks!

Severus was walking aimlessly in a nocturnal London, thinking about his quandary: how to fool the Dark Lord and to make him believe that the faux codex, which would soon be in his possession, was his Horcrux?

He turned the question in his mind as many times as he turned street corners. Two hours later, he still hadn't found a solution. Or rather, the obvious one that had come to him was just unthinkable. If he implemented it, he knew that he wouldn't be whole anymore, an idea that he abhorred with passion. It was one thing to want to live at any cost, but to part from a piece of himself ... he almost felt like those religious people who believed that if they were buried with a limb lacking, said limb would still be lacking when God resurrected them; a lost piece of oneself was lost forever, with no hope of ever being recovered.

Two hours of thinking in circles finally convinced him that he valued his life more than not being whole, and thus his decision was made: he would create his own Horcrux to fool the Dark Lord. All he needed now was a victim. A Muggle would do, he decided, and prey wasn't rare in London, even at this late hour. He set his mind into hunting mode.

He spotted a teenager, obviously a junkie, who was wandering alone, lost in his inner world. It was easy to drag him to a quiet place a park, and to kill him *Avada Kedavra* had been a long-time friend for Severus. What was more difficult was the next part. Anticipation and fear of the unknown had him in an adrenaline-induced stupor. He noticed that his mind had dissociated what he was doing from what he was feeling. It was like his first kill.

With a slightly trembling hand, he placed the tip of his wand to his heart and spoke the incantation: *Anima Dispergere*." He moved his wand in a gracious arc from his heart to the codex that he had put on a nearby bench. A white glow followed the tip of his wand, like the luminous path of a fairy. The beam then seemed to embed itself in the codex. All the while, Severus felt as if a physical part had been wrenched from him. He knew it was only a spiritual part that had been torn away from him, but he felt the loss just as acutely.

Suddenly, things were back to normal. Severus stood, exhausted, in the London night. He could now go to his Master and present him with a Horcrux, while his mind buried the horrible act that he'd just committed deep in the depth of his subconscious.

Severus was in presence of the Dark Lord for the second time in two days, but he'd never felt such fear before. He observed the Death Eater etiquette and bowed to his master.

"Severus," the Dark Lord acknowledged him. "I suppose that you have succeeded in the task that I had assigned to you?"

"Indeed, my Lord. Here it is." Severus held out his hands, the codex lying on his open palms.

The Dark Lord took the ancient book with reverence and went out of the room to put it somewhere safe. Severus knew to wait for his return. He didn't wait long.

"I shall reward you, my faithful servant. I have acquired a first edition of Cornelius Agrippa's book *De Occulta Philosophia*. It will be a gift to you from your Lord."

Severus was speechless. That book, in its first edition, was impossible to find; it'd been censored by the Ministry nearly as soon as it'd been published. Dark Magic was the official reason. That was really a great reward, for the knowledge contained in this book would allow Severus to use the elements as he'd like.

"I am most grateful, my Lord," he managed to say.

"You may retire now, Severus. You will meet with Bellatrix in the morning for the details of our next action; she will lead it with your help."

Severus bowed. He went back to his home to glean a few hours of sleep before he went in search of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Severus found Bellatrix in her home the next morning. It must have been as Unplottable as Grimmauld Place was, for no Auror had ever found it.

She must have received orders from the Dark Lord, for she let him in without a comment, just a grim face. It was clear that her dislike of him hadn't wavered a bit. She led him to a small and uncomfortable lounge. She didn't lose time with niceties and tackled him immediately about the Dark Lord's project to abduct Kingsley Shacklebolt in order to use a part of him in a Polyjuice Potion. The final goal of the action was to approach and murder the Prime Minister.

Bellatrix and Severus were both leaders of the group which would abduct the Auror the following week, when he would go and visit his mother in St. Mungo's Hospital, but one could feel in the air around them that each wanted to be the only leader. They argued about every detail who would go with them, who would watch guard, who would stun Shackbolt, who would take him to the place they had yet to chose, etc. In their rivalry, they came to use petty arguments.

"Really, Bellatrix, I wonder how it is that the Dark Lord still trusts you enough to conduct such an important operation."

"He trusts me enough to take care of one of his most precious ... objects ..."

Severus interrupted her, "I can only hope that you have hidden it well, and that Potter will not be able to put his hands on it."

Bellatrix looked utterly outraged; she hadn't seen the trap Severus had set up for her. "It is hidden in this very house, where only a Black or a Lestrage can come in uninvited." She shut up abruptly, realising what information she'd told a man that she perceived as a rival.

Severus felt elated at Bellatrix's confession. He had very useful information to pass to Miss Granger. And the Order happened to have a Black in their ranks Nymphadora Tonks; Bellatrix had overlooked that fact. He ensured then that the meeting ended quickly, left the house and began to think about a way to contact Miss Granger without either of them being caught.

The simplest things were always the better, Severus mused. He Charmed his letter into a copy of the *Daily Prophet* that only the girl would be able to turn back to its original form. He wrote her that he would meet her at two a.m. tonight in her parents' garden.

She understood the message, for she was there, pacing silently on the terrace. She startled at the sound of Apparition, but she was soon composed again.

"Good evening, Miss Granger. I am glad to see you here."

He could see that she was on her guard.

"Well, sir, you asked me to be there. Do you have something new to tell me so soon after our last meeting?"

"You never thought that I would uphold my part of the bargain, did you?" He saw in her eyes that he was right and felt an unexplained sadness. "As you can see, I've kept my word. Helga Hufflepuff's cup is in Bellatrix Lestrage's custody, as I have already told you. It is in the house where she is currently residing. I also know that only a Black or a Lestrage can enter the house without a formal invitation. You will need Nymphadora Tonks for this task." He wouldn't tell her about Shackbolt's planned abduction; it'd be the same as advertising his treachery to the Dark Lord in the *Daily Prophet*.

Amazement could be read on Hermione's features as she took in the precious information she was fed with. "Why are you telling me this? Excuse me, but I really have a hard time to believe you'd betray Vold ... You-Know-Who just in exchange for my testimony. It doesn't make sense."

"And does wanting to quit the Death Eaters make sense? I told you that I want freedom. Should I have to tell you in Chinese to have you understand this?"

"What is it about being a Death Eater that makes you want to quit?"

Severus knew the answer to her question, but he wasn't ready to tell her. Not everything at least. He sighed and began pacing. "I do not want to spend my life watching my back permanently. Being a Death Eater means any of them envy you when you are in favour with the Dark Lord, and dreams to see you fall from your pedestal only to take your place." He wasn't about to tell her about his loneliness.

Hermione's doubts, born of too much thinking about their last encounter in the basement of the orphanage, were swept away for good in the darkness of the night. A feeling she'd never thought that she'd have for her loathsome ex-teacher was rising in her heart: compassion. She could hear his longing for a more "normal" life in his voice.

"How can I reach you?" she asked him. "You'll want to know when we're going to retrieve the Horcrux, so that you'll be occupied somewhere else."

"Just use the same spell I have used on my letter."

She nodded, and then he was gone, as abruptly as the last time, without so much as a good-bye.

Their next meeting was requested by her. She could just have sent a letter to tell him they were going to make their move Sunday evening, but she wanted to see him again, like a kind of reassurance that he wasn't going to change his mind again, that he was now on their side for whatever reason of his. She also wanted to ask him about an obscure spell Death Eaters had used against two Aurors. It was a spell which could physically bind two persons, making them Siamese twins. She wanted to know the counter-curse, just in case. That unexpectedly led to a debate about the Dark Arts and their applications. Severus was so in need of conversing with a human being that he couldn't help but immerse himself in the conversation. Hermione never imagined that he was involved, though from afar, in the assassination of the Prime Minister.

After that, every upcoming event was used as an excuse to meet: the success of the mission at Bellatrix Lestrage's home, the destruction of the Horcrux, preparations for the onslaught on Voldemort's hide-out, etc. Before they realised it, they were on a first name basis. They didn't quite give up the formality in their meetings, but a growing warmth emanated from their words. When Hermione told Severus the date of the attack of the Order, each occupied the other's mind full time. But the moment wasn't right to act upon their barely acknowledged feelings; the time had come to set a trap for the Dark Wizard.

Chapter Four: He Was Never Dead

Chapter 5 of 7

The plan to defeat the Dark Lord is put into motion.

Disclaimer: see prologue.

Chapter reread numerous times by my beta, Somigliana. She's made it readable

Severus never knew how Granger convinced the Order to search the Death Eaters' properties. Each of them was thoroughly investigated. Luckily, Bellatrix Lestrage's house was the first to be targeted. The female Death Eater was caught off guard and didn't have time to relocate Helga Hufflepuff's cup elsewhere. She herself managed to

escape in the nick of time before she was completely surrounded by a vengeful Potter, an irritated Shackbolt who still remembered how she'd hurt him in the Department of Mysteries, a very determined McGonagall, and a niece Tonks who dreamed of ridding her family tree of evil relatives. She had to run to the courtyard, slipping between two of her assailants, where she could Apparate to the Dark Lord's mansion and inform him about the Order's attack on her house. She had had to leave the Dark Lord's Horcrux behind, a mistake for which she'd nearly paid with her life. It had already been a fortnight since she'd admitted her failure to the Dark Lord, and she hadn't shown any sign of recovery yet.

The Dark Lord himself had gone to Bellatrix's house after the Order left; he could only observe that the cup was missing. Potter had once more succeeded in thwarting his plans. What he didn't know was that Bellatrix's house-elf had been taken by the Aurors. The creature had been "interrogated" until he'd given the location of Voldemort's dwelling. Even Ron, who could be so ruthless sometimes, was horrified at the idea: to get a house-elf to spill his master's secrets, you'd have to torture the creature to death, which was what probably what had happened.

However, the information was useful, and they were going to use it. A plan was hatched to attack Voldemort and to get rid of him for good. Careful preparations were made to counter every known Intruder Charm, to take on Inferi and magical creatures. Everybody had to take part in intensive spells practice and duelling sessions until the attack, which was planned for June.

Hermione, against her logical mind, but in tow with her heart, told Severus everything about the Order's plans. They then hatched their own plan to further the Order's one. It was decided that Severus would dose or spray as many Death Eaters as possible with Sleeping Draught to diminish the resistance. He would also unlock the main door if he could manage it and attack the building's defences from the inside five minutes before the Order's attack, which was planned for one a.m. Before they separated from each other at that last meeting before the battle, he asked her if she intended to take part in the action.

"Of course," she answered. "I can't let Harry down."

"I wish that you would remain behind," he pleaded.

"You know I can't. Would you remain behind if I asked you, Severus?"

"No."

"Be careful, and try to live," were her last words to him. A watery screen shielded her eyes.

"No, you be careful." He showed how important it was to him by hugging her briefly before he left.

The next days were busy ones for Severus: he needed to brew large amounts of Sleeping Draught and to retrieve his Horcrux. The brewing wasn't much trouble; he could do it at Spinner's End. He was, after all, living there alone now. Finding the faux Ravenclaw codex was another matter altogether. He took to wandering in the Dark Lord's mansion under the pretext of "socializing", as was fitting for a Death Eater of high rank. He happened to overhear a conversation between Wormtail and Merckbank, the guardian of the Dark Lord's safe. He hadn't known that his Master owned a magical safe which could only be opened by a password uttered in Parseltongue. The first solution to this problem to open the safe that occurred to Severus' mind was to fetch Potter; definitively not a practical solution. Then he blessed his Muggle heritage: he would use a tape recorder. It took him a few more days to find the opportunity to hide the Muggle device near the safe and two days more of waiting for the Dark Lord to use his safe. At last, Severus had the password on tape; he tried it: it worked. He was now ready for the Order's attack.

On the evening of the twenty-first of June, Severus pretended that he wanted to have a stroll in the park after dinner. His aim was actually to place a few counter-spells on the enchantments that were defending the Dark Lord's property. He found that a bunch of Inferi had been set free, like guard dogs. He dodged them stealthily, but they prevented him from staying as long as he'd have liked in the park.

His next action was to retrieve the codex from the Dark Lord's safe. He used the old radio cassette recorder that he'd inherited from his father to open the door. The Horcrux was simply placed on a shelf with just a Warning Spell on it. Severus undid the spell, took the book, and slipped it in his pocket. It was time for the third part of the plan.

He strolled in the mansion's corridors, discreetly spraying the Death Eaters he met with Sleeping Draught. He counted thirty out of the usual fifty that were constantly present there. That should make the Order's attack very much easier.

Finally, he Disillusioned himself before going back into the park where he opened the gate slightly. The onslaught was scheduled in five minutes.

The rest of the night went by in a blur. The Order's attack was swift and almost brutal. They were a bit detained by the Inferi, but a strong fire sent at them by Moody had them turned to ashes within ten minutes. It was time enough though to raise the alarm and for Voldemort to summon more Death Eaters. If it hadn't been for Severus' treason, the Order would have been quickly outnumbered. In the meantime, Severus wasn't idle and attacked as many of his "co-workers" as he could without betraying himself. Jets of light were flying around him, giving a multi-coloured shine to the night. Smoke was rising from everywhere in the building. It was difficult to distinguish friend from foe.

"Ouch," somebody said after bumping into his Disillusioned form. He recognized the small stature of Alecko. She soon fell to the floor, unconscious. Severus then surveyed the scene unfolding in front of him. He saw Emmeline Vance's brother taunting Amycus, sending red and purple jets of light at the Death Eater, his face screaming for revenge upon his sister's murder. He heard insults being hurled through the room; cries of "Murderer", "Bastard", or "Filth" brushed his ears.

Suddenly, he spotted Hermione. She was battling with Bellatrix Lestrange.

"The Mudblood doesn't know how to play. Don't you know the Dark Lord's rules? Filth like you will be eradicated from our world." She slashed at Hermione with a white spell that had her falling backwards. The young woman didn't waste time to get back on her knees, intending to stand up, but the mad woman clearly had the upper hand. She probably would have killed the young woman on the spot had the rumour that Harry Potter was facing the Dark Lord at the other side of the vast room not reached them. It seemed as if everyone was holding their breath all of a sudden. This, however, lasted only a few seconds, and soon, Bellatrix resumed her duel. "It's a pity I don't have time to torture you, Mudblood. Maybe if you're still alive at the end ..." Hermione wisely kept her mouth shut, but the female Death Eater seemed like she didn't need to be egged on to go on taunting her. She was hardly even deterred by the inhuman howl of her Master when Harry sliced Nagini with a well placed *Sectumsempra*.

Hermione was on her knees now, cradling her bleeding wand hand. Bellatrix raised her wand and pointed it directly at Hermione. "I'll kill you now, filthy Mudblood. *Avada Kedavra*."

Severus didn't think twice he threw himself on the path of Bellatrix's curse. The green light cancelled his Disillusionment Charm, and both women gasped at the sight of his unmoving body. Rage invaded Hermione, and Bellatrix found herself being brutally thrown against the wall. At the same moment, general panic seized the Death Eaters' ranks at high speed: the unthinkable had happened Harry Potter had destroyed their Lord. Yes, destroyed was the right word: the boy had cast an enhanced form of the *Reducto* spell on his Nemesis, and what was left of the tyrant was rather ... gory. How Harry had managed to take on the Dark Lord had been lost on Hermione, Severus and Bellatrix, the last two being unconscious.

Many Death Eaters tried to flee, but to no avail. The Ministry had turned up, and the Aurors were efficiently rounding up those who were trying to escape. Very soon, elation and joy replaced battle and curses.

Hermione took no notice of the situation; she was sobbing on Severus' body. "No ... no ... why? Please, Severus, don't leave me." She was so lost in her grief that she didn't see him blink. But she felt him breathe. She looked at his face and saw him watching her, wonderment in his eyes. It couldn't be! She'd seen him take the Killing Curse! Or she thought that he'd taken the Killing Curse. But it was impossible to escape that curse. Her head began to spin, and her logical mind came to the only possible conclusion: he must have been protected by something, an object that he was carrying in his pocket perhaps, and that must have intercepted the curse. In fact, he had

never been dead.

Thank you for reading. I didn't expect this story to be that much appreciated. I hope you're still enjoying it.

Chapter Five: If Only

Chapter 6 of 7

The end of battle, Severus' trial, and the sentence.

Disclaimer: see prologue.

Chapter reread by the wonderful somigliana.

Severus opened his eyes to a wondrous sight: a young, dishevelled woman was crying her eyes out on him, for him. She lifted her head and looked directly at him. Perhaps he was dead and had just been granted Paradise. He couldn't for the life or death of him remember anyone looking at him with such sorrow and relief before. What a strange combination.

"Severus, oh, Severus, you're not dead!" she gasped. "I thought you were hit by the Killing Curse!"

Severus thought it wise not to set her right; it'd raise too many questions.

"As you see, I'm very much alive, contrary to the Dark Lord, if I am to believe the racket in here."

Hermione hadn't realised that the Order had won, that Harry had beaten the monster. She'd been so thoroughly distracted by her personal epiphany about her feelings for the Death Eater lying underneath her, that she'd missed the signs of the obvious elation of the Order members.

Severus had experienced the same realisation. Like in an accelerated film, he'd recalled their meetings: the way she became accustomed to his sharp tongue (verbally only), the way she talked to him, smiled at him, laughed with him. They hadn't spent that much time together, but that time had been the fullest of his life; it was worth the whole lot of his thirty-eight years. He'd never felt such longing for anyone's company. If only Azkaban wasn't waiting for him...

They were pulled from their musings when a hand wrenched Hermione from him. The hand belonged to Arthur Weasley, who protectively shoved the young woman behind him and pointed his wand at Severus' chest.

"I won't let you use her as a hostage to save your despicable skin," he said in a grating voice.

"I have no intention to resist," Severus replied. "May I stand?"

Arthur narrowed his eyes but nodded. Severus stood up slowly, leaving his wand on the floor. In the blink of an eye, he was seized by no fewer than three Aurors. When she saw Severus being manhandled, Hermione seemed to come back to her senses.

"Don't hurt him! He helped us! It was he who gave us the location of one of Voldemort's Horcruxes "

She was interrupted by an Auror saying, "And he's a murderer as well, Miss."

Severus warned her with a look not to interfere further. She understood that he wanted her to wait for his trial to speak up; there was no need for her to get into trouble beforehand.

The celebrations for the destruction of Voldemort were even more buoyant than those for his first downfall. Besides fireworks and parties all around the country, the public's attention was held by the trials of the caught Death Eaters that followed one another in a steady rhythm. At least one or two of them were condemned each week, usually to a death sentence; the Ministry was of the idea that it was better to eradicate evil from the midst of the wizarding society, and public opinion agreed.

The atmospheres of these trials were not unlike those at the end of the World War II in Europe, when those who'd merely been suspected of being collaborators to the Nazis had been attacked by the population. People wanted revenge, but for what wasn't always clear. Even those whose loyalty regularly wavered followed the dominant trend and demanded justice for whatever slight the Death Eaters had inflicted on them.

The last of the Death Eaters' hearings was the most anticipated one, too. Voldemort's right hand and most trusted advisor, Dumbledore's murderer, Severus Snape, who had terrorized half the wizarding world as a teacher, was to be judged tomorrow.

Severus Snape's hearing was public. Rufus Scrimgeour was facing elections soon, and he was looking forward to the free advertisement. And it was not as if the accused had ever been anything but unpopular.

Courtroom Ten was overcrowded two hours before the hearing was to start. Hermione was the only witness for the defence, as she'd found out that morning. Even Severus' counsel for the defence hadn't put much work not to say heart into this job. She felt like the decision had already been made outside of the courtroom and was waiting to be recorded in the Wizengamot's registers.

Harry and Ron had been incredulous when she'd told them everything that had happened since their adventure in the orphanage. They couldn't believe that Snape had helped them, but moreover, they couldn't overcome their hatred for the man. Well, Harry had seen him kill Dumbledore, that was undeniable, but they wouldn't have won so easily without his help surely they would understand this? But no, they were persuaded that they'd have succeeded without his help, that it would only have taken more time. They refused to hear her about the spared lives that his help had allowed: if the war had lasted longer, more deaths would have occurred. Both the boys were now giving her the cold shoulder, and the Order had aped them when they discovered that she was to be a witness for the defence.

The Minister for Magic took his place on the front row, right in front of two seats destined for the accused and the witnesses. Percy Weasley and two other women Hermione had never seen before were sitting on either side of him. Then Severus entered, led by two sturdy Aurors. He was seated rather roughly on the left chair by them, and immediately, the chains on the arms on the chair slid around his body and fixed him tightly to the "piece of furniture".

Scrimgeour spoke and the crowd grew quiet at once.

"Severus Snape, you have been brought here in front of the Council of Magical Law to answer charges relating to your membership to a prescribed and illegal organisation known as the 'Death Eaters', and to have judgment passed on you for the heinous murder of Albus Dumbledore. Said murder was done with malice aforethought."

Severus had heard him and nodded, yet his attention was focused on Hermione, who was sitting on a bench on the side, clearly isolated from the others by a large gap around her. He fleetingly felt remorse at the idea that it probably was his fault that she was alone, but she was his ticket to freedom.

A sneer remained plastered on his face as he listened to the witnesses for the prosecution, and hatred flashed in his eyes when Harry Potter told how he'd seen him kill Albus Dumbledore, "He didn't flinch, or hesitate, or try something; he just went to Dumbledore and did the Avada Kedavra."

His counsel hardly cross-examined the witnesses. The only good that came out of those tedious hours of listening to Snape's bashing was that the accusation of committing Dumbledore's murder with malice aforethought had to be abandoned. It seemed that the third part of the Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa, in which he'd promised to carry out Draco's task if the latter should fail, hadn't come into public, and McGonagall's testimony proved that he hadn't known of the Death Eaters' attack on that fateful night.

The time had come for Hermione to take place on the right chair. Everyone was very curious to know why one of Harry Potter's best friends was testifying in favour of the hated man.

"Miss Granger, please tell us what you have to say in the defence of Severus Snape," Scrimgeour asked her.

"Well, when Harry, Ron and I went to the orphanage where Voldemort had hidden one of his Horcruxes ... I met him while Ron and Harry were in the cellar retrieving the Horcrux."

"You met him?"

Hermione blushed. "He *Stupefied* me, and woke me in the basement. He told me of his desire to quit the Death Eaters. He could only do so by defeating Voldemort, and we came to an agreement with each other. He'd help us to defeat his Master. In exchange, he'd tell us ...er ... me, what he knew about the Horcruxes."

A wizard on the second row, a bit on Scrimgeour's left, spoke up. "Did you believe him? That sounds like a wife's tale to me."

"I ... had reservations, but he told me that night that Helga Hufflepuff's cup was in Bellatrix Lestrange's custody. I took this as a good sign."

Hermione had to answer a myriad of questions about her meetings with Severus, the kind of relationship they had she had to admit publicly she was still a virgin for some interrogators suspected her to have been his mistress while they had both been at Hogwarts the information he gave her, how he helped with the Order's attack of Voldemort's mansion. None of it seemed to move the way the members of the Council of Magical Law considered Severus Snape's case; she could see that in their eyes.

Severus could see it as well. Perhaps his plan wasn't that well thought out. He should have chosen escape and gone into hiding. His mind grew grimmer and grimmer.

"He threw himself in the way of a curse Bellatrix Lestrange cast at me!" Hermione was desperate. His accusers' expression didn't even mellow with that statement.

"Do you have anything more to say, Miss Granger?" Scrimgeour asked.

"No, Minister."

Without another word, the Council's members began to whisper furiously between themselves; the whispering lasted for around a quarter of an hour. Hermione was fidgeting on her seat, Severus was impassive though his insides were in turmoil, and the crowd was whispering. Silence fell on Courtroom Ten, like a blanket of snow on a landscape, as soon as Scrimgeour turned to the accused.

"Do the members of the Council of Magical Law think Severus Snape should benefit from the mitigating circumstances regarding the crimes he was accused of?"

No hand was raised.

"Do the members of the Council of Magical Law think that Severus Snape deserves a life sentence in Azkaban?"

All hands were raised.

"Severus Snape, you won't be executed due to your help of Mister Harry Potter through his friend Hermione Granger. However, your actions were considered heinous enough, and the Council is of the opinion you shouldn't be left free, in case you should commit such atrocious crimes again." He looked at Hermione. "Miss Granger, you have helped a known Death Eater, a sought man. Your intentions were good, but you should have denounced him to the Aurors. For this, you're charged with a fine of one hundred Galleons, and you'll have to work for the Minister for a period of one year for no salary."

Severus was crestfallen. The only person who could put up with him, the only person that he hoped he could build a future with, would now hate him for having made an outcast of her, and he was condemned to a life-sentence in Azkaban he who couldn't die, thanks to the Horcrux that he'd made! He might as well change his name to Sisyphus.

A/N:

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and the *Trial of Severus Snape* at the Accio conference in England in 2005 have been my inspiration for this chapter.

Sisyphus tricked Thanatos (death) to escape hell. The Gods punished him for his treachery by condemning him to roll a huge rock up a steep hill, but before he reached the top of the hill the rock always escaped him and he had to begin again. Full story at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sisyphus>.

Epilogue: To Be Mortal Again

Chapter 7 of 7

Hermione pays a visit to Severus in Azkaban.

Disclaimer: see prologue.

Chapter reread by Somigliana. Thanks to her for helping me to make this whole story better.

It'd already been a year since Severus had been put in jail. His days were as dull as the stone walls of his cell. He was allowed an hour of very fresh air every day, without a coat, or a jacket just his prisoner's robe. The rest of the time was devoted to pacing, thinking, eating, and thumbing the faux codex he'd managed to keep with him. Somehow, he'd convinced the Administration that he wanted to keep the family Bible with him, for spiritual comfort. The Ministry official had bought the lie.

He was pacing his nine meter-square cell, when the door was opened by a guard. He was going to go out for his daily afternoon "stroll" out of reflex, when he realised it was still morning. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw a cloaked woman enter the room. As soon as the man was out, she lowered her hood. Hermione! She'd come to him!

"Hello, Severus."

She sounded as hesitant as he was.

"Hello, Hermione. It's nice of you to have stopped by." He couldn't tear his eyes off of her. She'd lost weight, she looked exhausted as in exhausted from life, not from work. She may have been living in the outside world, but it didn't seem to have done her any good. He wondered if he looked as weary as she did.

"You look like you could do with fresh air," she said.

That answered his unspoken question. Strangely, she didn't sound as exhausted as she looked, he thought. There was some kind of resolve in her eyes, a hardness that hadn't been there before. He guessed her friends still hadn't forgiven her for standing up for him, and that the Ministry had overused her during her year of "work with no salary".

"You don't look quite like yourself either. How has your year been?"

"Tiring. They had me make all their menial paperwork, all their dirty work. They even had me clean the toilets, though they have a cleaning lady for it." It seemed that her year for the Ministry had been worse than his in Azkaban. She went on, "Look, I don't have much time. Let's go down to what's essential. Do you still want to walk unimpeded and as yourself?"

"It is only a dream now. I wish I could escape this dreadful place, but I'm a condemned man. How can I walk free without being caught?"

"And if you were free, what would you do? Where would you want to go? Would you like someone to be with you?"

She had asked the crucial questions. What to answer?

"I'd like to go to a quiet place. I'd like to have a garden. But I don't know where to go. I don't want to go back to my home on Spinner's End."

"That wouldn't be possible; a vindictive crowd had burned it the day before your trial."

He choked. "My books?"

"I had taken them away to my parents' home by then."

He sighed with relief. Then he wondered. "Why did you take them away?"

"I thought you'd want to have access to them once you were free."

"Was that your only motive?" He wanted her to tell him that she wanted to go with him, that she wanted to be with him, before he could admit feeling the same.

"Perhaps. But I must insist do you have a place you'd like to go to?"

"Not really. I've never thought that I would need one."

"Good. I've found a place. My 'work' at the Ministry had some perks, however minimal they were. I found papers about a house in Argentina which belonged to MacNair while cleaning the offices. I took them, so now, the Ministry doesn't know about that house anymore. We could go there."

His eyes widened with incredulity, his heart beat faster. "Together?" he croaked.

She faltered. "Maybe you'd rather be left alone?"

"No, no. That was not my meaning. I thought that, maybe, you would not want to come with me if I ever succeeded in escaping these walls."

She averted her eyes. "No, I'd like to come with you."

He felt how unsure of herself, of him, she was. "Hermione. Here, take this, please." He thrust the Horcrux that he'd made to fool the Dark Lord into her hands.

"You still have it? Are you that sentimental?"

"This is more than a mere souvenir. Do you remember the night we met at the orphanage?"

"Yes."

"I made a duplicate of Ravenclaw's codex to take back to the Dark Lord. But you told me there was a spell to check if an object was a Horcrux?"

She nodded.

"I had to put a piece of soul in there," he pointed at the fake Bible, "to pull my ruse off. After we parted, I made a decision. To trick the Dark Lord, I chose to put a piece of my soul into the codex."

Hermione was dumbstruck as the implication of what Severus had just confessed dawned on her. Reflexively, she threw the book on the floor. Severus' heart constricted.

"I give it to you as a testimony of my feelings for you. I give you my soul, Hermione Granger. I give you my soul, for you to do as you wish with it."

Hermione then gingerly retrieved the codex from the ground. Her hands were shaking. She pulled her wand out of her sleeve. "I gave the guard at the entrance one of the Weasleys' fake wands," she said in explanation. As if she didn't quite know what to do with Severus' Horcrux, she put it back on the floor, but steadily directed her wand at it. She locked eyes with Severus and uttered the spell very clearly, "*Reducto!*" Such was the strength she put into the spell that ashes were that was left of the book.

When it was done, she lowered her wand slowly. Like the sun rising upon a cold landscape, her mouth moved to form a smile, a grin, and finally she beamed at him and threw herself into his arms. "Severus, I'm so glad. There's nothing anymore to hinder us now. I'll free you, I've found a way." She pulled an ebony wand from her other sleeve and held it out to him. She again offered an explanation, "The guards only looked for one wand, not two. They didn't expect it. "She pulled a filthy handkerchief from

her pocket. "No one would suspect it to be a Portkey."

They both took hold of the rag and disappeared from the cell. Severus felt his heart and spirit soar with elation and ... could that be happiness? Love? When they landed, he breathed deeply, hugged Hermione tightly, and thought that it was good to be mortal again.

Many thanks to you who have been reading this from this beginning, whether you have left a review or not.

BONUS: the drabble series which was at the origin of this fic.

How he wished he could bring Dumbledore back from the dead. This act had cost him much, not in his conscience or in his self-esteem, but in his life as a whole. He was reviled by people, and the Death Eaters were too jealous of him to be trusted. He knew that he'd had to do it, lest his Unbreakable Vow killed him. Now, after months of being cautious to extremes, he craved companionship. He wanted someone in his life to whom he could speak freely without fear of being backstabbed. Never, ever before had Severus felt so utterly alone.

He had his chance when he fell upon Potter and his sidekicks by accident. He was to retrieve a cup which had a piece of the Dark Lord's soul in it and bring it back to his master. Yet he didn't feel like complying with his orders. After all, that object had contributed to his current misery by preventing the Dark Lord from dying all those years ago. He could have remained a respected Hogwarts teacher without him!

The Granger girl was the easy one. She strayed from her friends a little too much, and he could catch her unawares.

He managed to gain her trust, at least partially, when he let her go after he'd explained his plan: he wouldn't impede their quest for the Dark Lord's soul pieces, he would even give them hints about their location. In return, she would help him to gain as few years in Azkaban as possible if his master were defeated. It was decided that she would be his Order liaison.

In the meanwhile, Severus was in a quandary; if he could easily duplicate the cup and take the fake one to "him", it'd still be lacking something: a piece of soul.

There was no other solution; he had to put a piece of his own soul into the fake Horcrux. Well, it'd become a real Horcrux afterwards, but not the Dark Lord's. Severus killed a random Muggle and split his soul. He never told anyone of this, and Voldemort never suspected his treachery.

He went on meeting Hermione (for she had become Hermione to him) to help Potter.

He could feel things were drawing to an end.

"Harry destroyed the last object yesterday; there's only Nagini and Voldemort left."

The time had come to set a trap for the dark wizard.

Potter and the Order sneaked in Voldemort's dwelling at night. Most Death Eaters were caught off guard, and the others had been given a very powerful sleeping potion by Severus. The battle was, however, fierce, and more than one was hit by a killing curse. Severus was amongst them.

Harry had won. Hermione was sobbing above Severus' body when she saw him blink. It couldn't be; he couldn't be back from the dead. That meant only one thing: he was never dead in the first place. Perhaps she hadn't seen what had happened in the confusion of the fight correctly.

Seeing Hermione crying her eyes out for him made Severus realise that he may have found the companion that he needed. She'd become accustomed to his sharp tongue, verbally only, and the more time he spent with her, the more he felt compelled not to lie to her. If only Azkaban wasn't waiting for him...

He was tried. Hermione kept her word to him and testified that Harry couldn't have defeated Voldemort without Snape's help. However, only death was spared to him; he was condemned to a life sentence in Azkaban. The irony of it was that he couldn't die.

In the room that had been his cell for the last year, he finally told Hermione what he had done to fool the Dark Lord. He told her that he wanted to escape his life-sentence in this dreadful place and have a life with her. To prove his good faith to her, he did the unthinkable: he literally gave her a piece of his soul for her to do as she wished with it. She destroyed the cup in front of him, then she accepted to help him to go away with her. It was good to be mortal again.