

# A Walking Shadow

*by Ariadne AWS*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

## Prologue: Not Your Brightest Idea

*Chapter 1 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Thanks, as always, to my ever-patient betas, Luna305 and Melenka. And a special thanks to the lovely Anastasia, who took time away from editing to help me shove my irritating alter-ego into a Vanishing Cabinet. \*blows kiss to all three\* ;) A special thanks to the lovely and talented FerPorcel, who made the cover art.

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### Prologue: Not Your Brightest Idea

Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley stood flanking Harry Potter in the Dursleys' kitchen.

"Thanks for well..." Harry shrugged, and with those words, he left number four, Privet Drive and his hidebound Muggle relatives forever. Hermione and Ron remained behind, glaring at the Dursleys.

"Good riddance," Uncle Vernon spat.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance and whipped their wands out. "*Gluteus Porcus!*" they yelled. The Dursleys' hands flew to their backsides, and Hermione and Ron Disapparated.

A moment later they rejoined Harry in the garden at the Burrow.

"Oh, Harry, you should have seen their faces!" Hermione hugged him, laughing.

"How long do you think it'll take them to figure out it wasn't a real spell?" Ron grinned.

"It'll take Dudley a week to stop running. Thanks." Harry smiled, his first real smile in ages. He was free, and he was home.

The Weasleys had been only too pleased to have Harry move in with them. He had refused to consider Grimmauld Place; it held too many memories, too much guilt. The house Harry had inherited was theoretically safe enough ... strangely, it had been Mad-Eye Moody who had reassured them on that score, informing them flatly that Secrets do not die with their Keepers. Everyone even Moody accepted Kreacher's obedience to Harry as sufficient evidence of his ownership.

Although Harry wanted to forget the house existed, it was too strategic an asset to abandon completely. If nothing else, it provided a bolt-hole. Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt had consequently spent a tense week at Grimmauld Place, placing a permanent Locking Charm on the door "Unsafe to risk exposure even for a few minutes outside," Moody had grumbled and adjusting the existing wards to allow Apparition only by Order members. That particular enchantment had required Harry's presence, not because he owned the house, but because his wand contained one of Fawkes' tail feathers. Hermione had been especially curious about how they'd managed to key the wards without a Dark blood ritual she assumed it had to do with Fawkes' being the Order's symbol in more than just name but the one time she had ventured a question, Harry had looked so stricken that she had dropped the subject, cursing herself for insensitivity. *Tactless, Granger*, she had admonished herself. *Reminding him of Professor Dumbledore and Sirius in one breath, all because of your fascination with magical theory. All of our lives depend on a sane, strong Harry.*

The Order had also done everything in its power to make the Burrow a safe haven: making it Unplottable and sequestering its existence within Minerva McGonagall's mind as an officially Kept Secret. And from this evening on, when the blood legacy of his mother's sacrifice had expired, Harry would have a round-the-clock guard. From where the trio stood in the garden, they could see Mad-Eye and Tonks through the kitchen window. Tonks, at least, was clearly enjoying Mrs. Weasley's cooking; Mad-Eye seemed, even at this distance, to be scrutinizing the food with equal parts hunger and suspicion.

"Fancy some dinner, mate?" Ron asked, heading for the house without waiting for an answer.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a smile, and she said, "You go on ahead. There's something I want to check first."

Harry ruffled her hair affectionately. "Let me guess. Er wait, it's coming to me a book?" He grinned.

She rolled her eyes at him. "There are one or two references I need to track down."

"So you're off to Hogwarts, then?" He laughed. "We won't wait up. See you in the morning, then." Glad, whatever faced him, to have finally seen the last of Privet Drive, he turned and followed Ron into the Burrow.

Hermione bit her lower lip. She hadn't lied, exactly. *No, you let Harry do it for you.* Well, it was for Harry that she was going, anyway. He hated Grimmauld Place, and if she could spare him any pain, she would. It wouldn't take her very long to Apparate in and check Kreacher's nest for Slytherin's locket. If it was there, she would bring it straight to Professor McGonagall. If not, well, there *were* a few books there that she needed, Dark Arithmantic texts that she would not find even in the Restricted Section at Hogwarts.

Since leaving Hogwarts after the funeral, she had spent every free moment analyzing everything Harry had told her and Ron about his lessons with the headmaster the previous year. Researching the Horcrux problem, surrounded by books, covering rolls of parchment with formulae and equations, she had obsessively focused her formidable logic and Arithmantic skills on the questions of how to find them and how to destroy them. But in the moments between waking and sleeping, her mind would substitute two different, unbidden questions, questions that no one else seemed to be asking: Why had he done it, and where had he gone?

She mentally listed the rest of the Order members and their current assignments. Although the books she wanted were not technically illegal, they would probably earn her an official inquiry were she caught with them, so she definitely did not want an audience. The Weasleys, recovering from wedding chaos, were all at home save Mr. Weasley, who was probably still at the Ministry with Shacklebolt. Lupin had returned to the werewolves, and Hagrid was still working with Grawp toward some end only he knew. She had no idea where Mundungus Fletcher might be, but was willing to bet that he wouldn't return to Grimmauld Place after Harry had caught him with the Black family heirlooms. *If it's not where I think it is, we'll have to track him down.*

There was another name, of course, one that had become blasphemous in the Order. Once the initial shock had worn off, even the mention of his name was a flashpoint. In the weeks since the funeral, she had endured Harry's rages that, although spectacular, she privately found less alarming than the sullen silence that had followed Sirius' death the previous year. Ron's inarticulate but intense moods were nothing new to her. Tonks' universe, apart from her Auror and guard duties, appeared to have shrunk to include nothing but Lupin, and the Weasleys seemed more sad than angry. Mr. Weasley looked more drawn, more tired than usual, but she supposed that was true of all of them these days, especially the older Order members, who could remember the last war.

She drew a shuddering breath. She did not want to think what Professor McGonagall was feeling.

It was easier not to mention his name at all, although her increasingly stubborn inner voice insisted that this was the very impulse that gave rise to calling Voldemort "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." *What will they come up with for Severus Snape? "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Mentioned"?* She laughed mirthlessly a new habit for her but once again found her thoughts inevitably returning to the dark shape in her mind, the shape of the man who had killed Professor Dumbledore. It was like a black hole, drawing in all of the energy around it, silently, deadening, returning nothing. *Like my Potions essays, returned with an O and nothing else...*

She snorted. *You're talking about murder here, Granger, and comparing it to your schoolwork? Some soldier for the Light you are. "Lord Voldemort, could you give me tips on improving my hexes? I've found a variant reading in a footnote."* She snorted again. *I'm going mental. And I'm procrastinating. Better get moving before someone sees me, someone who will ask more questions than Harry.*

She decided to walk down the lane that led toward Ottery St. Catchpole to clear her head before Apparating. *No sense splinching myself.*

*Distraction, detonation, detention* And once again she slipped into memory, back to the Potions classroom, hearing that voice, the voice that seemed to defy the laws of acoustics, bypassing distance, achieving tangible resonance only when it found its home somewhere in her mind. *You should have to have a license to have a voice like that. It can't be legal. It certainly shouldn't be allowed.*

Too lost in thought to pay attention to the uneven ground, she stumbled. *Stop it, Granger. Professor Dumbledore is dead. Severus Snape murdered him. The Order is still reeling from loss, from betrayal; his name is anathema, and your breaking an ankle won't teach them that silence is the enemy.*

Yet despite herself, she heard the voice of the former Potions master, saying, "I can teach you how to brew fame, bottle glory, even put a stopper in death "

She stopped walking.

A look of renewed determination appeared on her face ... the look that always made Harry and Ron exchange a resigned shrug. They knew well what that look meant. It meant, "I'm going to the Library." It meant missed meals, monosyllabic responses to questions, and "Don't wait up" ... until she had proven her latest flash of insight, and

refined it to her satisfaction.

Resuming her walk, she smiled to herself. It wasn't a particularly nice smile; it was the smile of someone who, if she didn't know the answer, knew that she had it anyway because she had found the right question. It would not have been out of place on a Gringott's goblin, and, on the youthful face of Hermione Granger, it deeply disturbed everyone who'd ever seen it.

She had been certain that the questions of "Why" and "Where" were related. Now, thanks to her memory of that softly dangerous voice, she had a suspicion as to what the answers were.

She reached the end of the lane. A few seconds later, still smiling her equally dangerous smile, she appeared in the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

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A few seconds after that, she was pinned against the kitchen wall, a wand to her throat, its end glowing with a barely restrained curse.

*Not your brightest idea ever, Granger.*

Black eyes boring into her own, demanding an account. A reason. Something. Something she wasn't sure she possessed.

*Help.*

Her wand arm held to the wall with a grip like iron, her wand pointing feebly toward the ceiling, where her eyes darted briefly. *I could bring the ceiling down. Or not.*

His grip tightened on her wrist, cutting off the blood flow. His hand squeezing, ruthlessly, feeling seeping out of her hand until, finally, her wand clattered to the ground.

"Looking for something?" he murmured.

She could not speak.

His wand forced her chin higher, straining her neck.

Those eyes drew closer, reflecting the wand glow from the spell he held in check, a split-second from release. Deafened by her own heartbeat, she finally managed a hoarse whisper. "You."

His eyes hardened. He released her wrist and, not taking his eyes from hers nor dropping his wand, closed his hand gently, relentlessly around her throat.

The edges of her vision started to blur. Unable to breathe, desperate, panicking, she gripped his forearm and tried with all her strength to force his hand away. Her vision went dark, darker

He leaned in closer. *"Definitely not your brightest idea ever, Granger."*

The last thing she saw before everything went black was her own face, an agonized mask of terror, of betrayal, of pain, reflected in those relentless eyes.

## Interlude: Destroyed, But Not Defeated

*Chapter 2 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: I bled this one. My gratitude to Luna305, Anastasia, Mimiheart, and Jen, who all bled this one with me. Ladies, my Muse and I thank you.

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### Interlude: Destroyed, but Not Defeated

He watched the light fade from her eyes, watched her eyes close, and counted, slowly.

The curse he held in check was a problem. If she moved before he redirected it –

Swiftly, he closed the distance between them, pressing himself fully against her, forcing her back firmly against the wall, releasing the pressure on her throat, sliding his hand behind her head to cushion it. Only when he was certain she could not even move involuntarily did he flick the curse that remained in his wand out and away, covering her face with his.

A nearby chair exploded, bits of wood and metal flying toward them. Most glanced off of his heavy cloak, but one large chunk bored into his left shoulder.

Ignoring the pain, he pulled back and examined her. Other than the impression of his fingers reddening on her neck, she was unharmed.

Finally allowing himself to breathe normally, he eased her gently to the ground. He sat, leaning against the wall, resting her head in his lap, and his expression softened.

"I've been expecting you, Miss Granger."

He smoothed a wayward curl from her face, tracing her jaw line with his fingers, his touch defining her. He had been waiting for her, although he had not expected her to appear on Potter's birthday. He'd assumed she would eventually connect the Horcrux with Regulus Black, and thus with the house-elf's cache of treasures.

"Good of you to come alone."

He pocketed her wand, closed his eyes and leaned his head back on the wall, the blood warm on his shoulder. He could heal it ... he'd healed himself of worse, over the years ... but it would wait. He listened to the young woman breathing in his lap, waiting for her to awaken.

He idly traced Arithmantic symbols on her forehead with his little finger, slowly, one by one, finally resting his hand on her hair as if he could impress them on her mind. A blessing. A benediction.

And, perhaps, a threat.

*She will certainly see it that way, initially.*

As the light faded in the kitchen, he began to speak.

"At this moment, I am the safest man in wizarding Britain. It's confusing. Your mind is adequate to the task. The Order does not come here often; I have ample warning when they do. Before he died ... he was already dying, Miss Granger ... Dumbledore and Fawkes branded me. Another brand. Invisibly, a circle of Phoenix tears over my heart, attuning me to this place, to its magical signature. It works like a Proteus charm. At the approach – by door, or, now, Apparition – of an Order member, the circle over my heart warms, and I know to Disapparate.

"A touching symbol. He had that flair.

"He was already dying. He is dead by my wand, but not my will; he was already dying when he collected Potter from his Muggle home last year."

Hermione stirred. He stroked her hair, and she quieted.

"I doubt the Order knows or cares where I am. They assume I am 'with' the Death Eaters, as though that were a place. You will have to change their thinking, Hermione. It won't be easy. I won't be there to help you.

"The Order is not nearly as powerful as the Death Eaters, nor will they be until Potter sorts things out. I am afraid –"

He touched her face gently.

"– that will be up to you too. But among the Death Eaters, I am safe. Ironic. For my success on the Tower, I was awarded the honor of punishing young Mr. Malfoy for his failure. A knotty problem. I had made an Unbreakable Vow with his mother to protect him. Had I refused the honor of punishing him, we both surely would have died. As the Dark Lord's scourge, I could at least control, perhaps offset, some of the damage. You will note that I didn't die; my decision to harm him was the best protection I could give him. I bit my tongue and nearly choked on my own blood, and the lash in my hand sliced scars into the boy's perfect skin.

"There is a lesson there, Hermione. No; I can call you Miss Granger no longer. Do not ask it of me.

"We live in a tangled web of blood, scars, and protection, and I sit in the middle, watching, and waiting.

"I have been waiting for you, Hermione. Right now, for now, you are safe, although you will not believe me. It will be – interesting, to see what happens."

He regarded her softly for a moment, brushing her lower lip with a fingertip.

"I rent my soul on the Tower, Hermione, but it was not the first time. It is not new. I am almost certainly destroyed, but not defeated. In this moment, I count myself lucky."

He sat bleeding in the darkness, stroking her hair.

*She should be conscious by now.*

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Hermione Granger was definitely conscious.

And furious.

And trying to figure out why she wasn't dead.

And why he was playing with her hair.

And what he had written on her forehead.

Mostly, though, she was furious.

And she had never felt so alive.

## The Equations Don't Balance

*Chapter 3 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My thanks to Melenka for keeping this honest.

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### 3: The Equations Don't Balance

*... He sat bleeding in the darkness, stroking her hair.*

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He felt her body tense, and he drew his hand away, lighting his wand.

She surged to her hands and knees, hair veiling her face. Sweat beaded on her skin, chilling in contrast to the warmth of his body. She felt strands of her hair sticking to her sweaty face, and reflexively she tried to toss her hair over her shoulder.

His heart tightened at the familiar gesture.

Reaching up, she pushed the offending strands off of her face, smudging dirt and grit from the long-neglected floor on her forehead. She snapped her head to look at him, and began, "D" She winced, one dirty hand flying to her throat.

"Don't try to talk," he said very gently.

She held her throat and dropped her head. Her hair again veiled her face, a single strand falling straight into her eye. She blinked rapidly and rubbed her cheek on her shoulder, trying to push her hair out of her eye.

He gestured. "May I?"

She stared at him warily, one eye screwed tightly shut in pain. "I"

"Shhh. Don't talk. Look up." He carefully moved the hair out of her face. "Close your eyes now." He brushed the grit off of her forehead and rubbed the smudge away as well as he could. He tipped up her chin with a finger. "There. Better?"

She nodded, looking at him warily.

"I am going to heal your throat. All right, Hermione?"

She closed her eyes and nodded again.

Darkness.

She flinched at the feel of his wand on her throat. Warmth and relief soon followed. A fleeting touch on her cheek.

With a flick of his wand, he lit the lamp on the table.

She massaged her throat. "Thank you."

His eyes glittered, and he nodded. "It was the least I could do."

"True, since you were the one who caused it to begin with." She frowned. "I assume you have my wand?"

He nodded. *And so it starts.*

She stood, rubbing her hands on her jeans, and drew a deep breath. "How could you?"

"That is a rather a broad question."

"With several follow-ups."

He waited.

"Fine. I'm not going to have this conversation in a dirty kitchen. I am going to the library, Severus Snape. Try not to hex me on my way out the door." Tossing her hair, she turned and stalked out.

Mrs. Black's portrait started shrieking. "Mudblood filth! Besmirching the halls of my House! Freakish contagion!"

From the kitchen, Snape heard Hermione snap, "Oh *shut it*, you foul-mouthed pretext!"

Snape raised an eyebrow. *Pretext?*

Mrs. Black continued her tirade, and Snape heard a distinct *whump* followed by a sudden silence that, even from where he sat, felt decidedly embarrassed. Then...

"Ow."

Despite himself, Severus Snape chuckled. Rising stiffly, he headed for the library.

In an astonished but blessedly hushed tone, Mrs. Black's portrait asked, "How *dare* you?"

Hermione laughed bitterly. "The question of the hour, Mrs. Black. Now, if you'll pray excuse me"

Stunned, Mrs. Black gaped at her.

Snape heard Hermione mutter something about "manners" as she went into the library. He leaned against the wall, pulled the chunk of wood out of his shoulder, and whispered a healing spell. Gripping the wood in his fist like a talisman, he entered the room behind her.

She sat on one of the leather chairs before the empty hearth, rubbing her arms. "If you would be so kind as to light a fire."

He complied and stood by the fireplace, leaning his good shoulder on the mantle.

"Severus Snape, you owe me and the whole world an explanation. Several, in fact."

"You, indeed. The world " He shrugged skeptically.

"Quit stalling."

His eyes glinted, but his voice was even as he asked, "One wonders where you would like me to begin?"

She sniffed. "The beginning, of course."

"If we had a week, perhaps."

"Just the high points then. Starting," she continued, her voice low, deadly, "with the Tower. *How could you?*"

He stared into the flames, remembering. "He was already dying. I believe you heard that part?"

"I heard."

He glanced up briefly, then turned his gaze back to the fire. "When he destroyed the ring, the darkness that had preserved that piece of the Dark Lord's soul entered his hand. It was a mistake made in ignorance, Miss Gr- Hermione."

She furrowed her brow.

"As he often seemed to be what we asked of him, he was not infallible. He did not know everything."

"What happened?"

"You are aware it takes a life to create a Horcrux, yes?"

She nodded.

"It takes another to destroy one."

Her mind immediately flashed to her friends' faces, the faces of people she loved. *Harry Ron* Horrified to hear herself counting, she stared at him.

A fleeting look of sympathy crossed his features.

"But the diary " she protested.

"Miss Weasley was nearly dead... enough to satisfy the Horcrux Indemnity, at least a weak one. The more power involved in its creation, the more powerful the remuneration required to destroy it. To create his second Horcrux, the Dark Lord killed his father and grandparents."

"Not an even exchange for Dumbledore," she said, tears welling in her eyes. A moment later, her hand flew to her mouth as she realized the implication of her words. "I didn't mean "

"I agree, Hermione," he said softly. "And that is how Darkness works, preying on pain, promising justice. Do not judge yourself too harshly, but do not forget."

"Another lesson, 'Professor'?" she asked, deliberately twisting the knife that was his former title.

His irritation spiked. "If you are going to punch every portrait that offends you, Miss Granger " he began.

"Hermione."

He shook his head firmly. "No. Miss Granger. We can ill-afford your childishness. I have barely begun to explain our situation, and if you prove to have no more self-control than your foolish friends, I fear there is no point."

She stood and stepped toward him, raising her voice. "If there is no point, then why do you bother?"

His eyes flashed dangerously at her. "For the same reason I have done everything for over seventeen years, Miss Granger. Because I have no choice."

The air crackled between them.

"We all have choices "

Raising his voice, he cut her off. "I made mine long ago. And you, you foolish young woman, will listen to me until I have finished. Then you may judge me, Miss Granger. You will not judge me out of ignorance."

She refused to back down. "I came here looking for you, Severus Snape. Despite my friends, despite the Order, and despite what might happen if I was lucky enough to find you exactly what you did to me in the kitchen, I might add. Despite every reason not to, to stay at the Burrow like a good little girl 'Don't think,' 'Don't ask so many questions' I have not been able to get what you did and who I believed you to be needed you to be to make any sense!" Scathingly, she continued, "I have used logic. I have used Arithmancy. I've reviewed all of my memories of you: your every expression and posture, every inflection in your voice, every harsh word and every cunningly hidden compliment. It's all a carefully crafted mask, an act, that's obvious but still: nothing adds up. The equations don't balance, Severus Snape, they do *not* balance, and no one knows why except for you and a bloody portrait that's pretending to be asleep."

He looked Stunned.

"Oh, yes," a brittle laugh "he's faking. I'm sure of it. So please," she sneered, "please don't preach to me about ignorance when I am the only one who's bothered to realize that I *don't* know, that *you do*, and that whatever it is not only matters, but is probably the most important thing in the world." She moved toward him. "What don't I know, Severus Snape? What do I need to know?"

The silence rang between them.

She stopped less than a foot from him, raising a hand as if to touch his face, stopping just shy of it. She held his gaze for a moment. "We need you. Without you, we will fail." She let those words sink in, then dropped her hand and delivered her coup. "And I, for one, refuse to die just because your psyche has more buttons than your bloody frock coat."

*Damn.* Finally, he found his voice. Drawing himself ever so slightly taller, he said, "Then you will need to listen."

Her eyes narrowed. *Took you a long time to choose the appropriate mask, there, "Professor."* She nodded. "Agreed." Arranging her features into a flawless imitation of his own, she sat, crossed her legs and, looking for all the world like a medieval queen, opened her arms. "Proceed."

## A Patronus Can't Lie

*Chapter 4 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: My usual gratitude to the divine Anastasia, a.k.a. She-Who-Raises-The-Stakes, and to Southern\_Witch\_69, who has generously agreed to beta this edition of the story!

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#### 4: A Patronus Can't Lie

**Summary:** Truths, Half-truths, Innuendo, and Buttons.

*Arranging her features into a flawless imitation of his own, she sat, crossed her legs and looking for all the world like a medieval queen opened her arms. "Proceed."*

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Gripping the wood he still held hidden in his hand, he continued, "Albus Dumbledore's death balanced the death of all living members of two generations of the Riddle family. This is blood magic old magic, Hermione, more powerful than you dare to imagine." Fearing what he might find, his eyes swept her face, already alight with her desire to know. *She reminds...* No. His voice deepening with urgency, he said, "It will find you; perhaps sooner than you anticipate. It is not a test you can study for. The magical power of blood ties is a mystery, Hermione, and not in the detective sense. It will never make sense. It is the opposite of sense. It is chaos." He shut his eyes, blocking out a memory. His voice emptier, almost hollow, he finished, "The power that ultimately took Dumbledore's life is the very power that saved Harry Potter."

"I don't understand."

He regarded her intently for several heartbeats. "You will."

She fought the urge to look away.

"When the headmaster destroyed the Horcrux, he guessed what was happening and came immediately to me. We had little time. We bought a little more." He closed his eyes, remembering.

Unbidden, a small note of triumph sounded in her mind. "You put a stopper in death."

"Temporarily."

"To buy him time to work with Harry."

"Yes."

She drew a breath to speak, but changed her mind. Instead, she stated, "Harry's still not ready."

Eyes narrowing, he nodded.

"And the headmaster's portrait isn't really sleeping," she continued.

He was still, his eyes completely alert.

"And I'm supposed to be listening. I'm sorry." She folded her hands in her lap and tilted her chin toward him, every inch the Head Girl she should have been. *Your move, Severus Snape.*

He blinked slowly. "We agreed that when the time came, I should be the one to release him."

"Kill him, you mean." *Ouch. Not well done, Granger.*

He regarded her clinically. "We could not prevent his death, Hermione, merely slow its progress. Despite all of our research, our experiments, he was dying, painfully, before our eyes. I said I released him. If you pay attention, you will realize that I always mean what I say."

"Yes, but you rarely say what you mean. If you are trying to tell me that you bear no moral responsibility for the headmaster's death, Severus, I'm afraid we see morality very differently."

He bristled. "I will not debate morality with you. Not on this issue."

Her eyes glittered dangerously.

Her expression unnerved him, but he pressed on. "I released him. From the slow agony of the Horcrux's curse, from certain torture by the Death Eaters or worse Greyback, and from watching the hopes he had unwittingly bartered his life for die with him."

"You killed him to protect him, then."

"Of course I did," he hissed. "And to protect young Mr. Malfoy. And your precious Potter."

Her heart grew louder. She did not quite dare ask what it had cost him, but she had to know. She had to at least try. She ventured, "A high price to pay."

"Relatively speaking, no. It scarcely matters." His instincts told him he was being measured, tested...

"It matters to me." *Check.*

His instincts betrayed him. His hand twitched toward the Phoenix brand, but he realized it was dormant. Hidden in the folds of his cloak, his other hand clenched the jagged chunk of wood, tacky with his drying blood and fresh sweat, forcing slow splinters into his palm.

Careful to keep her face a neutral mask, she thought, *Check. Now, easy, Granger. You need your wand back.* "And it matters to you. Your list of people you have had to harm to protect is short by at least one name. Yours."

He focused on the splinters. "And?"

"And you do nothing unintentionally. Even your silences have meanings. Painful ones, usually." She smiled and raised an eyebrow at him.

He found it profoundly disturbing.

Rising, she asked, "Tea? Pretending we're not debating morality is making me terribly thirsty."

He nodded mutely, relaxing his grip on the wood.

At the door, she turned. "Severus?"

"Yes?"

"Do I remind you of someone?" *Checkmate*. She left the room.

Severus Snape did not move. He opened his hand slowly, the wood's rough texture raking the splinters in his palm. A small pain makes a good distraction, if the other pain slices too deeply.

After a moment, he let the wood drop into the fire. He heard his blood hiss as it boiled in the flames.

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Once in the hallway, she leaned against the wall, trembling. Adrenalin rushing in her ears in a sudden flush of relief and something infinitely more complicated. Professor Dumbledore had definitely been a genius.

*Breathe, Granger. Breathe... Oh, gods.*

In branding Severus Snape's heart, Dumbledore had given anyone who paid close enough attention in other words, her a tremendous gift: Severus' "tell."

*He mistakes his heart working properly as a signal from the brand. And it can only work here in this house.*

Utter genius. Only someone who cared enough to look for it would find it. She hugged this knowledge close to her. She laughed. *His hands*. She closed her eyes and smiled.

Her laugh brought him out of the library. He stopped, captivated. Emotions and firelight played across her face.

"Is there something amusing you wish to... share?"

She opened her eyes.

"Or perhaps," his voice dropped to an enveloping murmur, "something more serious?"

Neither moved, the only sound the fire in the other room.

Finally, she spoke. "Both, it seems."

He waited.

Her eyes not leaving his, she reached out and ran a finger up his coat buttons. *Soft*. "Which button first, Severus?" She smiled wistfully. "There are so many. This one?" She slid her finger down a few. "Or... this one?" She glanced up at him.

He was still watching her face.

"Or..." Her finger reached the button at his waist. "This one?"

His eyes dropped to her finger.

They both thought, *Please*.

As her finger traced the outline of the button, she pressed her other hand gently on his face, lightly brushing it down his neck, smoothing it with firmer pressure down his chest, under his cloak, to his hip.

For one breathless heartbeat, neither moved.

He spoke roughly. "What game are you playing, Hermione?"

She smiled up at him and slowly closed her fingers around her wand, drawing it out of his pocket. "Which one? There are so many."

A low, throaty chuckle. "Forgive me, but " One hand closed around her wand hand, splinters scratching her skin, digging further into his. "If you turn me in, I will receive the Dementor's Kiss by morning. That is not the only kiss I have dreamed about, Hermione." He gently took her face in his hand, rubbing his thumb along her cheek.

Her breath came faster.

"I won't risk one for the other. No matter how tempting. Give me your wand."

Ignoring the stinging on her hand, nestling her cheek into his palm, she echoed his chuckle. "No."

*Interesting*. "We are at an impasse, it seems."

"Mm, not quite yet, I think." Her eyes twinkled briefly, then darkened. "Which button first, Severus?" She caressed his name with her voice.

He lowered his eyes, entranced.

She brushed her finger back up to the top button. "This one, I think. Best to start at the beginning." Hesitating only for a moment, she opened the button. "But as we don't have a week..."

His eyes fluttered shut.

She ran her fingers along the line where his white linen shirt met his throat. "...we'll have to hit the high points."

A low moan escaped his lips.

Gently she pressed her small hand around his throat. "I am not nearly strong enough to kill you with my bare hands, I know."

"Yes, Hermione," he said, roughly, "you are." His hand memorized the skin of her neck, brushing her earlobe. He ran his hand under her hair. *So warm*. He drew her closer.

"I'm not," she said simply. "I don't know how. And I won't know, unless you teach me."

He breathed into her hair.



She caught her breath. *If he speaks this close to me, I will die. Just. Die.*

"Hermione," he murmured.

*Now I believe we are at an impasse.* She closed her eyes and concentrated, poured everything she was feeling into her wand.

It glowed blue, and an otter the color of winter starlight shot out of it and bounded up Severus Snape's sleeve to sit on his shoulder.

He suddenly heard her voice in his mind, saying, "*You can trust me. You don't have to it's your choice but you can.*"

He drew back, hissing, only to see the otter scamper to Hermione's shoulder to peek at him through her hair.

He reached for his heart, but Hermione curled her hand around his.

"Shhhh. I'm sorry." She spoke softly, but quickly. "You know a Patronus can't lie, Severus." She cocked her head slightly. "Although I do believe you frightened him a little. You sometimes have that effect."

"Your Patronus is an otter?!"

"Then again he might just be playing. It's difficult to tell for sure."

He released her wand hand.

She pocketed her wand, wincing a little when one of the splinters in her palm rubbed against the edge of her pocket. "I'm sorry for that, what I did just now.... If it hurt you. If I hurt you. Your feelings, I mean..."

"Hermione."

"I don't know... I'm no good at this, really, and... I was just going on instinct, basing my actions on..." she drew a deep breath, "what your reactions seemed to be. You *can* trust me. /know that. But to tell you, for you to believe me, I had to hurt you. Risk hurting you, anyway."

"Hermione," he repeated.

"In a way it's a compliment. More than just in a way I mean I really do pay attention."

"Hermione!"

"And I had to get my wa" she faltered.

"A Patronus can't lie."

Her cheeks flushed.

"Your message *was* that I could trust you, was it not?" He arched his eyebrow.

"But wh Oh." She blushed furiously. "OH. Then you... you know that it's true, then. What I was doing. Oh. Well." She squared her shoulders. "Yes."

Chuckling, he said, "The best lies are always based in truth."

She blushed harder, but flashed him a challenge. "Well?"

Her Patronus looked at Severus and scampered to the floor.

Strong hands grasped her shoulders, pulling her close. He wrapped her in his cloak, nestling his cheek in her hair. "Brilliant," he murmured into her ear.

She sighed.

He moved his mouth a little closer to her ear, lowering his voice. "But " he breathed.

Her hands tightened on his waist.

He inhaled sharply.

She turned her head and brushed her lips softly, swiftly, against his. "Scary?" she asked.

He growled, "Terrifying."

Her Patronus glowed brighter until, finally, the spell faded.

## Blood Magic

*Chapter 5 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

### 5: Blood Magic

**Summary:** All light. All fear. Then nothing.

A/N: I claim responsibility for this one. \*graceful bow\* in appreciation to Anastasia for her sharp eyes and well-tuned ear, and to Southern\_Witch\_69 for her finely-honed precision in betaing this edition. \*blows kiss to both\*

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... finally, the spell faded.

-----

Severus scowled at the table as Hermione heated the water. The angle of the lamplight illuminated letters scratched into the surface of the heavy, wooden table. Reading "Professor Snape Loves Kreacher," complete with a crudely drawn animated cartoon illustration, signed "R.W.," had a certain predictable effect on his mood. He levitated the lamp and moved it back and forth, scanning the tabletop. *Ah.* He moved to read. "The Daily Snitch Headline: Snape Gets Laid. (Rita the Beetle, Staff Journalist). Readers, today we have proof that miracles *do* happen..." signed "F.W." He waved his wand, and the lamp drifted farther down the table. Another glint caught his eye. No words, just an illustration. The night on the tower, rendered in meticulous, almost loving detail. The carving flashed green. And flashed again. And again. All the while, cartoon-Snape laughed. Deep, angry gouges across this one. He sent the lamp flying into the stone wall.

"*Reparo*," Hermione said, bringing two mugs to the table. The lamp glowed back to life on the floor.

Severus slumped over his forearms, encircling something she couldn't see what on the tabletop. Only an occasional reflected flicker from the lamplight glowing beneath him indicated that his eyes were still open. He stared into his hands, his breathing rapid. "Hermione."

She sat across the table from him, pushing a mug toward him and waited for him to continue.

He looked at her, his expression naked.

*Fear? Him?! "Tell me."*

He pushed away from the table abruptly, gesturing toward the graffiti, and stalked to the window, arms folded, blinking. He stared, unseeing, at the dark window glass.

She sighed. "Harry." He heard her put her mug down and walk toward him. She simply stood with him, not touching him, not speaking. His dim reflection in the window wavered and blurred as the mist rose outside.

In an instant his empty, haunted look was replaced by a blackness so complete she recoiled. He threw them both to the floor and rolled under the table, extinguishing the light as he did so. In the softest of whispers, he said "*Legilimens*," and his voice was in her mind.

"Dementors. Don't move."

She had no idea if he could hear words mentally spoken or if he just picked up images, or both, so she concentrated on an image of herself lying still, then on opening her hands and asking "The Secret?"

Again, the voice in her mind. "*I don't know, Hermione. And I can hear words.*"

*"If the Secret holds, are we safe?"*

"Yes."

*"If it doesn't, will hiding under the table accomplish anything?"*

*"Probably not. Dementors don't always work unaccompanied, and other things have eyes."*

*"Do you feel anything?"*

A projection of startled confusion.

*"I mean,"* she thought at him, *"your Charm. It's attuned to the wards generally, not only Apparition, right?"*

*"I cannot hear anything with you chattering. Be still."*

Her eyes widened in the darkness.

*"I felt that,"* he grumbled in her mind after a moment.

*"Felt what?"*

*"Your eyes widen. I told you not to move."*

*"How did you "*

*"Eyelashes, Hermione. They're rather distracting."*

*"Dementors, Severus. They're more so."*

*"Stay still."*

Several minutes passed in silence. After the first panicked moments, Hermione found herself drifting into pure sensation. The scent of him. The softness of his clothes. And the weight of his body, his legs, and the almost pain of his hipbone pressed into her thigh. His arm, still wrapped around her awkwardly, lying as they had landed, his hand pressing her head toward his chest, holding it off the floor. She would have bruises, she was sure. She was equally sure she did not care.

Minutes passed, stretching into undifferentiated time. She drifted from sensation to memory to fantasy. So many buttons...

*"Hermione."* Even in her mind he sounded strangled. *"I'm still in here."*

Mentally, she smiled and thought about stretching like a cat.

*"Are we safe yet?"*

*"... I believe the Secret holds."*

She laughed mentally.

"I would prefer that you not do that."

"Laugh?"

"Yes."

"Why?!"

Nothing for a moment, then, "It tickles."

"You didn't say we were safe. Shall I stop chattering?"

"We seem to be in no danger from the outside."

She laughed mentally again.

"Stop that."

"I've never seen you laugh. I may never see you laugh. For all I know, you don't laugh. I want to feel you laughing inside my head. Severus, please."

His body froze, and she tensed.

"Dementors?" she asked after a moment.

"Of a sort. No, not that kind."

He started to move away, to stand, but she held him. "No. Tell me. This way."

"No."

"Oblivate me afterwards if you want. But please, don't make me read any more of your silences tonight. It may be all we "

"I," he corrected her.

"WE," she insisted, "have. Severus, please," she asked again. "What do I need to know?"

A moment's hesitation, and it began.

Her mind was flooded with images...

A fist. A woman screaming. A younger Severus, eyes already deadened, in the Potions lab. Slightly older, seeing a young woman with red hair, smiling, concentrating on her cauldron in a classroom. Older still, seeing her smile turning to him. A flash of time short she wasn't sure how short seeing that smile turning to... who? *Harry?! A storm... a werewolf...*

Darkness. Searing pain. Robed figures. A cave, a green glow... Images too fast for focus. Stairs, crouching, "...seventh month dies."

Flashes again. Blue eyes, kind but stern, over half-moon glasses.

Then the images split, two sets flashing simultaneously. Dark blurs on one side, brief occasional flashes of something lighter on the other: A boat... *Sirius?* More green glow...

A slow focus on the Dark Mark on the lighter side? A change in angle, three shooting flames around his wrist. A fading light... A bright green flash...

Grey, nothing but grey, images repeating...

Then a grey Sorting... grey Harry, green eyes... Darkness deepening on one side, more grey on the other... Grey Harry, on his old broom. Grey Sirius, ugly, laughing. A werewolf. Dumbledore's hand, a potion, Fawkes, more Darkness, Red flames on his wrist...

"I saw that already..."

Wand forgotten, his hands gripped her head, tightly, desperately. She gasped and focused again, her heart racing. Now even the grey disappearing... All Darkness, then single flashes, of Draco, Harry, Professor Flitwick, stairs, stars, and then

Time stopped, and she felt his soul shatter as he loosed the spell.

Then blurs: Draco, bleeding, grey, dark, a pinpoint of light, a light on her throat, his shoulder *Blood?* A pinpoint, protection, admiration, retribution, her smile, doubt, her Patronus, blazing, blazing light, then

All light.

All fear.

Then nothing.

Inside her burning mind, the pieces of Severus Snape's soul howled a confession the world would never hear.

---

Hermione held him as she wept. He caught her tears, closed his hand, and opened it. Seven black pearls lay in a perfect ring. Unbuttoning a single button on her blouse, he placed them on her chest, over her heart. He pressed them into her skin.

Hermione screamed.

---

*Technical Note:* \*taps wand to computer screen\* I solemnly swear I will either edit this to canon format compliance for Legilimantic communication when JKR shows us how in Book 7... :) In the meantime, italics and quotation marks indicate that they are "*speaking*." \*taps wand again\*

# Blood Magic (II)

Chapter 6 of 34

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

**Summary:** What happened in the kitchen. And on the stairs. And in the library. Oh, and a Horcrux.

A/N: As always, a special thanks to: Luna305 (welcome back) and Melenka, my stalwart betas, and Anastasia and Wandlimb for writing advice and encouragement. My eternal gratitude to Southern\_Witch\_69 for generously taking the time to put a fine, sparkling polish on this edition! \*blows kiss\*.

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## 6: Blood Magic (II)

*Inside her burning mind, the pieces of Severus Snape's soul howled a confession the world would never hear.*

*...He pressed them into her skin.*

*Hermione screamed.*

-----

Her scream echoing in his mind, Severus collapsed, chest heaving, spent.

*What have I done?!*

She stirred.

*I'm crushing her.* He rolled onto his back, holding her, but drawing out of her mind.

*"Don't go..."* Her thought sounded almost sleepy.

*"Only for now,"* he told her. Privately, he thought it unwise to be inside her mind when she returned to full awareness.

Hermione felt a mental caress, and the voice in her mind was gone. Softness against her cheek, his strong arm holding her protectively, possessively... but something had changed.

She blinked, trying to focus her thoughts. Her mental vision split into two screens, and reformed, as the images she'd received in a rush played more slowly, in reverse... Not Sirius... Regulus? ... The split resolves... James... "Who-oh, no..." ... And finally a slow-motion flash of pain, a breaking bone, a fist her whole field of vision, growing smaller, and smaller, the vision fading as she heard her own voice saying "... please."

"Severus..." she whispered, horrified, "... what have we done?" She raised her head slightly, and the darkness spun around her.

She jerked away from him, scrambling out from underneath the table. "Light," she choked, struggling to get to her feet. "I need light."

The lamp flared to life as she lurched, stumbling, out of the room.

She was halfway up the stairs before she collapsed, vomiting, tears forced out of her eyes. Her hair being gathered behind her. She arched again, choking. A scalding hand on her face; inarticulate words, soothing her, grounding her. Weakly, she pushed his hands away, focusing on breathing. "Don't touch me."

*Evanesco,* he thought, watching and waiting.

Finally, she spoke. "I don't understand everything I saw, but I felt it. What was it?"

His face was still, guarded.

"You were powerless, of course, I felt that, too, but there was something else consistent, something worse. Everything pointed to one thing."

She frowned, thinking, then glared at him accusingly. "The web. You, in the middle. Protection."

He couldn't deny it.

"Was that blood magic, then? It certainly felt... old."

"To spontaneously activate blood magic, three conditions must be met," he began as though reading from a book only he could see. "Passion, desperation, and sacrifice." He refused to look at her.

"Passion," she repeated. "Yes, well," she continued briskly, "of course. You knew that already."

Brushing his hand across his chest, he murmured, "Mine, Hermione."

"Oh." The darkness seemed lighter. She reached for the banister and stood, stepping down a stair.

He closed his eyes against the hope in her voice. He knew the whole of it and what came next.

"I "

His tone quiet, almost flat, he interrupted. "Don't, Hermione. Blood magic deals with elemental emotions. Real passion is not the pretty thing you imagine it to be."

"Severus," a note of steel entered her voice. "What happened in the kitchen was not 'pretty.' Or did you perhaps" a hint of acid "miss the metaphor?"

He opened his eyes a fraction. "Most assuredly, I did not."

Silhouetted against the dim glow of the lamp from the kitchen, she was dark fire, outlined in light.

His voice a sharpening, unrelenting edge, he asked, "But which event were you speaking of? When I pressed you against the wall and closed my hand around your throat? Did part of you want to die? When I comforted you afterwards, tracing the symbols of my knowledge on your forehead, did you want to stay there forever? Or when I invaded your mind, brutally taking your innocence, gripping your head in my hands, covering you with my body, pinning you to a dirty floor, filling you with the forbidden knowledge that you had been asking, begging me, to teach you? Did you find it thrilling, *Miss Granger*?"

A harsh silence echoed in the stairwell.

Her eyes narrowed. "You don't believe it was blood magic, do you?"

He closed his eyes. "We share no blood. It can't have been."

"Light your wand."

He gave it an irritable twitch, and it glowed.

"Open your eyes." She held up her hand, and he saw the scratches and splinters embedded there. "I saw the wood in library." She touched his cloak, where the blood had stiffened. "The wound you ignored while getting my hair out of my eyes. That wood was covered in your blood."

He exhaled softly.

She continued, "I don't understand blood magic, but I do understand you, a little, after what happened. And I have been watching you for a long time. Nothing less than a force of nature could make you lose control." She touched his elbow briefly, stretching up to place a gentle kiss on his cheek. "I don't hate you." She turned and walked downstairs.

The air seemed cooler where her lips had been.

He had no way of knowing exactly what had just happened, but he had a good general idea. Blood magic governed three things creation, protection, and destruction always in combination.

He wondered which combination this would prove to be.

---

She stood by the fire in the library, twisting her hair into a loose knot, appreciating the warmth of the flames after... well, after everything.

"Brandy?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you."

He Summoned two snifters, and she took a sip. Better.

He sat, warming his drink in his hand.

After a moment, she said quietly, "I can't believe you survived it all."

His lips twitched. "I believe I answered that question before. I had no choice."

"Yes, I see that now. There are one or two things I saw that I still don't understand, however."

"*One or two?*" He opened his hands, inviting her to ask.

*That's new*, she thought. *Take advantage while it lasts, Granger.*

"The other man in the boat with you. Regulus Black?"

He nodded.

"He was underage?"

He hesitated. "Potter told you Dumbledore's theory, then, about the boat?"

It was her turn to nod, and his estimation of Potter increased minutely. If the boy had managed to remember that detail after that night... *Interesting.*

"Was he... I'm sorry, Severus. Was he your friend?"

"Black? No. But we were allies, briefly."

Searching his face for signs of concealment, she found none. *I must be dreaming.* "All right, then. That settles R.A.B." She glanced toward the kitchen and bit her lip. She'd had no opportunity to check Kreacher's nest yet. She frowned and looked at her watch. *9:30?! Feels like it's been a month.*

"I believe you said you were looking for something," he began and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a heavy gold pendant.

She drew a sharp breath. "Slytherin's locket."

He nodded.

She watched it dangle from his fingers, spinning slowly at the end of the chain. Her skin crawled. "It looks so harmless."

He said nothing.

Sudden fire in her eyes. "One of my friends will have to die. For *that*." She snarled the last word and turned her back on it, facing the fire. She stared at the flames, blinking rapidly.

He gave her a moment, watching the locket as it spun slowly.

"Put it away, please," she said finally.

He set his brandy down and joined her by the fire, reaching for her hand to give her the Horcrux.

"No."

"Hermione, you must. If I am Summoned by the Dark Lord..."

"And you've left it in your pocket for how long?!" she asked, clenching her hand.

"A few hours. Since right before you arrived."

"Hm," she sniffed disapprovingly.

*She sounds like Minerva.*

"How did you know where it was?" she asked.

"Mundungus Fletcher is incapable of complete discretion, Hermione, and had he found this, I would have heard... something. Dumbledore told me of his thievery, so I put feelers out in Knockturn Alley, 'listening,' "

"Spying, you mean," she said bluntly.

He glowered. "Hearing nothing, for months, I deduced that it might still be here in this house. I'd been looking for it." His mouth twitched. "I've had very little to do, after all... and your house-elf liberation front..." He shrugged.

Firmly ignoring the surge of irritation that followed whenever anyone mentioned house-elves in favor of latching onto the far more interesting fact that he'd been thinking about her, she concluded, "So you didn't Disapparate when the wards shifted."

"I had to give it to the next member of the Order to appear, no matter who it was, but I had no intention of dying in the process. If I could avoid it."

"So you readied a curse."

He nodded.

"Did you have to strangle me?"

"Even my restraint has its limits and had you moved..."

She snorted. "Harm to protect."

He hesitated. "For what it's worth "

She held up her hand. "No, don't. Really, it's not necessary."

"But this is."

He drew her hand up, and she opened her fingers. The chain caught the firelight, sparkling as it coiled into her hand.

She shuddered and shoved the locket firmly into her pocket. "Okay. How very... strange," she breathed. "I have a piece of Voldemort's soul in my pocket."

He cocked his head to the side, assessing her. "Extraordinary."

"Relatively speaking, not at all. Having a piece of someone's soul in your pocket should be extraordinary, yet it isn't, given that I seem to have *all* of yours as a tattoo."

He levitated his brandy to his hand.

"Considering everything else that's happened this evening, even finding the locket seems almost mundane. And that's just... wrong." She shuddered again. As if to herself, she added, "But it fits the equation somehow." She turned back to him, drawing herself to full height. "So. If you would, please, clarify something else for me?"

He met her eyes.

"Did you, or did you not, make me your Horcrux?" Her voice was steady, her eyes calm as she waited for his answer.

Respect flared in his eyes. "No, Hermione. Even were it possible... No."

She exhaled a shaky breath, "Oh... that's good."

His mouth twitched. "Indeed."

---

Whenever blood magic had touched him and it had, too frequently for his comfort it seemed to take perverse delight in making his life more difficult.

Dumbledore had always told him this was its gift.

He preferred to call it chaos. And at this moment, chaos was standing before him with unfocused eyes, arranging and rearranging pieces of the puzzle that would eventually decide the fate of their world.

And she only had a few of them.

His heart warmed, and his hands stayed perfectly still.

## Bewitching the Mind

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: As always, thanks to Luna305, my extraordinarily perceptive and forgiving beta. Special thanks to Potion Mistress and Anastasia for their support, encouragement, and suggestions during the writing of this chapter. Special thanks to Southern for her kind and necessary observation that the format of the original version was really confusing - I've tweaked it a bit in this edition.

Note to Readers: We spend most of this chapter in Hermione's mind - fasten your seatbelts. (Ever wonder how Arithmancy works? :) ) When this little trip is over we will return once again to a more usual narrative style.

---

*And at this moment, chaos was standing before him with unfocused eyes, arranging and rearranging pieces of the puzzle that would eventually decide the fate of their world.*

*And she only had a few of them.*

-----

The lump in her pocket was a far weightier matter than the one in her throat, but at that moment, Hermione might have argued differently. She had a lifetime of Severus' memories to sort out, and one night in which to do it.

*When in doubt, Granger, trust Dumbledore.*

*Seven phoenix tears, the "tell"... Surely someone was supposed to figure this out and tell Harry, and whose job had that always been?*

*Severus' soul was cracking before he ever came to Hogwarts.*

She swirled her brandy, watching the firelight refract within it and reform, ever-changing. Chaos, indeed... but sometimes things that are chaotic can be beautiful.

*What had held it together?*

She swirled her brandy some more, frowning, making lists and rejecting them; arranging equations, transposing them, rejecting those as well. Her brow furrowed as she stared darkly into the snifter, ceasing its motion until the liquid calmed.

*What happened when it shattered?*

Then she swirled it again, in the opposite direction.

Sitting before the fire, Severus watched her thoughts and judgments flicker across her face in counterpoint to the flames. He was relieved that her attention was absorbed in something else for a while. It was the calm before the storm, and he planned to spend it watching her. He recognized her focus, if not her method. *Or do I?*

So much to tell her, and so little time to do it in, but he was patient enough, for now. She had to take the first steps on her own.

*The first time is the worst, Hermione, until it's not.*

His awareness of time passing had nothing to do with the young woman who had just paused and frowned again.

Nothing whatsoever.

*Okay, Granger. Logic. Your greatest asset. A brief smile crossed on her face. One of them.*

Concentrating again on the bowl of the snifter, she swirled it more slowly.

*Seven Horcruxes, seven tears... and seven damaging blows to his soul.*

*Right, then.*

"*Accio quill. Accio parchment. Accio lamp,*" she muttered rapidly, the three incantations unifying into one as the required objects flowed toward her. She caught them with the fluidity of long habit, moving to the table at the far end of the room.

Aligning the parchment at the precise angle she preferred, awareness of the room fading, she got to work. She sucked the end of her quill briefly; then, at the top of the page, she wrote, "Voldemort" and "Severus."

She took a deep breath and began writing in earnest, almost instantly falling into her study trance. Eventually she started muttering to herself.

Severus moved quietly to a closer chair, eyes lingering on the angle of her head as she bent toward her work, on her hand sweeping the parchment.

"Okay. First Horcrux." She sketched an outline of the problem, writing rapidly. "The diary, written while he was still at school, still a child..."

"Two deaths well, one and a half; Moaning Myrtle and, almost, Ginny."

She paused.

"Harry, protector, honor... Innocent Love."

Right.

She wrote some more. "Diary - (Memo: Basilisk gaze = corruption? Research Muggle Studies?)"

The tiniest of smiles more a tightening of her lips.

*Now for Severus' memories. Let's see how this plays out.*

"The fist," she wrote, thinking, *...more buttons than... Oh. Oh, dear. That's frightfully simple.*

Still writing, "Passion, desperation, sacrifice... Childhood." She underscored this word heavily and circled it, before continuing, "Couldn't protect mother tried beaten badly."

She raised her head in thought for a moment, then wrote, "Innocence lost early; inadequacy (?) in the face of a father who was inadequate himself."

Another pause, then she added, "Father broke nose. Blood." The last word underscored twice. She scowled. *The bastard.*

"Notes," she commanded, and another piece of parchment flew to join its mate in front of her.

"Mother a witch, father a Muggle. Different power ratio, though... Okay, try a reverse relationship..."

*Time for Arithmancy... Accio new parchment.* A third piece landed in front of her. She covered the page with symbols, a formula taking shape as her hand moved almost automatically over the page.

Unconsciously, she started twisting her hair around her finger, writing quickly, fashioning these new figures to work within the Arithmantic formula she'd been working on all summer.

Severus leaned slightly closer, watching as her hand moved more quickly, her thoughts faster now, each one bringing some new posture, a different rhythm to her breathing - his own breath coming faster in response.

Finally, she grimaced at the piece of paper and cleared it with an impatient wave. *No. Not the reverse of Voldemort... not quite... hm... 'inverse,' maybe?*

She wrote, "Voldemort: 1/7" and "Severus: 7/1 (?)" and her hand froze mid-air.

Severus was holding the snifter to his lips, but lowered it when he saw her sudden stillness. Holding his breath, he leaned closer, his usually tense shoulders relaxing a fraction. *Yes, Hermione... That's it...*

She sat back for a moment, possibilities realigning and forming new shapes in her mind.

*Slowly... slowly.... Yes, like that...*

She reviewed her latest insight and nodded to herself. *Feels right. Okay, then. Test it one step further; find out where it breaks.*

*Substitute "anti-Voldemort" for "inverse"?* Since Dumbledore died, the active "anti-" function in the formula had belonged solely to Harry. A good test, then.

Two more variables: Voldemort: 0 and Severus: 1.

The formulae broke almost instantly. The lines on the parchment flowed into Severus' face, frowning at her.

She grinned. "Didn't think so..."

Severus tilted his head for a better look at what she was writing. Seeing his own face, he raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

The lines reformed. She scratched out "anti-Voldemort" and made a note in the margin "too far." For the next several minutes, she covered the page in Arithmantic symbols, then sat back to watch the formula as it swirled and finally settled, stable on the page.

Re-reading her work, satisfied, she summarized the first page:

"Diary, Fist: Childhood. Innocent Love, Innocence Lost. Young Ginny, young Severus, both scarred (!), only one was protected."

She picked up her snifter, not taking her eyes off of her notes even as she sipped, thinking. *Okay. Severus the inverse of Voldemort; seven pieces of a soul in one body, versus seven "bodies" containing the pieces...*

She drew a breath and released it, clearing her mind. The larger problem didn't balance yet, but she was making progress.

Severus raised his glass slightly, then sipped his brandy. *One down.*

Summoning another piece of parchment, she went back to writing.

"Second Horcrux. Ring; created when he killed his family." More. "Killed his father, grandfather..." She frowned. "Killing the father" had rung a bell.

*Something from Muggle Studies... Right, that daft old bugger with a cigar* She sniffed, disdainfully.

*Ok. Fathers.*

She turned her thoughts to Severus. *Families, fathers...*

She leaned back, lost in thought, toying absently with her quill.

Severus knew where the next bit of logic would take her, and he steeled himself.

A sudden gleam of inspiration lit in her eye, and she resumed writing.

*Obviously.* Taking the Dark Mark (underlined). Power (underlined twice). *Powerless as a child, eyes dead, the first crack in your soul long before you arrived for your Sorting...*

*Sorting, Slytherin... Desire for power... that works... Ambition?*

She shook her head. Not in the traditional sense, no... More like... restitution? She thought, tapping her quill on the page. A drop of ink landed on her face, just beneath her eye. Lost in thought, she barely noticed.

Severus fought the urge to brush it away. He scowled, stood, and went to the fire, standing with his back to her, his shoulders rigid.

She sighed. *Not very logical, bonding yourself to subservience out of a desire for power... but firmly within the parameters of the kinds of things boys do. Just like Harry and Ron are about Quidditch.*

She shook her head. *Strange analogy, Granger.*

Still. Same flaw, smaller stakes.

She heard the boys' voices in her mind as she continued writing.



*"It's about the challenge."*

*"It's about winning."*

*"It's about beating Slytherin, especially Draco Malfoy."*

It's about the challenge; it's about winning; it's about beating the Marauders, especially James Potter...

Bottle fame, brew glory, even put a stopper in death...

Dumbledore. *Who was like a father to him. And "the child is the father to the man."*

Tom Riddle, Voldemort. Severus, the Death Eater... and James, of course.

*James.*

She stopped writing.

Head turned resolutely away, Severus heard her quill stop and frowned. She'd have this one soon. His nerves stretched in the silence. Then he heard her start writing again, the scratching more urgent.

Shoving himself away from the mantle, he paced the far end of the room, eyeing the books on their shelves with a malice so hot some of them actually started to smoke.

She wrote frantically, the equations harsher, almost sharp, scrambling, scribbling themselves out in inky explosions almost as fast as she could start them. Finally, one, darker than the rest, stayed stable.

*I see.* Her eyes narrowed. *James Potter is part of why he took the Dark Mark?*

Adding the "Father" aspect to the equation, she tried it again, knowing what she would find.

The equation shifted once, then was stable. Ugly, and very, very stable.

*Poor Harry.*

*Poor Severus.*

At the other end of the room, Severus clenched his hands. His snifter shattered, glass embedding in his hands, brandy stinging into small cuts as it flowed down his arms.

She reflexively shot him the same look she used to silence First Years who hadn't yet learned not to play Exploding Snap while she was studying.

He flinched, as did several books on the nearby shelves, hiding his hand from her view.

Her expression softened in understanding.

*That's two.*

She turned back to her notes and examined them.

The larger equation still didn't balance. No, Severus' desire for power wasn't pure ambition; it had started with his mother. It was born of desperation, of desire.

She focused herself sternly. *Follow your formula, Granger.*

New parchment.

She swallowed nervously a soul, even a piece of one, really was a strange thing to have in her pocket.

*Focus, Granger.* She bent to write.

Third Horcrux: Slytherin's locket belonged to Voldemort's mother. *Protection?*

She twisted that symbol around until it cleared. *Ah, ok.* She'd failed to protect herself from death; by dying, failed to protect him. Harry had said Voldemort had hated her for it.

*Hm. Ok.*

More writing. "Mothers."

Severus Summoned a glass of firewhiskey. A large one.

She added it to the formula and the equations took on a faint red tinge.

*Old magic, then?"* 1. Passion (Merope). 2. Desperation (sold locket). 3. Sacrifice (Merope), and blood (childbirth)."

Switching her thoughts to Severus now, sifting the various images she'd received from him...

*His mother, screaming?*

She worked a few equations. They all blurred and faded. *No?! Then... Who?*

She sighed, twisted her neck to get a kink out, and rubbed one of her shoulders. She reviewed the images again, playing them forward, slowly, until she paused on the young woman with red hair. Smiling. At him.

*Oh. I don't like this.*

Severus was leaning on the bookshelves, eyes closed. He listened, waiting, turning the glass slowly in his hands. One of the books nudged him. He opened his eyes.

*I don't like this one bit.*

Biting her lip, she worked one new symbol into the formula. It glowed faintly gold. She connected two symbols, one symbol changed. She connected another, and all of them did.

*How awful.*

She exhaled softly. *Yet how very logical. I can't believe I didn't see it before.*

She put down her quill. This was going to be much more complicated than she thought. She knew she'd found one of the questions she needed to ask him, but she was going to have to word this one very, very carefully.

He'd probably hex her into next week anyway.

"Severus?"

One of the books nudged his shoulder. He opened his eyes, and forced himself into the middle of the room. "Yes?"

Softly, she asked, "What were the symbols you traced on my forehead?"

He looked at her, startled. That was not the question he'd been expecting.

-----  
The mind itself, being infinite, is the largest erogenous zone that humans possess.

The most sensitive.

And the most difficult to touch.

Hermione Granger had taken up permanent residence in his, and was even now deciding where to put her book collection.

## Among the Lilies

*Chapter 8 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: A message from the past, for both of them. The Potions master returns, and something explodes.*

A/N: The seeds of this chapter were sown during a discussion with Luna305 and Bathilda one weekend last summer. Thanks to Luna for the lightning-fast beta, and to Anastasia for inspiration.

Note to Readers: Thank you for flying Air Hermione. The seat belt sign has been turned off.

---

*Softly, she asked, "What were the symbols you traced on my forehead?"*

*He looked at her, startled. That was not the question he'd been expecting.*

-----  
Hermione looked at him expectantly.

Severus hesitated.

Still softly, but more firmly, she insisted. "You're going to have to tell me. I can't work this any further without them, you know. And after all this," she gestured toward her notes, "I'm a little fried."

He nodded once and, keeping his hand hidden within his cloak, turned to the bookshelf, reaching for the book that had nudged him earlier. Its cover was well-worn, and he rubbed his thumb along the spine tenderly, his touch lingering, almost as if he were saying goodbye.

Enchanted by the way he was holding the book, Hermione smiled tiredly.

He sat on a small loveseat by the bookshelves, lighting a nearby lamp. It glowed, softly pink, in the dark corner. He gestured for her to join him.

Hermione stood and stretched, arching her back like a cat. Her brain hurt, but she was used to that. She welcomed the familiar feeling, a touchstone in what had been, thus far, the most frightening, most exhilarating few hours of her life.

Summoning more brandy, she sat down and waited.

He held the book almost reverently, rubbing a worn, frayed corner.

*He loves that book*, Hermione thought absently, leaning into the corner of the loveseat, tucking an escaped curl behind her ear, watching him.

Wordlessly, almost apologetically, he held it out to her.

"Wait - you're bleeding." She reached for her wand.

"Leave it, Hermione." Something in his eyes spoke of his need for her not to push him on this.

That gave her pause. "Are you sure?" she gestured toward the book.

"Take it. Please."

Taking the book, her fingers brushed his, driving one of the shards of glass in a little deeper.

A smear of blood over the title, *World Mythology*.

She looked up. He gestured back toward the book and, drawing a deep breath, she opened it.

There was an inscription. She wasn't sure she was supposed to read it. She glanced at him.

He closed his eyes and looked away, but nodded.

*"All ceased, and I abandoned myself,*

*leaving my cares forgotten.*

*Always,*

*Lily*

*P.S. I'm a dreadful poet, I know, but that popped into my head yesterday during Binns' lesson when I was thinking about Saturday. Shameless of me, wasn't it?"*

Below the postscript, there was a drawing of a witch and wizard watching a cauldron. As they watched, characteristic spirals of smoke rose slowly from the surface. The witch and wizard looked at each other and smiled.

*"P.P.S. I can't draw, either."*

For once in her life, Hermione had absolutely no idea what to say.

He spoke in a strangled voice, "She -" He couldn't finish. He started again. "I was reading it when Professor Flitwick came to my office."

She nodded, blinking.

"I read it often, that last year. The... inscription."

She blinked again, her vision blurring.

"I- ah." Collecting himself, he tried again. "I always had it with me, just in case." He looked toward the shadowy ceiling, eyes bright.

She did not want to be looking at Harry's mother's handwriting. She didn't dare look anywhere else.

"You'll find the symbols on page 394."

Brushing her eyes with the back of her hand, she nodded, relieved that he had removed the burden of staring at those terrible words.

"Osiris, Isis and Horus. *see also* Set. *x-reference* Anubis; later, Hermanubis (Greek: Hermes)."

Symbols for each were illustrated below. She looked up, questioning.

He nodded sadly.

She closed the book. "I-" she ventured, holding it out to him.

Abruptly he stood up and swept away from the loveseat, coming to light, finally, by the door. Without turning around, he said harshly, "You *will* wish to read it." His voice was almost toxic. The voice she remembered from her first days at Hogwarts.

"I don't need to. I- " she paused and glanced around the room. "I... um..." she faltered. She wasn't at all sure how to keep the next words from suggesting more than she intended.

Although he did not move, something of the edge went out of his posture. "You have a copy of your own."

"Yes."

He turned and leaned wearily against the door frame. "Of course you do."

A question threatened, finally, to tumble out of her mouth. She clamped her lips firmly shut.

Some of the weariness left Severus' face as he noticed her expression. He'd seen it countless times; it was the expression she got just before her hand shot into the air.

"Ask your question, Hermione."

"Your patronus. It isn't... is it by any chance a jackal?"

She saw the answer in his eyes before he spoke. "Yes."

"It... it changed, didn't it." She held herself very still.

His eyes glinted dangerously. He didn't answer. The temperature in the room dropped suddenly.

She froze.

A voice in her head yelled, "*Move! Now!*"

Using reflexes she hadn't known she possessed, she threw herself off the loveseat and rolled sideways, getting distance and furniture between herself and where she'd been sitting. She ended face down under a sofa, covering her head with one arm, clenching the book with the other, protecting it with her body.

With a roar, he hexed the loveseat into oblivion. Wood, metal, and scorched fabric flew through the air, and flaming stuffing settled everywhere, coating that end of the room in a wintry white.

In the terrible silence that followed, Hermione, heart pounding, was pointlessly reminded of the snow globe she'd had as a child. The flaming bits of stuffing sparked and went out.

A corner of Lily's book pressed into her face. It rubbed her cheek consolingly, exactly as if it were saying, "I understand."

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Sources: *World Mythology* is one of the books on the bookshelves on JKR's website. It doesn't open. \*grin\*

Lily's inscription is from a poem by St. John of the Cross, based on the Song of Solomon. The line actually ends "leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies."

Oh, and the Legend of Isis and Osiris is worth reading. *\*innocent look\**

## Innocence

*Chapter 9 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: A book, an apology, and - hm - buttons.*

A/N: Thanks as always to Luna305 for beta and narrative logic assistance, and Anastasia for logistical advice. ;)

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*A corner of Lily's book pressed into her face. It rubbed her cheek consolingly, exactly as if it were saying "I understand."*

-----

Severus dropped his wand arm and breathed heavily, as wisps of smoke rose from the bits of stuffing that were still drifting on the floor.

Still clutching the book protectively, Hermione rolled over, and, keeping the couch between her and Severus, drew out her wand. She stood, pointing it at him.

"I'm-" he started.

"No."

"But-"

In a glacial voice, she announced, "Enough. Get out." With a furious flick of her wand, she reassembled the loveseat. It looked slightly lumpier than before. She heard Severus stalk away.

She turned to the book. "What happened?" she demanded, then sighed. "No, I don't suppose you can tell me."

The book rubbed against her hand, but its cover stayed shut, and no pages rippled open to answer her.

She snorted. "Something else I get to drag out of Tall, Dark, and Brooding." Holding the book rather more gently than her tone would seem to indicate, she ran her free hand through her hair, muttering, "Lovely."

She heard a crash from the kitchen.

"Just lovely." She had been strangled, had her mind invaded, found - or at least been given - the next Horcrux, and performed a feat of Arithmancy complex enough to earn her a master's position at any wizarding school in the world, and nearly had the daylight hexed out of her. Twice.

And she still had questions.

From the sounds of things, the answer to them was violently rearranging the kitchen.

She snorted, and then lay down on the couch, the book on her chest. She was *not* going in there.

He'd destroyed the sideboard first - ceramic, pottery and silverware flew clanging into the walls, against the ceiling, smashing, clattering, clanging to the floor. The stove caught his eye next, and he drew himself to full height and held a slow-release curse on it, building the pressure on its metal seams, refusing to let them fail completely until he allowed it. Beads of sweat appeared on his brow as the metal groaned and started to buckle. *Now.* The stove exploded with shriek like a banshee's.

In the library, Hermione looked up and frowned.

Then he spotted the flour barrel. A moment later, a cloud hung in the air, fine powder settling onto everything.

He stood alone in the kitchen, panting.

There were several forks impaled on the ceiling. One gave way and hit his shoulder before falling to the floor. In one fluid motion he had wheeled, pinpointed its location, and released a finely-honed, perfectly proportioned hex at it. It melted.

Eventually, his breathing slowed.

In the library, Hermione was wrestling with a new problem. She had kissed Severus Snape, and he had clearly loved Harry's mother.

*Lily*, her mind insisted. *Think of her as Lily. The other way lies madness.*

*Fine.* Severus had probably kissed Lily too.

She didn't know how she felt about that.

She suspected that was all that had happened.

The book nudged against her hand.

"Cut that out," she snapped at it. Then, "Oh. I'm sorry." *Not its fault.* She peered at it for a moment, then shook her head. Not really its fault at all.

The potion in the drawing Amortentia, obviously. Too dangerous for inclusion in the general curriculum. Brewed in secret, then she well knew how possible that was possibly with Professor Slughorn's tacit knowledge; he was like that probably just to see if they could. *They were playing with fire...*

In the kitchen, Severus slowly gathered his wits.

Hermione's musing continued. What had they learned, standing by that cauldron, younger than she was now? That what they truly desired most in the world was each other?

*Surely not. Then, Get real, Granger. It's not impossible. Lily was a woman, not a saint, and you know how you respond to him.*

Shared attraction, certainly. On his side, given his history, probably more. On hers?

The book nestled into her hands. She petted it absentmindedly. It seemed to feel that it was in good hands.

Severus, meanwhile, was repairing the kitchen with the ease of long years spent teaching students who were forever careless with volatile ingredients. A few efficient sweeps of his wand, and he was done. He crossed his arms, nostrils still flaring. He had warned her, at the last second. *A rationalization, Snape!* His lip curled in self-derision. *Fool.*

Something glinted by the hearth. The fork had melted into a perfect circle. He picked it up and turned it over, slowly, in his hands. Simplicity, elegance, perfection. Transformed by violence his violence, his guilt, his anger and an immaturity he had not realized he still possessed. *Dangerous. Too dangerous.* An image of her holding his book, unharmed, even as she held him at wand-point. *She protected it.* It must have been instinctive; he'd given her no time to think. He gave himself over briefly to the memory of her touch, their fleeting kiss... over so quickly. So little time. He turned the disc over and over, smoothing his hands over it, and the key of his tension changed. *Or, perhaps, just enough...*

If she didn't kill him.

Odd that she hadn't sought him out. *Or not.* His eyes tightened at all he'd done to her with and without reason. *The first time is the hardest, yes, but it's almost over.* Then his stomach growled. *Hm.* He pocketed the metal disc.

Hermione was still thinking. She didn't want to know how the details the Severus-Lily-James triangle had played out. Having endured years of Lavender and Parvati's melodramatic accounts of whatever constituted the latest chapter in *Hogwarts: The Hormones*, she imagined that the earlier triangle had probably appeared rather unremarkable, especially with the war against Voldemort at its height. Certainly, at least from the outside, not the stuff of which tragedies are made.

So what had happened? A secret tenderness, a stolen moment on that long ago Saturday. Something "shameless."

She didn't want to know. She really didn't want to know.

Then she realized she didn't need to. If the specifics of what Lily and Severus had done mattered in the grand scheme of things, it would have been among the memories she'd received.

*Oh... Oh, good.* She swallowed. *Good.*

Whatever it had been between them, for the young Severus, what had mattered was her smile, and her gift.

Still... "Shameless"?

He had kept the book for...

He had kept it even after...

She sat up suddenly. *She loved him too. His first kiss. His only kiss? Oh, dear gods.* Her thoughts flew to what she'd done to him in the hallway. How she had manipulated him, used him... *He enjoyed it, Granger,* her logic insisted, but her conscience asked, *How could you?*

For a young Severus Snape, who'd been denied kindness, denied compassion, denied touch unless it brought physical pain, a single kiss could easily have made an impression that had lasted a lifetime. And she, she had replaced that kiss with...

Still holding the book, she flew toward the kitchen.

But in the hallway, she paused. Bound by blood and by something at once complex and very, very simple, to an inscrutable, unpredictable man, some new part of her checked the impulse to burst into the kitchen with a girlish apology.

No, that would not do at all. She took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled. Better.

As Hermione reached for the door, she heard Mrs. Black's portrait mutter, "Do try to keep him from destroying anything else."

Startled, Hermione turned and looked at the portrait. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," the portrait said, then added, as an obligatory afterthought, "Mudblood filth."

Not even Mrs. Black's portrait would survive Hermione Granger's fury once and risk it again.

The only one in the who seemed willing to do so looked up at her as she entered the kitchen, and said, "You're late."

Startled, she stepped back automatically, instinctively hiding the book behind her back. Then, feeling foolish, she laughed. "You sound like you're going to deduct House points."

A raised eyebrow. "If it will make you happy, I am willing to indulge you." His tone was light, but she could hear a hesitancy behind it.

She smirked at him, but something in her eyes changed. *Really... Hm...*

"Five points from Gryffindor for... disconcerting facial expressions. 15 for lateness, and a detention. And... yes?"

She was biting the inside of her cheeks, trying not to laugh. If she looked at him, she knew that all of her tension would result in a terribly undignified fit of giggles. *Gods,*

*no.* She looked up.

"... and another 20 for not looking at me when I am speaking to you."

"Oh, forgive me, *Professor*. I was just wondering if those holes in the ceiling were, by any chance, made by forks?" Her eyes sparkled.

They looked at each other.

He continued, softly, "I'm not finished, Hermione."

She nodded.

"For the greatest Arithmantic feat the wizarding world has known since the days of Nicholas Flamel..." he paused.

She wondered if he would give her one point or one hundred. Her brain automatically started figuring the odds.

He reached out and smoothed a strand of hair off of her forehead, his hand coming to rest lightly on her cheek. "... my gratitude."

Her world tilted on its axis. Without taking her eyes from his, she set the book down on the table. With a hint of triumph, she smiled.

Then his eyes did something she'd never seen before. She was dumbfounded. *Severus Snape's eyes do not twinkle. They don't. That's just impossible.*

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Given appropriate circumstances and ample motivation, Hermione, who can deny that more may be possible than not?"

"You sound almost like..."

A shadow crossed his face, but he did not move his hand. "He was my professor, too."

She brought her hand up to his a swift caress.

The stood unmoving for a moment. As they held each other's eyes, what had passed between them that night shifted from the edge of uncertainty to the stability of knowledge.

Understanding would come later, but in this moment, knowledge was enough.

He leaned closer, and murmured, "There is more... much more. Are you ready, Hermione?"

Scarcely daring to breathe, much less speak, she nodded. She laced her hand in his hair *Smooth...* and pressed her palm to his neck, feeling his skin, warm underneath.

He trailed his hand to his chest, where it lingered at the next button. He watched her, and waited.

Slowly, she reached up and released the button.

And watched, fascinated, as he undid the third on his own.

Lily's book scuttled quietly out of sight.

At that moment, his stomach rumbled. He sighed. *Inconvenient. But necessary... So little time...* "Are you hungry?"

"I - What?" She swallowed hard, giving her head a small shake. *He cooks? Of course he cooks.* "If I sit, do you promise not to hex my chair out from under me?"

He nodded again and held a chair out for her, the lines around his mouth deepening.

She stared at him. *Is that a smile? No... it can't be...*

It was.

## Experience

*Chapter 10 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: A new cut and an old scar. Why Dumbledore trusted Severus. And... something else.*

A/N: My obeisance, as always, to Luna305 (bloody brilliant beta and narrative continuity goddess) and Anastasia, for sending virtual kleenex. Chocolate Frog Snape Cards to both.

---

*She stared at him. Is that a smile? No... it can't be...*

*It was.*

As they finished eating, Hermione decided that a dinner cooked by Severus Snape was a rather acceptable apology for his having blasted the furniture to bits. Regretting

what she had to do next, she folded her napkin slowly. "Thank you. That was excellent."

He nodded, but tensed in anticipation of what was coming..

Tilting her head in apologetic acknowledgment, she said, "There's something you're not telling me."

"Many things."

"Something very specific. The symbols, Severus. They make sense, yet they don't. What is it you're not telling me about Lily?"

"You've deduced what happened at Hogwarts, yes?"

She nodded. "Enough of it."

A brief look of relief crossed his face, before it was replaced by something harder.

"You've pieced together what happened, then. Sixth Year."

She nodded.

He held out his hand to her across the table, drawing her gaze to his thumb. A new cut.

*Why hasn't he healed... Oh.* An old scar next to it.

Her eyebrows raised.

*Still some surprises left, then.* "No grand arcane ritual. It was... sentimental. Muggle."

"So she knew. That you're Half-Blood."

"Yes, she knew. She saw my Potions textbook often enough. And she enjoyed puzzles. She hoped I would have the courage to stand up to my Housemates. She believed I would. 'We're strong, Severus. Our blood is strong. I'll prove it to you.' A nick of her dagger, and..." He looked past her, at the cold hearth behind her. "She was wrong. Not about her strength. About mine."

He was silent for a very long time.

Finally, he said, "Hermione, I assume you are familiar with my role in the prophecy?"

"As far as I know."

"Very well then." He stood, glancing at the window. Still misty. He frowned. "Somewhere more comfortable, I think." He waved his wand and the dishes cleared themselves.

By tacit agreement, they returned to the library. She started toward the table, but he waved her to a chair. Confused, she sat.

He steepled his fingers and started silently for a few moments.

Feeling time starting to slip, and anxious to conclude her calculations, she finally betrayed her impatience with a shift in her chair.

Sitting straighter, he began. "It is not a matter of not wanting to tell you you will find, I'm sure, that you already know. No, it is a question of deciding which matter to address first."

She drew her legs up underneath her, settling into the chair, and looked at him expectantly.

"Before I explain the symbols you will understand them and begin to see their implications before my explanations are finished, I'm sure " he looked away and muttered something.

"I'm sorry? I didn't hear."

"Could you, perhaps..." He Transfigured his chair so it was slightly wider.

Her eyebrows raised a fraction, then she joined him, a little uncertainly. *Okay. Strange.* He put his arm around her and drew her into the crook of his shoulder. *Maybe not so... mmm... Focus, Granger; this is important.*

Touching her seemed to free his voice. "I told you earlier that the power that ultimately took Dumbledore's life was the same power that saved Potter."

She nodded, "Blood magic." Her eyes widened. "Oh."

"No, that was all Lily. She was a mother then. That changes things." Very softly, he added, "But I was... implicated, regardless. Her passion to save her child. Her desperation. And her sacrifice." He closed his eyes and exhaled. Then he raised his eyes to hers. "As you noted so perceptively, I do not always say exactly what I mean."

Turning slightly, she looked at him questioningly.

"Did you never wonder why Albus trusted me?"

"Honestly? Yes. It was enough for me that he did, but I can't well " she gestured toward the table where her papers lay, and shrugged, half apologetically.

"Do not apologize for your curiosity, Hermione. Never. But especially not now." He held her more closely.

Even as she welcomed the protected feeling of his arm settling more solidly around her, it made her worry about what was coming next that made him do it.

"I know he trusted you. He had faith in you. That hasn't been enough for well, everyone else, not since... But I -" She tilted a chin, a small, fierce movement.

Distracted for a moment, he chuckled. "As you've proven, Hermione. And that's the crux of the matter proof. Dumbledore did not, as you say, trust me on faith alone. Although it would not have been unlike him to rely entirely on faith in most matters, do not mistake his faith for stupidity. In this matter, he, too, had proof."

"He knew about... about you and..."

"He knew about me and Lily, yes; he missed little from the Head Table. I refer, however, to a few years later."

She waited.

"The prophecy. You know I heard it."

"Yes."

"And," his voice tightened, "reported it."

She nodded.

"I didn't know, Hermione. I had no idea whose... executions I had just..." He drew his fist to his mouth and held it there, clenched.

She didn't move.

"I didn't know that she was expecting a child, or when. But I learned. And at first I was... I was still angry. But later, eventually... after too long..."

"You went to Dumbledore."

He nodded. "I went to Dumbledore, and he warned them. Lily and - and the Longbottoms. I had expected to die, but he didn't turn me in. Instead, I turned spy."

She sifted the images in her memory and drew in her breath sharply. "You made an Unbreakable Vow with Dumbledore."

"Not with Dumbledore." His fist still at his mouth. "With Lily. With Lily... Potter." He lowered his hand and stared straight ahead.

Hermione stared at him. *He's never called her that before.*

"Dumbledore was our Bond. Every day that he saw me alive, he knew not believed, *knew* - his trust in me was not misplaced."

A thousand questions tumbled through her mind, but she ignored them. "He had faith in you, just the same," she said, stubbornly.

"He was a problematic man."

"So when you said that the power that saved Harry was the same as the one that killed him..."

"It was, Hermione. That power was me."

He gave her a moment to let that sink in. *Think, Hermione.*

She knitted her brows. "The Quidditch game. His broom. You must have been watching him the entire time."

"I was speaking the counter-curse instantly. I hadn't even enough time to identify the source of the curse. Because I carry her blood in my veins, the Vow is more than voluntary."

"A compulsion."

He nodded.

Her eyes widened. "How horrible." Her eyes narrowed. "Severus... what, exactly, are the terms of that Vow?"

Very quietly, he replied, "To protect the child she then carried. To aid him in his mission, should he be the one prophesied to confront the Dark Lord. And, should he fail, to complete his mission for him."

Hermione drew in a sharp breath.

"Yes, Hermione, exactly. Exactly what Narcissa asked of me last year."

"You still loved her. Lily."

"Yes."

"But... wait. You can't complete this mission. Only Harry can."

A raised eyebrow. *Good, Hermione... Now a little more...*

She ran her hands into hair and pressed. "If Harry fails, you will have failed, and you will die."

"Yes, Hermione." *A little more...*

She looked up at him. "Another gift. So you wouldn't have to live under Voldemort, should he..." She shook her head, amazed. "Dumbledore may have been a genius, but Lily... She was..."

"Compassionate." *And you, Hermione, are exceptional.*

*Oh. Oh.* Her eyes widened. "Passion, desperation, and sacrifice. And blood." Her tone was accusing. "All of them yours."

He nodded.

*He did not do that. He didn't!* She reached for his face and turned it toward her own a gesture of compassion, but more one of command. "Your sacrifice. You knew. You *knew*, because of the blood bond, it could be something more, something in addition to the Vow, and you... you..."

"I embraced it."

"A compulsion. For love. The inverse of the Dark Mark."

He couldn't escape her gaze.

"Love. The flip side of Voldemort's power. And you chose it you *twisted* it into a compulsion. You bound yourself. By blood magic. To the Vow."

"Yes."

She glared at him. "That was unbelievably medieval of you."

*Medieval?* He returned her gaze warily. But her expression was changing as he watched. That smile again.

"And selfish, and stupid, yes, *definitely* stupid, but mostly, most importantly, medieval."



He stared at her. *That mind...* He had no idea what she was going to do next.

She brought her hands to his face and held it firmly. "You, Severus Snape, are a bona fide idiot." She leaned in and brushed her lips against the corner of his mouth.

*Breath... Warm...* he thought, his eyes fluttering closed.

"And I think," she said, her lips a breath away from his, "that your medieval idiocy may have bought us exactly the chance we need."

He had no idea why his response to being called an "idiot" was to bury his hands in her hair and draw her to him, claiming her kiss, gently, insistently, lost in the feel of the weight of her head in his hands, his mouth moving firmly, possessively...

His only coherent thought was, *Mine*.

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# The First Time Is the Hardest

*Chapter 11 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Thanks to the usual suspects: Luna305 and Anastasia. A special thanks to Karelia for her sharp eyes and gentle quill. \*blows kiss\*

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*His only coherent thought was, Mine.*

Hermione wasn't thinking at all.

Lips together, gently, softly, then crashing, demanding, hands in hair, pulling, hot breath, hands searing invisible brands, marking, burning, acid fire, raging defiant, furious, angry, into a sweeping, a falling, drowning in the waters of a thousand silent, rippling, shadowing waves...

"Breathe" Hermione gasped. Her neck arched, head bowing to his shoulder, her shoulders rising, falling, each breath a miracle, a reconnection. "I need to breathe."

"Yes, Hermione, by all means, please, keep breathing." A low rasping chuckle in her ear as he buried his face in the hair.

She gripped his collar as though it were her last connection to sanity, his hands firm behind her shoulders, pressing, arms strong, wrapping, lower, claiming, and she he, disappearing into the dark, hot night that was her mouth on his neck, his head fallen back, an offering, her mouth a blessing, a question, an answer, forgiveness, delirium, wonder, awe.

"Breathe, Hermione. Breathe," his breath ragged, her soft lips brushing, gentle, caressing up his neck, her face resting beside his ear

His hands. Grasping her hair, supporting her head, stroking, tracing one long curl to the end. One strong arm around her waist; one hand pressed, sated, on her hip.

Breathing. Silence.

Then, quietly

"Severus?"

Firelight reflecting in the absolute blackness of his eyes. "Yes?" Still playing with her hair.

"Why?"

A low throaty rumble. "Do you ever run out of questions?"

"Not so far."

"I had no choice."

Her eyes glowed. "We all have choices."

He kissed her temple, gently, through her hair. "And I've made mine."

"Hm... Good."

A very, very slightly cocked eyebrow and a sideways look. Still lazily twirling the curl around his finger. "Good?"

She trailed her hand down his buttons. *So soft*. "Very," she said, sounding determined.

His mouth twitched. "Indeed."

They sat in silence for a while longer. Finally, she sat up, snagging her hair as she moved. She extricated her hair from his hand and traced the outline of his eyebrow, touched the corner of his eye, with a light finger. *He's seen too much*.

He closed his eyes, exhaling fully as he felt her hair leave his fingers. "Work?"

She tilted her lips in regret. "Work."

He watched at her from underneath his eyelashes as she stood, twisted her tumbled hair into its usual knot, and returned to her table. Of all of the masters he had served,

including himself, Hermione might just prove to be the most ruthless.

After a moment, he followed her to the table.

She was taking an overlong time to arrange her notes. "May I speak plainly?"

"Of course. I am master enough of my responses to appreciate the delicacy and, ah... urgency of the situation."

She smiled skeptically but couldn't help checking her watch.

"I see you take my meaning."

Hermione blushed furiously.

"Delightful..." He smirked. "Now. If you would be so kind as to summarize our... predicament."

"Ambiguous git," she muttered.

"Arithmancy, Miss Granger."

"As you wish, Professor." She began, "We have the first two figured out the first blow to you is related to Voldemort's diary Horcrux by the life stage of Childhood, by the aspect of powerlessness. The two deaths involved were Moaning Myrtle and, almost, Ginny, both children. The second blow was your taking the Dark Mark, because of - " She didn't look at him. "Yes, well, for several reasons, all tied to Fatherhood and power. The deaths involved in making and destroying the ring Horcrux were Voldemort's patriarchal line and, of course, Dumbledore."

She stopped.

*Don't flinch, Hermione. Not now.*

She drew a deep breath. "Right, then. Moving on. The third Horcrux, the locket, is related to your Vow to Lily or your self-inflicted compulsion. The stage of life represented is Motherhood, and the aspect I'm not sure yet that will take some more work; a bit of a piggy-back with the compulsion riding on the Vow like that...." She made a few notations. "Assuming that this follows pattern a rather large assumption," she said suddenly, eyes going wide. She shuffled her parchments, as if she feared a large smoking hole had appeared in one of them that was about to ignite and consume her hands.

He recognized the impulse for what it was a delaying tactic. *Her logic is perfect, and she knows it.*

Finding no gaping holes in her logic, Hermione continued in her best recitation voice, "Assuming that the fissuring of your soul follows the pattern of the creation of the Horcruxes, we can use your memories of what caused the fissures to understand Voldemort's Horcruxes. In so doing..." she took a deep breath, but her voice did not steady, "...we may be able to understand how to destroy them and who among the Order members is likely to be..." She could not finish. The lives of her friends were about to bleed through her quill.

He quietly finished for her, "Whose lives will be required to satisfy the Horcrux Indemnities, and in what order."

Her quill remained poised over the parchment, but it did not move.

"The first time is the hardest, Hermione."

"I always do my best work, Severus," but the doubt in her voice was unmistakable.

"This time is different, I know."

"Severus... what if I fail? What if I succeed? I - " She faltered and choked, "Either way, my friends are going to die."

"But not necessarily in vain, Hermione. Not necessarily in vain. That is your choice, your gift." Very softly, he spoke the next words: "You can't save them, Hermione. But you can give their deaths meaning."

She shook her head, eyes wide with a growing panic. "I don't think I can do this.... This kind of courage has always been Harry's. Dumbledore's." She looked at him. "Yours."

"You have the power to change the meaning of their deaths. Only you can give them that gift. Since you were eleven years old, I've been watching your mind work, watching it grow. Watching it fulfill its every initial promise, and demand ever greater challenges. You're the only one left whose mind is agile enough, fast enough, subtle enough for this. Your mind is one of our greatest weapons, Hermione a weapon for justice, a weapon of mercy. You can do this. You've been preparing for it since the day you were born."

She closed her eyes, nodded once, quickly.

Moving to stand behind her, placing hands on her shoulders, he murmured, "This will hurt, Hermione. This will hurt as much as anything you ever do. You can do it. And I'm right here."

She nodded. Her face like marble, she put her quill to parchment and started working, Severus a wall of strength at her back.

After setting up the initial formula, she muttered, "Severus."

"The symbols?"

"It's time. I need them now. List them. I'll figure how it fits and work it into the formula."

He began, "Isis - the mother - "

"Lily." She started working the formula.

Without pause, Severus continued, " - hiding her son, Horus, protecting him until he is of age - "

"Harry, the blood magic, her legacy of protection ending yesterday evening." She consulted an earlier note and worked in a symbol containing the body of a lion and the head of a hawk, Horus, differentiated by an eagle's head, for Gryffindor.

" to battle with Set, the serpent, the usurper - "

"We know who *that* is," she muttered and drew the symbol that writhed and coiled even as she shaped it.

" who split Osiris into seven pieces and their inversions, making fourteen, and hiding them along the banks of the Nile, corrupting, trading fertility for..."

"Immortality." She paused. "Is Osiris James, then?" She shook her head. "That doesn't work at all."

"Hermione, this is magic, not maths. *Think*. The mapping is not literal - not one to one. Consider Osiris a metaphor, for fatherhood, for the sun, for the fire that brings life. If you prefer, life itself."

Aloud, she muttered, "How sexist," but inside, she thought, *He still can't say "James Potter."* No need to push this; she could work with it. Again she bent to her parchment.

"And Anubis. The black jackal - " a hitch in his voice "the faithful companion of Isis. The first Potions master. Associated with death, with stasis, with wrapping the soul of the deceased. Associated with the underworld whose gates he guards, the guardian of lost souls and thus the protector of orphans. Or, if you prefer," he continued, "the greasy git of the dungeons."

Still focused, her tone oddly distant, she said, "I don't. Not the label, anyway. The git himself is... interesting."

She worked in the "guardian" aspect of Anubis. They watched the formula run, hot, cold, liquid, its intensity beginning its transformation from ultraviolet to infrared. The changes were slow, subtle, and inexorable.

Hermione breathed. "That's all the formula will accept for the moment. There's still something missing, but this has to resolve first." Shifting in her chair, she commented, "I always thought Anubis was unfairly represented in most modern versions. After all, he *did* help Isis find and reassemble the pieces of the... oh, wait. Isis... but that's Lily. But..." The parallel was hitting too close to home.

"Part of my function regarding the Horcruxes is fulfilled. I know what and where they are, Hermione."

She turned in her chair and gaped at him. "*All* of them?!"

"All. Potter was not the only one who was privy to Dumbledore's work, and I have since had time to think. Finish this one first."

"But - "

Wistfully, he cautioned, "One at a time, Hermione." The small triangle of his white shirt stood out starkly against the otherwise unrelieved black of his shadowy form. "One at a time."

She sighed. She did not want to watch the ink swirling on the parchment. "There's a symbol I've yet to add."

"Soon. Are you ready, Hermione?"

She nodded, determined. But her expression was devoid of any of the light that usually accompanied her intellectual work.

Severus turned his head, curtaining his face behind his hair so she could not see him wince. He had brought her to this point, brutally. Even so, casting a shadow over the usual light in Hermione's face was not anywhere close to the worst crime he had ever committed. Relatively speaking, it should not have registered at all. But -

His left forearm prickled - an early warning, as he was in favor. An hour, probably. Maybe a little more.

Her voice brought him back to himself. "You do know what the next symbol is, Severus?"

"Yes," he said, mustering a mirthless chuckle. "I was going to ask if you did. The later form of Anubis, from the period of Greek influence."

"When his aspects well bonded with those of Hermes, founder of alchemy, and was renamed Hermanubis. I figured that out while you were destroying the kitchen."

"You begin to see, then. Why I - " he couldn't finish aloud, but his mind raced. *Why I destroyed your innocence... used you... tested you... pushed you to see if you'd break. I have to, to protect him. Them.* He swallowed. *To protect you. I had to sacrifice you to protect you.*

The silence stretched between them, her knowing eyes deepening to a shade almost as dark as his own.

"You're playing a dangerous game, Severus."

"Many." His eyes held hers with an intensity almost as profound as that moving on the parchment behind her. "You can finish it now?" It was a challenge.

She returned his gaze with utter composure. "This part of it, yes." With meticulous precision, she added the alchemical figure representing Hermanubis, but inflected it with the caduceus, the symbol of Hermes in his healer aspect.

The formulae swirled into tight, efficient spirals; with less energy expended for greater result, isolated areas began to stabilize.

With an air of finality, she set down her quill.

His eyes widened as her meaning dawned on him. *Hermes*. She had never imposed her will on events before; in one Arithmantic gesture she had demonstrated not only her acceptance of all he had forced upon her in the last hours, but committed herself to seeing it all of it through to the end. Not just as a member of the Order of the Phoenix they were all sworn to stand by Harry Potter against Voldemort. That would have been enough more than should be asked of the slight figure before him, no matter how astonishing her mind.

But Hermione, with the last inflection of the symbol representing their combined efforts, had voluntarily committed herself to an additional end: his liberation.

"Your move, Severus," she said quietly.

Severus could not tear his eyes from the parchment. *Hermione, what have you done?*

"Did I remind you of someone, just now?" She smiled wistfully.

He could not find his voice. Her gift rivaled Lily's. No response seemed possible.

"This formula *will* work," she said quietly.

"Given time." His eyes were haunted.

*He expects to die. He expects to see his name on the list when I'm done. Last, perhaps, but there just the same.*

They watched as the ink eddied. Its progress was hypnotic. And inevitable.

---

A note on sources: All of the references to Egyptian myth and their Greek development, including Anubis being the guardian of orphans and the blending of Anubis with Hermes, are accurate, gleaned from many excellent websites. I took the liberty of making Anubis a Potions master, of course ;) - but he did invent embalming fluid and other

funerary unguents.

# Of Masks and Mirrors (I)

Chapter 12 of 34

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Thanks to Melenka and Luna305. This chapter is dedicated to someone who will never read this story. Ah, humanity.

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**Summary:** *The parchment glows, and a hunger long-denied finally explodes.*

*2009: Special thanks to Lady Karelia for her ruthless eradication of commas in compound predicates! :)*

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*They watched as the ink eddied. Its progress was hypnotic. And inevitable.*

---

Hermione stood unblinking, watching the ink swirling, its color deepening, glowing, reflecting hazily on the polished table. She started as a hand touched her elbow and looked up to see Severus offering her a small flask.

"A Calming Draught," he said.

She waved it away. "I can't; I might need to -"

He ran his hand up her arm and rubbed it gently. "The calculations are perfect, Hermione. You can do no more with them tonight."

"But if something happens -"

"A modified version, Hermione; this will merely calm your mind, not impair your reflexes."

Her eyes flicked from the parchment to the potion. Finally, she sighed gratefully. "Thank you."

Taking the empty flask from her, he reached for her hand and drew her out of her chair. "Well done, Hermione."

An exhausted smile crossed her lips briefly, but it did not reach her eyes. He drew his cloak around them as if its darkness could protect her from what was happening on the parchment.

The glow emanating from it was changing from stormy indigo to a smoky violet.

He shut his eyes against it and rested his cheek on her hair, and she sighed again, a tired sigh, but her breath was smooth. The Draught was taking effect.

He stroked her hair softly, focusing all of his attention on the feel of it under his hand, between his fingers, rubbing it between thumb and forefinger, jarring one of the slivers of glass he'd not bothered to heal. The abrasion against the small cut heightened his awareness of the feel of all of her of her warmth, her weight in his arms. Tilting her chin up toward him, he saw dark circles under her eyes. *Patience, Snape.*

He led her away from the table, toward the fire. He sat in the Transfigured chair. "Come," he said, drawing her to sit next to him.

She leaned against him, her cheek on his chest, staring into the dying fire. It blurred before her, and she blinked. She caught her breath and closed her eyes.

He was sitting at an awkward angle, the chair arm digging into his back, but he did not move. Placing his palm on the side of her face, holding her against him gently, he said nothing, brushing his fingertips against her cheek, thinking.

The third condition of Lily's Vow, the one that guaranteed his death should the Dark Lord prevail, had been the act of a compassionate woman. Hermione's voluntary binding of her will to his liberation stemmed from a different impulse; one that he did not yet understand. He had loved Lily; who had, for a time, loved him. His feelings for her had been the imperative that severed and bound his life, his soul, filling an outward emptiness with an obscure but irresistible purpose. She with her love, her gift, her death, and her child had given shape to Severus Snape, given language to his thought, judgment to his decisions, and reason to his existence. He had long known he would serve his sentence, play out his allotted hour through the terms of his obligation to her, and find his release either as a sacrifice for a Horcrux or in a suicidal attack on a victorious Dark Lord.

That his death might be a sacrifice was the closest thing he'd known to hope; that it would otherwise be suicide, the closest thing to optimism.

Until now.

He leaned his head to Hermione's and kissed her hair, gently. He saw her eyelashes flutter and adjusted his position slightly.

"Hermione?"

"Hm?" She sounded sleepy.

"I believe I've ascertained what you meant by 'medieval.'"

Despite her exhaustion, she laughed softly. "10 points to Slytherin." Sitting up, she rubbed her eyes and smoothed her hair back. Studiously ignoring the glow from the parchment now a rather vile green, shading towards a rancid yellow she tilted her head and looked appraisingly at him.

"Severus, do you really hate Harry?" she asked quietly.

"No."

She arched her eyebrow skeptically and waited.

*She's getting too good at that.* "I hated his father."

"Obviously. I was speaking of Harry."

"Him, I fear."

"You fear Harry?" *Oh, the irony.* "Because you think he might fail?"

"No. If he fails, I have nothing to fear."

"If it's not that, then what is it?"

"Because he holds my life in his reckless hands."

She turned this over in her mind. "Severus... how absolute is the Compulsion? Is it triggered every time Harry's in danger or only when you're nearby?"

His voice measured, bitter, he said, "Every single time."

She eased herself out of the chair and went to stand, alert, by the fire.

"Did you never notice how 'convenient' all of my appearances were? His decision to go after the Stone have you ever heard of 'speed chess,' Hermione? Who found Potter and brought him to the Hospital Wing? I did. When he was in the Chamber of Secrets, I walked every corridor in Hogwarts for hours, in vain I could not find the entrance. The night in the Shrieking Shack, I was there in two heartbeats."

"But... he was in no danger from Sirius."

"*Pettigrew*," he spat.

She shut her mouth, eyes snapping.

"And every time I believed the condition bearable just, mind Potter would, in his sadistic ignorance, devise a way to increase my torment. I spent the Tournament year with an endless, pounding migraine, because only the great Harry Potter can put himself in mortal danger simply by *procrastinating*."

"The night the Dark Lord returned, *I knew* the stakes as soon as Potter touched the Cup. I *knew*, and there in the crowd, surrounded by children with large eyes and bigger mouths, I did not dare move for fear of betraying the larger purpose. To move a muscle would have resulted in my death, Hermione," he hissed, eyes smoldering, and he rose, a barely contained volcano.

His eyes were molten as he closed the distance between them. "Who alerted the Order to the Ministry, the next year? And the next - I *know* that Potter attacked Malfoy in self-defense. I felt Malfoy's intent to harm him almost before Malfoy himself did, and Potter's response followed, hard. I oversaw Potter's detentions personally in order to spare my own strength for what I knew - *knew* - was coming, and in short order. Parking Potter's arse in my dungeon was the *only* way I could get a break the only time I *wasn't* driven to agonized distraction by the Compulsion."

Gripping the mantle with both hands, he dropped his voice. His eyes glowed with manic intensity.

"And that final night, I knew where Dumbledore was taking him. And I waited. I sat, waiting. I sat, reading the book that *that boy's dead mother* had given me, an endlessly reverberating echo that refused to die. I waited. And waited... and then I knew, and I ran - Flitwick fell, a casualty of my haste. Blindly, from the dungeons. Blindly, through the castle. Blindly, through a battle in which *all* of the fallen were my comrades. And up the stairs,

"...and into silence...."

"And all of my marks, my Vows, my Compulsion, all of what you blithely call *my medieval* constraints combined on that Tower into one moment, one act, one towering, inglorious sacrilege. I killed him because Narcissa's Vow compelled me to complete Draco's mission. I killed him because Lily's Vow compelled me to protect Harry have you figured *that* out yet, Hermione Granger? And I killed Albus Dumbledore because *that's what a loyal Death Eater would do, given the chance.*"

The mantle splintered in his hands. He dropped his arms to his sides and stood glaring at the floor.

"The only thing that held my soul in my body was that the bonds were unified, Hermione. Otherwise, I would have fallen."

She looked at him for a moment, then repaired the mantle with a flick of her wand.

"Severus."

When he did not respond, she took a step closer, hooking a finger behind one of the buttons on her shirt. "Severus," she said more firmly.

He stood, unmoving.

"*Severus*," she yelled.

He flinched. Her voice echoed in the house which suddenly loomed, vast and empty, around them.

"Look at me."

He shook his head.

"Look at me," her voice blistered with command.

Out of the corner of his eye, through his hair, he risked one glance.

With one finger, she undid two of her buttons and pulled her shirt to expose the mark on her chest.

The ring of seven black pearl-sized dots was filling, from the center outward, with a small black roiling cloud.

His eyes glittered - empty, save for a terrible, patient hunger.

# Of Masks and Mirrors (II)

Chapter 13 of 34

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Enjoy...

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*The ring of seven black pearl-sized dots was filling, from the center outward, with a small black roiling cloud.*

*His eyes glittered - empty, save for a terrible, patient hunger.*

-----

His hunger would not be denied.

In one fluid, feral movement, he was on her – trapping her hand, straining her shirt open, eyes staring at her mark with fierce, desperate need, her skin flaring to life, his gaze drawn inexorably to the symbol emblazoned on her chest – powerful, possessive, and permanent.

“Mine,” he growled, leaning in, lowering his mouth to the cloud swirling on her skin, a turbulent oasis of potential, of promise.

His voice slid through her, her nerves resonating in harmonic response. She arched in primal offering, the slow, starving insistence of his lips thundering in her heartbeat, his fingers a ring of bruising desperation on her skin. Her hands flew to his face, a wild grasp at balance, at completion.

And they fell, hard, to the floor.

His weight slamming into her, his hair grazing her skin, his mouth demanding on her mark, she enfolded him to her chest, hands firm, gentle, merciless, on his head, knotting in his hair - inciting him, gentling him, discordant, lost, subsumed by fury, pity, fear, and desire, clawing, raking the thick wool on his shoulders in a paradox of mercy and terror as he drew her skin in his mouth, his teeth rough on her skin, the pressure building -

His need unrelenting, insatiable; its satiety forbidden, his hand dove, grasping her hair, wrapping it around his wrist, firmly, holding her trembling just this side of pain.

“I-” his voice breaking

Her hands on his shoulders, down his arms, drawing his full weight onto her, yielding, trapped, secure, safe –

-- he caught himself before, just before, he crushed her, and he tightened his grip in her hair.

“Hermione,” a simmering moan, “I’m dying.” His hands in her hair, clenching, his shoulders shaking. “I want to. I – want – to - die.”

Her breath a desert wind in his eyes: “I won’t let you.”

“How dare you...” he growled.

Her expression fathomless, ancient, newborn, she drew his eyes to hers by force of will alone. “Because,” she said, twisting his hair around her fingers in a dark echo of her own habit, “you asked me – begged me – to - ”

Her fingers knotted around one strand of his hair, she yanked once, hard, sharp, before spreading her hands on his face, pulling him to her, murmuring, “The small pain makes a good distraction, Severus. I learned that from you.”

Eyes blazing, open, aching, he bent and brushed her lips, persuading, hands brushing, burning, down her neck, her shoulders, to the bare skin, dancing, trailing to buttons, through fabric, falling open, delicate, smooth, summer, hot, palm pressed on skin, firmer, farther, grasping her hip, pulling, possessing possessed –

- she rising, body supple, fingers delicate, determined, eager, a button, and another, another, wool, linen rough on fingertips breaking, breaching, taboo, pausing, then -

- her fingers, cool, burning, enflamed, tracing, encircling, spiraling, hypnotic, mesmerizing, a slow firm persistent inevitable balm over his heart, palm pressed, seeking, forgiving, demanding, turning him over, sideways, down, so -

- her mouth over his heart, tongue following fingers, sliding, slippery, downwards, his eyes fluttering shut, captive, enslaved, every soft button a release, a confession, an absolution, linen scraping, exposed, air, a chill, a breath, her skin, warm, a consolation, a problem, a philosophy, a solution -

- resolution, dissolution, innocence, discovery, wonder, knowledge, awe, escalation, rising, falling, rising, building, need, force, shaking, desire, pain, negation, no, pleading, hope, no, belief, faith, no, please, please, then - crashing, spinning, tumbling, falling, softly, boneless, wordless...

... stillness... silence... softness... awareness...

Yes.

The fire died, slowly, to low, basking coals. The glow of the parchment at the other end of the room flared a violent orange. A flash of ozone, then the light fell slowly, fading, bathing the room in a slow, steady heartbeat - an emanation the color of old blood.

Her head back on the hearth, his hair a black waterfall across her eyes, skin cooling, air drying the sweat on their bodies, she did not see the glow, did not think of its import.

Holding him, collapsed, heavy, breathing, in her arms, Hermione smelled rain.

---

Breathing her skin, lips bruised, aching, pressing a soft kiss on her neck –

- and he could move. Trailing his fingertips across her mark, still swirling, rising up, propped on an elbow, a kiss on the small dark circle a hint of promise, a tinge of despair, a breath sharp with life, he chuckled, low, throaty.

She turned, blinking lazily, to watch him.

His eyes sated coals, nudging her chin aside with his head to paint a trail of dark velvet whispers on her collarbone.

She brought one hand up, weakly, entranced, to trace his back, lean, sharp, taut.

He raised his head to look at her. Finding his voice, he murmured, "Why?"

"I had a choice. I made it," she breathed, nestling closer to him.

Another chuckle.

His arm brushed the mark on her chest, and the Dark Mark flared to life.

## Of Masks and Mirrors (III)

*Chapter 14 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: The first name is revealed.*

A/N: Note to readers: I confess that I could not bear to include what happens in this chapter with what happened in the last. I split them into two. ~ Ariadne

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*His arm brushed the mark on her chest, and the Dark Mark flared to life.*

-----  
Hermione felt him tense. "The wards or the Mark?"

"The Mark," he said grimly, sitting up, his moves agile, lithe, precise.

A few subtle wand movements and a fully-robed Death Eater stood before her, reaching a gloved hand out to help her stand.

Unnerved, Hermione nonetheless accepted the offered hand. Something pressed into her palm - something sharp, flat, and metal.

"It's a two-way mirror with a Protean Charm, Hermione – I Charmed it this afternoon. Use it if you need to; mine is attuned only to myself. It's safe," he paused, then muttered, "As much as anything can be."

Mind awhirl, she nodded mutely, her skin growing cold, her heart growing colder.

He reached for her face, but hesitated. She clasped his hand and pressed it to her cheek, the leather glove hard, her eyes searching his masked face for the man behind it.

"After the initial release, one often finds that subtlety has its own, even greater rewards, Hermione. Watch the parchment."

With those enigmatic words, he Disapparated.

Reaching for her clothing, she looked at the piece of metal she held – a half-circle with one sharp, slightly jagged edge. In the dim light it was difficult to be certain, but it seemed to bear the unmistakable impression of once having had tines. *A fork?!* She shook her head in wonder, then was brought up short as two things happened simultaneously: her brain kicked into full gear and her knees gave out.

*Okay... Breathe...* Holding her clothes in a jumbled pile, she collapsed gracelessly onto the nearest chair. *Breathe, Granger.* No, okay, that wasn't happening. This wasn't happening. That did not just happen. And it was certainly not going to happen again...

*Liar.*

A very small, very old smile played across her lips. One that would have frightened even a Gringotts goblin.

A few minutes later, fully dressed, she turned to the table where the dark red light from parchment was still pulsing its tell-tale rhythm.

No. She screwed her eyes shut and resisted the urge to curl into a ball. A voice, an echo out of memory, saying, "*I won't be there to help you.*"

"No, of course not." Then she winced. If Severus could go from... what had happened straight to a Death Eater meeting - *Please be okay* - then she could face what awaited her on the parchment. One name. The first of - "*One at a time, Hermione. One at a time.*" She stared at the cool metal in her hands, then clenched her fist around it – "*The small pain...*" - and stood.

She walked slowly to the table, drew a deep breath, and looked down.

There, on the parchment, the ink whorls had resolved.

*Molly Prewett Weasley.*

Hermione clenched the metal in her fist, and a trickle of blood seeped between her fingers.

---

Somewhere else, a low tone sounded like a gong in his mind, a coppery taste filled his mouth. Severus' eyes narrowed behind his mask. She had seen the first name. He had a good idea whose it was.

Lucius Malfoy spotted the look and mistook it for anticipation. Malfoy clapped his fellow Death Eater on the back and joined a knot of others, clustered by a stone table.

Schooling his eyes to their customary blankness, Severus followed. The plans for the evening had not yet been revealed.

---

Hermione reached blindly for the chair. She shoved the offending parchment away - *Evil! Vile!* - and buried her head in her arms.

---

A rustle of robes in a circle of Darkness.

The plans were in motion.

The owl had flown.

They watched and waited, poised to kill.

---

The tears would not come. She sat up, dazed, and automatically began to straighten her notes. To a casual observer, she might have been packing up her homework in the Gryffindor Common Room.

---

The owl's wings beat a harsh, slow rhythm in the misty air.

---

They waited.

---

She reached for fresh parchment.

*The fourth...* Her eyes screwed shut involuntarily. *You can do this, Granger. You have to do this.*

---

A dark house.

An owl at a window.

A lighted wand.

Trembling hands breaking a seal; a wash of tears on cheeks; joy in the eyes of a mother long shunned.

"Oh, Percy."

---

The cloaks rustled in a rising wind.

---

*Voldemort's fourth Horcrux...* "I can't!" Hermione screamed.

Mrs. Black's portrait muttered in her sleep. Otherwise, Grimmauld Place did not answer.

---

A steady beat of wings, a blasphemous excitement, a collective will bent toward...

A series of *pops* as the cloaked figures Disapparated.

One lingered for a fraction longer than the others, drawing on recent memory. A streak of icy blue-white, and he, too, was gone.

The circle was empty.

---

The jackal exploded into the library, a blazing white light, a shout: "*LEAKY CAULDRON! NOW!*"

And then the library too was empty. No movement, no sound, save the rustle of a lone piece of parchment as it drifted to the floor.



# War

Chapter 15 of 34

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: What happened at The Leaky Cauldron.*

A/N: Thanks, as always, to Luna305 for beta duty, and to Anastasia, for live RR. The ceiling is for you.

---

*The jackal exploded into the library, a blazing white light, a shout: "LEAKY CAULDRON! NOW!"*

*And then the library too was empty. No movement, no sound, save the rustle of a lone piece of parchment as it drifted to the floor.*

-----

Hermione appeared in the Leaky Cauldron. It was empty save for a frowzled, sleepy witch emerging from the Floo.

"Mrs. Weasley! It's a trap!" she shrieked, diving instinctively for the covering shadows of the bar.

Molly whipped her wand out of her bathrobe pocket and backed into the nearest wall as a dozen or more black-robed figures emerged from the shadows. She crouched into a fighting stance, both her posture and the look in her eyes at odds with her usual comforting, slightly distracted presence.

*Too late, Hermione.* A masked figure edged, catlike, toward the bar.

Hermione did not betray the fact that she noticed.

A dozen hexes, curses, and Binding spells flew from a dozen wands, converged on each other, some fizzling, some rebounding to crash into the walls, the ceiling, and the chairs that were stacked on the long wooden tables. Plaster silt exploded into the air and drifted downwards, feet raising the dust from the floor, a cloud obscuring all but the hooded figures and the chair legs, oddly disembodied in the haze.

Hermione watched, unnoticed, from the deep shadow behind the bar. One dark figure separated from the chaos, gliding in apparent slow motion toward the fireplace where Hermione had last seen Mrs. Weasley, indifferent to the flying arcs of light, the blinding iridescence of firing spells, the cacaphony of shouts, yells, curses, counter-curses.

*Voldemort*, Hermione thought, retreating further into the cover of the bar, flinching as a large chunk of the ceiling fell and crashed down, showering her in plaster and bits of brick. *Please, please, Mrs. Weasley, escape.*

Then she realized the older witch would not leave her here; she would reach Hermione or die trying.

*Damn!*

Severus Snape had just reached the same conclusion.

Through the smoke, dust, and hail of plaster, Hermione saw that one of the larger Death Eaters was approaching on Molly's blind side, wand out, ready to strike. Abandoning her hiding place, she leapt to her feet, shouting, "*Expelliarmus!*"

All eyes turned to her as his wand flew to her hand, and in that moment, Molly let fly a Stunner at the Death Eater closest to Hermione.

"*Protego*," Severus snapped, flicking his wand almost negligently a few degrees to the left, deliberately deflecting the rebound away from Molly and angling the shield's radius to protect Hermione from whatever curses might fly her way next.

Molly's face contorted with fury as, not realizing the real implications of his subtle deflection, she nonetheless recognized his voice. The wandless Death Eater made a dive for her, grabbing a handful of her bathrobe, entangling her in it and pulling her down. Molly struggled to stay upright, to free herself, to get to Hermione.

Hermione did the only thing she could think of. "Molly!" she shouted. "Hogwarts!" And she Disapparated.

*Adequate*, Severus thought, dropping his shield and inching forward toward the ongoing struggle, his mind smooth, focused - determined, if nothing else, to help a brave woman die.

But Hermione's departure freed Molly, who, falling, flung a final well-aimed curse at the central ceiling beam and Disapparated. Severus' last thought as he dove under a table to avoid the crashing beam was that she'd taken Crabbe with her.

-----

Hermione grabbed the iron gates of Hogwarts for balance, clutching the Death Eater's wand and the pitted iron column awkwardly. Less than a second later, her Patronus shot off to Professor McGonagall, and she found herself counting seconds, thinking, *Come on, Molly... please.... Professor, hurry!* and *Please be okay.*

Whether that last thought was for Molly Weasley, or for Severus, or for herself, she wasn't sure. She repeated it like a prayer as the wind rustled in the trees.

And then Molly Weasley Apparated before her, on the ground, flailing, struggling with the burly Death Eater. Hermione tried to take aim, but could not get a clear shot. *Blast it! Oh, bloody hell... "Stupefy!"*

The Death Eater went rigid, and Molly shoved him roughly off of her. She flinched reflexively away from the inert body, and stood up slowly, stiffly.

Hermione was instantly at her side. "Are you hurt?"

Molly shook her head. She held the Death Eater at wand point, and, in response to a gesture, his mask slid aside.

"Crabbe," Molly snarled. For a moment she seemed lost, then the corners of her eyes crinkled as if she'd been struck anew by remembered pain. Very quietly, she said, "*Avada Kedavra.*"

Hermione was stunned.

Molly looked up, pale around the eyes, her expression vague. "This is war, Hermione." And she fainted. Hermione caught her shoulders and the two of them slid heavily to the ground. Resting Molly's head in her lap, Hermione looked anxiously toward the castle, where a slanting rectangle of warm yellow shone from its base. A dark figure hurried toward them, a small point of light marking its progress down the lane.

"Professor McGonagall! Hurry!" Hermione shouted.

"Hermione?" came the distant response.

"Molly's fainted!" she called back.

A few moments later, Minerva, wand out, was unlocking the gates. She stopped short at the sight of the Death Eater's body. "What on earth - "

Minerva raked her eyes sharply over the scene - Crabbe's body a crumple of twisted black robes, a foot splayed at an unnatural angle, a ragged hole worn in the sole of one dusty boot; pale dusty swaths painting Molly's deep blue bathrobe, her head in Hermione's lap, her cheeks damply reflecting wandlight; and Hermione, cradling the older woman, her eyes glassy.

"What has happened?" Minerva hastened to Molly and felt for a pulse. Relieved, she asked, "Are you all right, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded, saying simply, "He's dead." After a pause, she added, almost to herself, "Molly killed him."

Minerva stood, nostrils flared slightly, but otherwise betraying no outward hint of distress. "It is high time we got you both inside," she said, waving her wand and gently bearing Molly's prone form through the gates. "I shall have Poppy see to Molly, and inform Hagrid about..." she gestured toward Crabbe's body, "... that." She closed the gates and re-set the defenses, muttering, "Better Hagrid than Filch, oh yes, especially at this hour." More loudly, she ordered, "Come along, child."

Hermione responded obediently, relieved by the headmistress' presence and her familiar, somewhat brusque efficiency. But a little voice in the corner of her mind, the voice that accompanied harder, more knowledgeable eyes and small, old smiles, said, *Child? Oh, no. I don't think so. Not any longer.*

"Once we see Molly settled, I will, of course, be wanting to hear your explanation - " Minerva continued, distantly, but not unkindly. "Although I know you're tired."

Hermione nodded mutely.

Minerva spared Hermione a glance. The girl looked all in: her Muggle jeans grimy, shirt askew, her hair an astonishing lopsided tangle... and, although it might have been her imagination, it seemed to Minerva that Hermione was rather carefully avoiding her eyes. *The child must be in shock...* She sniffed. She would have Poppy see to her, as well, but after they talked.

There was no delaying their debriefing conversation as titular head of the Order, Minerva knew she had to place information above all else, even concern for whatever had put that look on her favorite student's face. A small sigh escaped her lips. She'd lived through the Grindelwald years, and knew all too well the burdens Albus had carried, large and small. This one, she knew, was small.

Well, there was no avoiding it. Better a quiet explanation than taking center stage before a rampant gaggle of distraught Weasleys.

What Minerva didn't know was that what she would ask of Hermione Granger was not unlike what Albus had asked, so often, of Severus Snape.

## I'm Right Here

*Chapter 16 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: The aftermath, the portrait, and a breath.*

A/N: With gratitude to Anastasia, partner-in-Transfiguration.

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*What Minerva didn't know was that what she would ask of Hermione Granger was not unlike what Albus had asked, so often, of Severus Snape.*

-----  
Half an hour later, Hermione sat in the headmistress' office, accepting a cup of tea. The cup clattered against the saucer as she held it in her lap.

*Poor child,* Minerva thought, sitting behind her desk. Aloud, she said "I've notified the Weasleys good news at such an hour is a rarity, but even so, I'm afraid they are quite understandably upset. Arthur is with Molly now, and the children will be along shortly."

Hermione nodded, staring at her milky tea. She blinked. Only hours before she had been gazing into brandy, into a heavy lead-crystal snifter, and in it she had glimpsed the refracted shapes that had led her *You embraced it* - to present events.

Minerva peered at her with some concern. "My dear, I know you must be quite shaken up by what you've seen tonight..."

*Seen? Done.* Hermione just nodded.

"...and I hate to ask it of you, but I need to know. What has happened?"

Hermione began, "I was researching, working on my formula, trying to get a fix on various aspects of the Horcrux problem, and..."

"Working? Where?"

"Grimmauld Place. The Burrow is rather... " she gestured, half-apologetically. "It being Harry's birthday..."

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, Minerva's mouth twitched. "I quite imagine it is rather a difficult place to concentrate. Well, you're safe enough at Grimmauld Place. You did leave word as to where you were going?"

Hermione looked up guiltily. "No, Headmistress. Harry assumed I was coming here, to the Library. I... I let him."

A stern look. "Miss Granger, that was " Minerva stopped herself. Something on Hermione's face... "Yes, well. You know perfectly well it was irresponsible. Continue."

Hermione's mind raced frantically. How much to tell? All? Some? If some, what? She glanced up at Dumbledore's portrait, and Minerva looked at her sympathetically.

"I miss him too, Miss Granger."

"Has he awakened at all, yet?" Hermione asked, the possible ramifications of what she might divulge still playing out in logical pathways that had thus far offered her no guidance for how much to say.

Minerva looked away from the portrait and closed her eyes. In that brief moment, Hermione saw Dumbledore shake his head at her, very slightly. *So you are awake, then. I thought as much... Okay, so, he wants me to keep quiet about Severus.*

Mastering whatever she'd been feeling, Minerva said crisply, "No, Miss Granger, I am afraid he hasn't."

"Ah..." Hermione's tone was bland. *Right, then.*

Minerva looked up. That tone, a tone which revealed nothing save that it was hiding something, reminded her of... no. Shaking the feeling off, she continued, "Miss Granger, do proceed. I cannot keep the Weasleys at bay indefinitely, and forgive me, child you are a sight. Tell me what happened, and let's get you tucked away you may stay in the dormitory and perhaps a hot soak would be in order."

"Yes, Headmistress." *Just the facts. And not too many of those.* Hermione shuffled the night's events in her mind, and delivered a highly edited version of her story. "I was researching, and working a few formulae the library at Grimmauld Place has a few rather... well... shady... um... Arithmantic sources - " An image flashed in her mind, a sensory memory, of Severus' hair sweeping across her face as she clutched his shoulders, the tendons in his neck straining as he arched his back... *Oh, dear... "Shady sources"... indeed.* She swallowed nervously, repressing a highly inappropriate giggle.

"I do understand, Miss Granger, and would urge you to extreme caution where such sources are concerned..."

*Oh, gods...*

The headmistress continued, "They pose no small danger to the inexperienced." She paused, and her face pinched with disapproval. "They can be quite seductive."

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek, hard.

Minerva sighed. "But such risks are sometimes necessary. I trust you have experienced nothing out of the ordinary? No unexpected effects from your activities this evening?"

Keeping her jaw firmly clamped shut, Hermione looked the headmistress in the eye and shook her head.

"No?"

Digging her fingernails into the palm of her hand, she shook her head more firmly.

That seemed to satisfy the headmistress, who nodded once. "Then pray continue."

Hermione drew a steady breath.

Minerva inclined her head sympathetically. "Take a moment if you need to, Miss Granger. Realizing that you have inadvertently flirted with a Darkness for which you were completely unprepared, that you may have courted your own transformation yes, most unsettling. I do understand."

*If this continues much longer, I shall burst into hysterics,* Hermione thought wildly, steeling herself to a greater amount of control than she'd ever possessed. *Focus.* Finding her voice, she announced, "I believe that I may have found a pattern in Voldemort's actions."

Minerva's eyes widened at that, and she leaned forward slightly.

Hermione recounted the parallels between Voldemort's life stages at the creation of the Horcruxes, and the ages of his victims, leaving out all mention of the fact that Severus' memories were what had allowed her to see the patterns. "I am not entirely certain, Headmistress, but the pattern insofar as I have been able to reconstruct it indicates that... Well, I believe there may be some kind of..." she swallowed. "... some kind of life Indemnity required to destroy the remaining Horcruxes. It seems logical."

Minerva sat back in her chair as the implications of Hermione's words registered. *The child's a marvel.*

"I hypothesized that the third Horcrux might be connected somehow to the issue of Motherhood more specifically, fertility and thought immediately of Molly."

"An inspired bit of logic. Yes, inspired."

That small voice in Hermione's mind laughed dryly. *"Inspired." You have no idea.*

"Well done, Miss Granger."

Hermione breathed an inward sigh of relief.

"One more question, before you go."

"Yes, Headmistress?"

"How did you know to go to the Leaky Cauldron?"

Hermione's eyes flew to Dumbledore's portrait again, but no more assistance was forthcoming from that source. Turning her gaze back to Minerva, she was quiet for a moment, before saying firmly, "I can't tell you."

Minerva's eyebrows shot up. "Can't?"

Hermione considered her options, then amended, "No, of course, you're right. I'm afraid that the truth is that I won't. Tell you, that is. You're going to have to trust me."

Although her own manner was forthright to the point of bluntness, Minerva McGonagall had witnessed too many exchanges between Albus and Severus not to catch a similar subtext in this one. *She was tipped off by someone.* She caught her breath sharply. *And she's protecting her source... young Malfoy, perhaps.* She breathed out, slowly, glaring at Albus' portrait. *Wake up, old man. Sooner would be preferable.* Then her heart tightened, and she thought, *I am a Scot, Albus; we've always preferred Claymores to spying.*

There was a long moment of silence, in which she searched Hermione's face appraisingly, running through all of her memories of Hermione's student years. Hermione returned her look calmly, accepting whatever judgment the older witch would reach.

Finally, the headmistress nodded.

"There is something else," Hermione began, reaching into her pocket. "This was in Kreacher's nest."

She stood and placed Slytherin's locket on the headmistress' desk.

Minerva pushed her chair back, eyes wide.

"I believe that Molly's life may somehow be..." Hermione dropped her eyes and her voice, "... required. In order to destroy it," she finished.

The headmistress' horrified eyes flew from the locket to Hermione and back.

Hermione whispered, "I'll keep working on it."

"Do." Then Minerva's eyes softened, and she gave Hermione a small smile. "Whoever - However you managed it, you saved Molly's life tonight. You must continue your research." More briskly, she concluded, "I shall inform the Weasleys that you are working on Order business and that for now you must do so uninterrupted. After tonight - " she glanced out the window at the lightening sky and frowned " - after this morning, then you shall stay at Grimmauld Place. Report to me daily, on your research and... on anything else that may be relevant."

Hermione, knowing herself dismissed, rose to leave. As she reached for the door handle, Minerva spoke again.

"Hermione..."

Hand still on the handle, she turned.

"Be careful." The older woman's eyes were glistening.

Hermione nodded and left. She shut the door and leaned against it. *I'm a spy*, she thought. *Well, no, not a spy, exactly, although goodness know what Professor McGonagall thinks. A courier, then.* Okay, she could work with that.

That question settled, she started to head down the stairs. Abruptly, she reached out for the banister.

Minerva McGonagall had just ordered her to move in with Severus Snape. Inadvertently, to be sure, but... *Oh, dear. And Dumbledore knows... Oh, dear. How very...* She wanted to say "appalling," but the word would not come. *How very... adequate.*

She flew down the spiral staircase, through the halls, and barely made it into the Prefects' bathroom before she finally burst out laughing.

-----  
A parchment lay on the floor in the pre-dawn light.

Stiffly, slowly, Severus bent down to pick it up. He glanced at it the words "Molly Prewett Weasley" still pulsing faintly red and set it on the table, eyes taking in the crumpled parchments that Hermione had roughly shoved aside not two hours earlier. Placing his palms on the table, he eased into her chair and drew the nearest parchments closer to him. His face a flat, expressionless mask, his eyes flicked to the top of a nearly empty page, which bore only the words "Voldemort's fourth Horcrux." Slowly, methodically, he set about smoothing the wrinkles out of the parchments with the heel of his hand, not stopping until all of them lay neat, flat, aligned perfectly with each other and the edge of the table. Resting his fingertips on the edge of the table, then, he focused his breathing and closed his eyes.

The unsuccessful attempt to capture Molly Weasley had earned the Death Eaters responsible for the mission severe punishment. From his place at the Dark Lord's left hand, he had watched dispassionately as Lucius Malfoy had meted out retribution. Only the forger had escaped the Dark Lord's wrath relatively unscathed; planting the doubt regarding Percy Weasley's allegiances was considered reasonable success. There would be time enough to target the family again, and sowing discord was...

Severus chased Albus' voice from his mind and reoriented his thoughts. He, too, believed that the former headmaster's portrait was probably awake. It would make a kind of brutal sense; upon "awakening," the portrait would be subjected to interrogation regarding his Severus' actions, and there was a good reason for keeping those quiet. The last shreds of whatever neutral reputation he had possessed had been sacrificed to guarantee one key moment in which the element of surprise could turn the final tide. A small enough sacrifice, all other things considered.

"*Pretending we're not debating moral relativism is making me terribly thirsty,*" another voice in his mind. A voice that would eventually join the others, deciding all questions in favor of the greater good. His voice was among that chorus, for a very different set of reasons, but now...

*Hermione*, he breathed, flattening his palms over the table where he had watched her work a mere few hours ago. He ran his hands meditatively over the polished, smooth surface. So soft. So hard. Warmed by his hands... Bowing his head, he sat that way until the first rays of sun shone on its surface, into his eyes.

-----  
Damp tendrils of hair still clinging to her flushed skin, Hermione eased into bed as the sun slanted into the otherwise empty dormitory, brushing a hand over the strange new mark on her heart, lingering over the bruises where Severus' sharp, lean body had so desperately tried to subsume her own. She smiled, nestling further down under the covers, then winced as the thousand small cuts from the glass in his urgent hands abraded against the sheets.

She reached to the nightstand for the two-way mirror. Was he back at Grimmauld Place? He'd said it was safe, but she had no idea how long Voldemort would have kept his followers after a failed mission. Resting her hand on the pillow beside her head, she looked at metal for a long time. Definitely it had been a fork, a mundane, utilitarian object transformed by a ruthlessly honed anger into something perfect, then broken, again...

She sighed. Her breath misted on the smooth metal, and she drew it to her lips. *Please be okay.*

-----  
Brought out of his reverie by the feel of her breath on his cheek, he tasted her lips against his own before he drew his half of the two-way mirror out of his pocket. As soon

as he touched it, he heard her barely breathed prayer.

*"Still awake, I see."*

*"Severus?"*

*"I'm fine, Hermione. Sleep now."*

A mild protest, *"No. Don't go."*

*"I'm right here, Hermione."* He closed his eyes against the empty room around him that gave lie to his meaning, if not to his words.

*"I know,"* she thought, already drifting into sleep.

He chuckled tiredly.

*"That tickles,"* her thought barely a whisper. *"Do it again..."*

Hermione's half of the two-way mirror slipped to rest beside her face on the pillow as, finally, exhausted, she fell asleep, her breath misting its surface.

Still holding his mirror, he climbed the stairs, seeking his own bed, finally, settled, his position mirroring hers, the halved metal disk next to his head on his pillow.

Entranced by the feel of her breath on his neck, Severus slept.

## Fade to Black

*Chapter 17 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: Hermione returns, Mrs. Black gives advice, and another name appears.*

A/N: Thanks as always to Luna305 and Anastasia.

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*Entranced by the feel of her breath on his neck, Severus slept.*

-----

Hermione awoke mid-morning in the Gryffindor girls' dormitory to find Hedwig hooting softly at her. Rubbing her eyes, she reached for the note tied to the owl's leg.

"Hermione,

Glad you found it. (We promise not to tease you about S.P.E.W. any more.) And thanks.

Professor McGonagall said you're staying at the old Headquarters and doing research. We'll see you when you've solved everything. Don't take too long?

Harry

P.S. Mum and Dad say thanks. Us too. Mum won't stop hugging everyone. It's a bit annoying. Ron

P.P.S. Remember to eat sometimes! Ron, again"

She smiled, but in the next moment she had crumpled the parchment in her hand. The boys would never understand. She wasn't sure she did. She ran her hand through her hair and dressed quickly, pocketing her wand and mirror.

A few minutes later she was outside the gates. Crabbe's body was gone. *Surreal...* She Apparated back to Grimmauld Place.

-----

*Damn and blast.* Severus was on his feet and Disapparating before the phoenix tear brand on his chest had stopped flaming.

-----

Hermione was already moving reflexively to the left as soon as she appeared in the kitchen, but, this time, the room was empty. The hand on her throat, the voice in her ear, the pressure absent. She glanced at the ceiling, and saw the holes made by the forks.

She released a breath she hadn't known she was holding. *It happened.* Then she glanced at the fine scratches on her arms, rubbing her hands over them, one hand coming to rest over the mark on her chest. *All of it.*

By the force of habit so long ingrained that it was almost instinct, Hermione headed for the library.

A voice stopped her in the hall. "Good morning, Mudblood filth."

"Good morning, Mrs. Black."

"Walking a bit stiffly this morning, are we?" The portrait cackled.

Hermione gaped at her in shock, then muttered something about "polite conversation."

"A word of advice from an old witch?"

Hermione looked suspiciously at the portrait. "Yes?"

Mrs. Black glanced toward the upper corner of her frame, then back at Hermione, "Coffee."

Hermione nodded in understanding. "Not a morning person, is he?"

Mrs. Black's eyes crinkled in amusement.

As Hermione turned back toward the kitchen, Mrs. Black continued, "And next time? Use a Silencing Charm..."

Hermione fled.

Both hands on the kitchen table, she tried to ease her breathing. *Damn.* That bloody portrait had the biggest mouth in the wizarding world, and with the Order likely to appear at any time... there was no telling when Mrs. Black might decide to herald the details of what Hermione had been doing. And with whom. *Damn!* She dropped her head and screwed up her eyes. She didn't know how she felt about what had happened, really she'd hardly had a moment to think, and yet she suspected thinking was not going to help, really... *Breathe... breathe...* - but that made her think of - She slammed her hands down on the table and yelled, "Damn!"

*Pop.*

Severus' cloaked presence filled the kitchen door. He leaned against the frame, arms crossed, hands hidden, only his face relieving his studied darkness.

Hermione wheeled, furious.

His response to the impending tempest was to cock an eyebrow.

Her eyes narrowed. "Make your own bloody coffee." Sweeping past him and past the still-cackling portrait, she stormed into the library. Picking up her quill, she muttered "Voldemort's 4th Horcrux," and started writing.

"FAILURE TO PROTECT" big letters, across the page. Underlined so heavily she nearly tore the parchment.

"Failure to protect Lily." *Another crack in his damned soul. Fine.* Her thoughts were like ice. "Cup. Hufflepuff. Accepted all. Nurturing. Protecting."

Still breathing quickly, she stopped writing. Her eyes glittered with undirected anger. *Who did Voldemort kill for this one?* She tossed her quill aside and stormed back to the kitchen.

Severus was sitting at the table casually sipping his coffee when Hermione appeared in the doorway like an avenging angel.

"And who did he kill for *that* one? A *mother*? A *child*? A *baby*? People in *love*, people with *hope*, people with everything to look forward to? Who? Who was it?!" she demanded.

Severus had the unsettling feeling that he had missed half of the conversation.

"Tell me!" Her cry hung shrilly in the air.

He sipped his coffee slowly and set the mug down with a dull thud that seemed to absorb the echo of Hermione's outburst, replacing it with a leaden silence. "A family," he said.

"A... family." Hermione struggled to bring herself back from the ledge of her anger. "A family."

Severus nodded.

"Oh... oh gods." She leaned weakly on the door frame.

"There was one specific target, of course, but yes."

"Who was the target?" Her voice was deathly quiet.

"Marlene McKinnon."

Hermione shook her head and looked at him. She had no idea who he was talking about.

"Marlene McGonagall McKinnon."

*Professor McGonagall had had a daughter... ?* Failure to protect a family... Hermione closed her eyes. She knew whose name she'd find next. She nodded sharply and left the kitchen without a word.

-----  
An hour later, Severus ventured into the library, to find Hermione glowering at another completed formula. Her face reflected its malignant red glow. "The predictable bastard," she breathed, and looked up at Severus, an unholy fire in her eyes.

The fear he had struck in hundreds of students was nothing compared to the stab of ice he felt in his heart at her look.

He circled to stand behind her. Reading over her shoulder, he saw the words

*Minerva McGonagall.*

One hand on her shoulder, his grip painfully tight.

She turned in her chair and buried her face against the dark wool. "I'm going to kill him, Severus. I'm going to kill him. You can't stop me. Not you, not Harry. Not the whole bloody Order."

Without taking his eyes from the parchment, he grasped her roughly by the shoulders and drew her out of her chair, away from the table, wrapping both of them in his cloak.

They stood that way for a long time, his cloak absorbing the malevolent red glow that was reflected in his eyes.

Pressing her cheek firmly to his chest, his face dispassionate, he was reeling. Did it get easier with time? No. Easier not to show it, yes. Practice made one better at everything, after all, and his life had depended on maintaining an illegible façade more times than he cared to remember. The vacuum of his response ensured that people, most people, would project whatever they wanted or needed to onto him. He had employed such deception against both Potter and the Dark Lord, with equal success.

He moved his thumb on her cheek, just a fraction of an inch. He had had nearly twenty years to perfect the indifference that was his outward response to extreme emotion, light or dark; she had had fewer than twenty hours. Neither his arms nor his cloak would ultimately protect her, any more than the fire of her passion would save him, but it was something, for the moment. The breath and blood and sinew he would sacrifice might buy her, them, the world, a moment. It would be the work of a moment, a moment he'd been stalking for longer than the woman he held had been alive.

Severus Snape knew, intimately, both the worth and the price of a moment. In this one, he held Hermione, her weight warm and tight against him, and he did not move.

Finally, she spoke, her voice muffled and shaking, "You said that you know where they all are?"

He looked down. "I do, Hermione. The cup is at Hogwarts."

She looked up at him. "Hogwarts?!"

He nodded, half-expecting another logical leap.

She sighed and leaned into him. "Just tell me, please."

He said nothing.

She waited. "Or not... okay, then. Hidden in plain sight, probably." She snorted. "Of course. The Trophy Room."

"Of course," he echoed, his voice tinged with a sarcastic edge.

Had Hermione stopped to register it, she would have recognized that edge as a compliment, but she was still thinking. "Either his Medal for Magical Merit, or his Award for Special Services to the School."

"One or the other. I strongly suspect the latter."

"Yes, that sort of crude irony would appeal to - " She paused. "Oh, poor Ron. He spent hours polishing Voldemort's soul."

Severus tensed. He had known about Hermione and Ron all of the teachers had. The youngest Mr. Weasley's affection had been painfully obvious.

Hermione interrupted his train of thought. "Predictable bastard."

"The Dark Lord?"

"Of course. Who did you suppose I meant?" She looked at him questioningly.

He searched her eyes, which were guileless. *Not hiding anything about Weasley, then. So, that innocence remains, at any rate.* "No one." He bowed his head to rest his cheek on her hair again.

Unlike Hermione's open gaze, his action was hiding in the shadows as he made a conscious effort to resist admitting, even to himself, that he had been for an instant - *Surely not. ...jealous.*

"When?" Hermione asked suddenly.

"Just now."

"Excuse me?" She looked at him again in utter confusion.

*Brilliant, Snape.* "You were asking when the Dark Lord make the switch?"

"Yes."

To cover his brief loss of composure at the slip he'd just made, he drawled, "Really, Hermione."

"Oh, fine. It would have been when he returned to the school supposedly to ask for a job. When he cursed the Defense Against the... oh." She stopped herself, remembering what that curse had meant for Severus, for Dumbledore, for all of them. They'd used it, of course, brilliantly, but were still reckoning the cost. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean... oh."

He had leaned in closer and was kissing her hair, his hands drawing her face up to his.

"And what is it that you don't mean," his voice dropped dangerously low.

"I don't intend to remind you of... "

The pressure of his hands on her jaw increased slightly, but sharply. Her breath came with a slight hitch. "It is impossible to remind me of something I cannot forget, Hermione."

She wanted to look down, but his hands held her firmly. She glanced away.

Leaning his face in a fraction, he breathed, "Look at me, Hermione."

She hesitated, but obeyed.

His eyes drew her in, empty and soulless as a snake's. "I cannot forget, Hermione." He pressed a thumb over her heart, insistently, not quite hard enough to bruise, but with enough force to remind her that he could. "And you bear the burden of my reckoning. Does that frighten you?" he breathed.

"Of course it does," she whispered.

"Good."

"Why is that good?"

"More questions."

He felt her try to move her chin, and saw the challenge in her eyes. "Always."

His soul broken, shattered, but imminent filled his eyes again, and his touch turned strangely gentle. .

*Regret...* The word came unbidden into Hermione's mind.

"Because I am a man, Hermione. We would both be wiser not to forget that."

"There's no need to remind me of something I cannot forget, Severus." Bringing her hand to his face, she brought her lips to his, and breathed, "Believe me."

He closed the distance between them and, for a time, neither of them remembered anything.

In her frame in the hallway, Mrs. Black sighed and rolled her eyes. Gathering her heavy skirts, she eased herself out of her portrait. She disliked visiting Phineas Nigellus really, the absence of furniture in his frame was too uncivilized but it was preferable to.... She sighed again. A moment later, her frame was empty.

## Phineas Interruptus

*Chapter 18 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: Laughter, tears, and a message from Dumbledore.*

A/N: Thanks, as always, to Luna305 for a lightning fast beta in a thunderstorm, and to Anastasia, for inspiration and attitude. ;)

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*Mrs. Black disliked visiting Phineas Nigellus – really, the absence of furniture in his frame was too uncivilized – but it was preferable to.... She sighed again. A moment later, her frame was empty.*

-----

Hermione buried her face in his neck, clinging to his shoulder, the side of his face, the solace of skin. Hands buried in her hair, his thumbs on her temples, his lips seeking, tongue tracing her eyebrow to her mouth, and she tensed and held him tightly, time in an endless spiral. Controlled, no movement, holding her, no movement, now, forever... *Pain* and she raked his back, pain, sharper, longer, and then he – reaching out, reaching toward, reaching – falling, headlong, in a long, slow, shuddering tremor of blinding endless darkness.

Upstairs, Mrs. Black peered down her pureblood nose toward the floor, waited, then looked inquiringly at Phineas Nigellus. He regarded the floor speculatively, considered for a moment, and finally nodded. Both portraits smirked.

Head resting on her chest, listening to her heartbeat, her fingers trailing down, resting, on his hip – hand clenching, a sudden pressure, movement, and then a sigh, drifting almost voicelessly through his hair...

...and he was in her mind, his chuckle a backdraft of heat.

Her thoughts a low, dreamlike, answering laugh. *"I love when you do that."*

*"Mm."* He raked his fingers down her sides, and his hands claimed her hips, strong, sudden, subtle, an echo.

She caught her breath. *"And that."*

*"So it would seem."* One hand lingering on her hip, a reminder of what he could do, had done, would do, when he chose; the other a brush on a lip, trailing to a shoulder, his eyes following his fingertips, a swift caress of a collarbone, a press of his palm, holding, and a slow, deliberate thumbprint on the swirling cloud over her heart.

His thoughts darkened in Hermione's mind, and her reason, which had been curled up in a corner of her mind, was awake instantly.

He felt her alertness in his thoughts, and sighed into her mind. *"I would not have -."*

Her thoughts hardened. *"Would not have what, Severus? This?"* An image of skin, black hair, fingers entwined, a hand, pinning, pressing, arms straining. *"Or the mark - "* her thoughts gestured toward her chest.

An image of the cloud as he saw it – boiling, smoke. A shadow of a kiss on her cheekbone, resting, moving, his mouth, breath, breathing warm behind her ear. The tension in her body eased and she held him more closely.

*"I've not asked,"* his thought hesitant. *"Does it hurt?"*

*"No – it's just... wind. Blowing. Rushing."*

*"You can hear it?"*

She nodded against his forehead, his lips brushed her ear. *"In my mind."* She brushed a fingertip lightly down a strand of hair, watching as it reflected the sunlight, as the reflection traveled at her touch. *"Sometimes it screams."*

He clutched her to him, then, his palm on her face, hiding his anguish in her hair, the scent of her skin, the heat of her pulse.

A wordless thought in her mind, a shape, a sound, a movement, a snapping, rippling inky swirl. Something like regret. Something like apology. Something like gratitude. And something like... curiosity?



She pressed her lips to his forehead.

*"That burns,"* his thoughts breathed.

She blew gently where she had kissed. *"And now?"*

A pause – guarded – suspicious. *"Now it doesn't."*

*"Forgiveness works that way."*

He looked at her. Her eyes were dark again.

*"Does logic tell you this?"* His tone was mocking.

Her eyes crinkled with impatience. *"Those were my tears, after all, Severus. They were forgiveness if I say they were."*

He did not say or think anything that she could hear for some time. Finally, his voice was in her mind again.

*"... and this?"*

*"A cryptic question,"* she thought, trailing her fingers down his spine. His skin was alive again and he shivered.

An incoherent grumble, in counterpoint with something that sounded very much like *"More."*

*Laughter... grumbling... more laughter...*

*"That tickles,"* he complained.

*"Then stop being amusing."*

In a flash he was over her, pinning her hands over her head.

*More laughter, of a different kind.* She asked, *"And does that... tickle?"*

He growled.

The two on the couch - and the two in the portrait - were shocked when something large, heavy, and very, very solid crashed in the kitchen.

Hermione looked at Severus. Severus looked at Hermione. And Mrs. Black and Phineas Nigellus looked at each other, their eyebrows arched to the ceiling. Then they heard voices. In a flash, the two portraits were crowded into Mrs. Black's frame in the hallway.

Severus and Hermione, fully dressed, wands out, came into the hall. "I told you, it's not the wards," he said.

"Someone in the Floo, then?"

"It's not a person, Hermione. I don't know what it is."

"But - "

"Cease your chatter and let me listen!" he hissed.

Phineas Nigellus and Mrs. Black tried to crane their heads around the kitchen-side edge of the frame.

"I'd have your job, you old bat," Phineas Nigellus sniggered, as Severus and Hermione inched past them.

"Mudblood whore," Mrs. Black cackled approvingly.

Hermione shot them a look of exasperation.

"Really, Severus, a Gryffindor." Phineas Nigellus made a dry "tsk" noise.

Hermione glared at the portrait. Mrs. Black drew him back slowly. "Watch out for that one," Mrs. Black whispered. "She's got a nasty right hook."

"And claws," Severus muttered.

"Is it true what they say about the nose, then?" Mrs. Black continued, conversationally.

"Severus, please brew me some turpentine."

"Shush, Hermione."

"Me?! What about them?"

In a fluid movement, he had her pressed against the wall, wand arm pinned, arching menacingly over her. "You, I can control."

"Ha."

Her wand was pointing at Phineas Nigellus' ear. He ducked behind Mrs. Black.

Hermione put a hand on Severus' chest and pushed. "Kitchen. Crash."

Severus considered, and countered, "Wall."

Hermione shoved him away harder. "Later."

The portraits grinned lasciviously.

Severus let Hermione go and she pointed her wand at the bridge of Phineas Nigellus' nose. The portrait went slightly cross-eyed. "If you breathe a word of any of this to Professor Dumbledore - "

"He already knows." Phineas Nigellus chortled.

Severus and Hermione both winced, looking for all the world like two Third Years caught snogging after curfew. Phineas Nigellus let forth a sharp bark of what might have been laughter.

"He sends his regards, and a message."

Snape arched a slow, malicious eyebrow.

"He says to tell you that if you hadn't murdered him, he'd fire you for this." The portrait turned to Hermione. "And you, young woman...."

Hermione gulped and leaned weakly against the wall.

"He says that unless you defeat the Dark Lord and save this maudlin old bat from himself, you've no chance of making Head Girl. He gives you a week."

Severus scowled and stomped into the kitchen. Death had not improved Dumbledore's sense of humor.

## One Word

*Chapter 19 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: The list completed. The kitchen gets terribly crowded.*

A/N: One moment herein is owed to Luna305, who suggested it ages ago. (She's started making noises about writing a fic of her own. I'd like to read it.)

---

*Severus scowled and stomped into the kitchen. Death had not improved Dumbledore's sense of humor.*

-----  
Hermione's looked closely at Phineas Nigellus. "I don't believe you."

Phineas Nigellus crowed with laughter.

"I don't," she said, more firmly.

"Hermione?" Severus called from the kitchen.

She glanced up. He didn't sound terribly worried, just confused. Fine, that could wait. Turning back to Phineas Nigellus, she raked him with an appraising look. Eyes narrowing, she announced, "You're lying."

Phineas Nigellus' laughter calmed and finally stopped. He regarded her curiously, then coldly. "And what," he began, every inch a former headmaster, "makes you so sure?"

"Dumbledore's not that callous. Wasn't. Isn't. He simply wouldn't say such a thing. Not that way. Not to Severus." What he had asked of him had hurt him enough.

"Hermione?" Severus called again. Hermione heard something scrape on the floor.

A few minutes' staring contest and Phineas Nigellus finally grinned. "All right, girl, have it your way. If it makes you feel better, believe that I lied." He smiled wickedly at Mrs. Black. "I haven't had such fun since -"

Hermione's fingernails were on his canvas cheek. Phineas Nigellus flinched.

Mrs. Black interjected, "This is *my* canvas. His is upstairs!"

Hermione scowled. "It wasn't entirely a lie, was it."

Phineas Nigellus' eyes flicked to her fingernails and back to her face. "No. You can be certain that Dumbledore sends his regards, and that he gives you a week. The rest..." he shrugged.

Hermione pressed the canvas harder. Mrs. Black huffed, but did not move.

Severus emerged from the kitchen and froze at the tableau before him.

"It lied, Severus. I think."

"Slytherins do, sometimes" Phineas Nigellus stated. "That said, the two of you do need to remember your Silencing Charms. You've been rather... rude."

Mrs. Black added, "Purebloods cast them reflexively. To do otherwise is disrespectful. Sign of bad breeding." She sniffed.

Hermione turned helplessly to Severus.

Severus drawled, "Turpentine?"

"Indeed."

He gestured for her to precede him into the kitchen, where her trunk lay in front of the fireplace.

He looked at it, then at her, folding his arms. "I assume there is an explanation?"

"Oh. Well... yes. Right." She could not bring herself to look at him.

"Yes?"

"I'm to stay here while I research. Um... uninterrupted."

"Really." Severus pondered the implications of this.

"Orders." She sat at the table. "I have orders."

"Orders," he repeated blandly.

"From Professor McGonagall." She clasped her hands and stared down at them.

Severus joined her, his face stony. Finally, he said, "A week?"

"A week."

He Summoned coffee. Hermione made a face at it, but picked up her mug.

"It's an acquired taste," he said.

"Dark, bitter, enervating," she mused. "Yes, I can certainly see how that might take a bit of getting used to." She looked at him wryly. His lips tightened in a wan impression of his usual smirk.

Her expression grew serious, and his breath caught in his throat.

"Shall we finish the list, then?" Her voice sounded brittle.

He forced himself to meet her gaze. Not betraying the control he was expending to stay still, not to look away, not to reveal that every fiber of his being was shouting "No," he said instead, calmly, "As you wish."

She met his eyes only briefly, and dropped her head once more. A week.

"All right, then," she said softly. "What's the rest of it? I'll work the equations and report them to..." She bit back the words "the headmistress." Having in a very real sense forged the woman's death warrant, such formality seemed inhuman. "... to Minerva," she finished.

Severus perceived what she had not said, the decision she had made, and what lay behind it. He acknowledged all of this with a respectful nod. The nod she had earned so many times in his classroom, the nod he had afforded her only mentally, unable to offer even that token respect in a room full of Death Eaters' children. *Well done, Hermione.*

She smiled sadly.

"The remaining Horcruxes pose additional complexities," he began, the words coming from his mouth as though echoing from some deep, hollow chamber. "The fifth is the snake, Nagini. The sixth..." he paused, then committed himself, "... is Potter's scar."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Harry? Harry is a Horcrux?" Memories of conversations, of Harry's dreams, of his visions, everything flooded back to her. "Of course, yes," she said, distracted by the echoes of conversations in the Common Room, "it does make sense, and it would explain his problems with Occlumency, but..." She looked at Severus suddenly, horrified. "But Harry can't die! The prophecy!"

Severus was careful to keep his eyes on the table. He would not look at her, not now. The table, then. His hands. Yes. That would do. Very appropriate. "Dumbledore did not believe that Harry himself is a Horcrux. Just the scar. No more do I believe that that indemnity will be paid by Potter."

She furrowed her brow. "But the distinction between Harry and his scar – it's academic."

Still looking at his hands, he said quietly, "Dumbledore did not seem to think so."

"Did he explain further?"

"No."

"Of course not." She rubbed her eyes, then muttered, "*Accio quill and parchment. Accio notes.*" And, *Accio Dark Arithmantic text I won't have time to learn before...* Her throat tightened.

Severus watched her work the next formula, not moving, barely breathing, his history, his work, his blood, his passion, his sacrifice, all in her hands, in her mind, running through her quill.

She began muttering, "Voldemort, #5: Nagini, the death of Frank Bryce, the gardener..." she paused for a moment, reaching for a thought, but it refused to stay. "SS: Vow to Narcissa, protection, fostering..." She paused, and wrote, "Guard? Guardian? Caretaker?" She closed her eyes briefly. Easier not to predict. *Just keep working.*

He watched her face as she wrote, watched her shut off the knowledge of the next name even as it occurred to her. He should care about this fifth name, but he did not. The sixth, however...

She worked these elements into a formula and set it aside as soon as it had started its long, swirling progress into death.

Her hand shook as she reached for another piece of parchment.

He reached for her wrist. "Not yet."

She tried to pull her hand free, not looking at him. "It's better faster. I won't have to work up the courage again."

Yes, *you will*, he thought, not taking his hand off hers. "Not yet, Hermione."

"It's easier this way. Best get it over with."

"No."

"I-" she tried again.

In her mind. *"Hermione, please."*

She stopped moving and stared unblinkingly at the table, her face reflecting the muddy green light from the parchment she had just set aside. His voice: *"Hermione, please."* Dumbledore's voice: *"Severus, please."* She shut her eyes. *No.* Her eyelashes were damp, and her eyes, hidden, were full of self-loathing.

He could not look away from her face, bathed in green light. He could not think, could not breathe, until the green had seeped into yellow.

A single tear escaped her eyelashes.

He caught it on his fingertip.

She opened her eyes and saw it there, sparkling, and looked at him searchingly.

A tear takes some time to evaporate. Longer than it takes a formula to resolve. Longer than it takes to ask and answer an unspoken question. Longer than a kiss, longer than conception, longer than death.

Words give shape to silence.

They had none.

They watched it until it dried, leaving a small pinpoint of salt on his finger.

Just a tear. Just salt and water. Nothing more.

Nothing more than everything.

-----  
Hermione closed her hand over his. The parchment's glow was deep red, almost brown, and beating very slowly.

*Rubeus Hagrid.*

She closed her eyes. She wasn't surprised. His titles, of which he was so proud... The Keeper of Keys and Grounds. Care of Magical Creatures Teacher... *Oh, Hagrid.*

Severus watched her closely. It was coming.

Finally, she drew a breath and exhaled deliberately. One more name.

She looked at him then, as if asking permission.

He nodded.

She wrote, "6th. Scar. Lily. Died protecting Harry."

He could not look away.

She wrote, "Draco – failure to protect, failure of mission."

She glanced at him. He nodded. The 6th fissure, and then a final blow. Killing Dumbledore had cracked the fissures wide open.

She reached to tap the parchment with her wand to set the formula in motion toward its final conclusion, then stopped.

She reached instead for his face and kissed him. Once. Softly. For now. Forever.

"I love you," she said.

His eyes still widening in wonder as she tapped the parchment.

They waited.

The tension threatened to tear Number 12 Grimmauld Place off of its foundations. Even the portraits held their breath.

-----  
The ink flowed, broke apart, swirled, and flowed again.

No resolution.

They frowned.

"It's not resolving," he said.

"I see that."

Still no resolution.

"The formula was perfect," she insisted.

"I know."

Still nothing.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know."

She thought. He thought. Eventually she went to the library for a book.

Then he did.

An hour later she went for another.

Two hours later, he brought back three more.

Five hours later, the table creaking audibly under the weight of the books they'd read and set aside, she looked at him.

He was staring at a page, eyes glassy, as if he could by will alone force it to contain information it very clearly did not.

She lay a hand on his arm. He jumped.

"It's not here, Severus."

He re-read the last paragraph and turned a page.

She sighed. "It's not here."

She reached out, gently, insistently taking the book from him.

Something rubbed her knee, and she glanced down. *Lily's book?*

She reached for it and set it on the table.

"I think the answer's in here."

"Why?" he asked sharply.

"Would you believe me if I said intuition?"

His eyes, tired, glittered coldly. "No."

*Ok, then.* "It rubbed my leg."

She heard his voice, in her memory: *Page 394.* She opened it and read, "Isis, Osiris, and Horus."

*Oh, damn.* Even in his memory, he hadn't admitted the existence of...

She reached for the parchment and added "James."

He glowered. Lily's book touched his hand. He jerked away.

"They were a family."

"I know that," he spat, refusing to watch the ink swirl. It was beginning to glow.

-----  
A web of blood, scars, and protection.

They sat in the middle.

She watched.

He just waited.

-----  
A flash of ozone.

She watched.

Fade to red the color of old blood.

He looked up.

Finally, the pulsing heartbeat in the glow. Different. Arrhythmic. Out of time.

"Oh, no," she breathed. *Two...*

The first name stabilized.

*Severus Snape.*

He acknowledged it with an ironic twist of his lips.

But it wasn't behaving properly; it blurred and resolved into

*Hermione Granger.*

She had no time to react before it blurred again, then resolved back into *Severus Snape.*

They watched as their names cycled in and out of focus, alternating with the heartbeats.

They looked at each other in confusion, then the dissonant pulses slipped into sync. They looked again.

One word: *You.*

The glow intensified, brighter, unbearable, searing.

The parchment burst into flames and fell to ashes.

-----  
Two people sat in the kitchen in Number 12 Grimmauld Place, their hands clasped tightly, although neither would ever know who had first reached for whom. Between them on the table, in a circle of ashes, sat a tiny, ugly, featherless bird. It opened its eyes and emitted one pure, perfect note.

An otter the color of winter starlight appeared on the table, peering curiously.

A jackal, only a little darker, put its paws on the table and sniffed. For the first time in its existence, it wagged its tail.

Then it blushed.

# Tayet

Chapter 20 of 34

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: A phoenix, a problem, and an insight.*

A/N: My thanks to the lovely trio Luna305, Mama Ariadne, and Anastasia, as always, and to Melenka for the Walking Shadow mix. A special thanks to emmacrew, who figured out what baby phoenixes eat.

---

*Between them on the table, in a circle of ashes, sat a tiny, ugly, featherless bird. It opened its eyes and emitted one pure, perfect note.*

An otter the color of winter starlight appeared on the table, peering curiously.

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Then it blushed.

-----  
*Oh...*

Then Severus was in her mind. *"Don't move..."*

*"That's a..."*

*"A phoenix, yes."*

Hermione's otter extended a curious, translucent paw toward the tiny phoenix. The phoenix tilted its head sideways and blinked, rustling its wings. The otter wiggled its paws in imitation, then looked up at Hermione.

*"...is it Fawkes?"* Hermione asked, scarcely daring to breathe.

A new note sounded, and in their minds they heard a voice like a single drop of water: *"Tayet."*

The voice was music, and female. They glanced at each other and looked again at the baby phoenix. Tayet.

The jackal, still blushing faintly from its undignified wagging, leaned in for a closer sniff, and Tayet extended her neck to touch her beak to its nose. She sang another note, and the jackal drew back a fraction.

Woman, man, otter and jackal watched as Tayet took her first, tiny step. Blinking at the jackal, she tilted her head. A small pearly tear formed in the corner of her eye, and she touched it smoothly to the jackal's nose. The blush disappeared.

The jackal seemed to think for a moment. Then, very seriously, it wagged its tail again.

Tayet sang another note that sounded, somehow, like amused laughter.

*Lovely*, Severus thought, with only a trace of his usual irony. The bird was definitely female.

Tayet looked at him as if to say "What did you expect?" She nestled down into the ashes, closed her eyes, and fell asleep. After a moment, the patronuses faded out.

Severus' eyed glittered as he looked at the sleeping phoenix. He didn't dare look at Hermione. The word on the parchment - *"You."* A problem in a word; in a word, a problem. He exhaled carefully. He did *not* sigh. He was damn sure not going to start now.

He exhaled again. No. Definitely not going to sigh.

"Well..." Hermione began.

*And now it starts.* He dropped his head. *Just like Lily.*

She drew a breath, and gave a shaky laugh. "Well. Perhaps I am going to die because your psyche has more buttons than your frock coat after all."

He did not look at her, and did not return the laugh. *Yes, you are going to die. Just like Lily. And for the same reasons.*

He suddenly reached for his lapels and ripped his coat open, off. Buttons scattered to the floor.

Hermione jumped.

Sitting at the table, in a white linen shirt, he bowed his head into his hands.

She watched a button roll away, spiral almost lazily, and drop, finally, to the floor. Keeping her voice low, even, she said, "I was implicated anyway, Severus. Ron and I talked about it a lot, last year. The chances of all three of us surviving were never good. We never mentioned it to Harry, but..."

He looked up. Weasley. Again, a flash of jealousy. *Just like with Lily...* His face hardened as he tried to shove the jealousy aside.

Hermione watched the subtle changes on his face. "Severus," she said carefully.

He turned away from her, his face half in shadow.

"Severus, before, what I said... I always mean what I say."

Her words echoed in his mind. *"I love you."* He could not speak. All he could think, all he could see, all he could taste, was, *Just like Lily. And, No.*

Finally, Hermione stood.

"I'm not Lily, Severus."

His body went tense. She heard it, the friction of cloth on cloth.

He said nothing.

"I'm not," she said simply. "And I'm not going to let you... us... either one of us die."

He pushed his chair away from the table and stood up, going to stand at the window. Eyes hard, he saw her reflection in the glass. "As if you" - he drawled the last word, a knife, twisting it - "have that kind of power." He closed his eyes against the wave of self-hatred that broke and ran, running, chill, cold, rising between the pieces of his soul.

"If I don't, we do." Hermione watched his reflection. His white shirt reflected in the window glass, lending his pale skin a strange luminescence. *So broken, and so beautiful...* "Something made Tayet, after all. Or have you forgotten that miracle already?"

He scoffed, "Miracles are for fools and madmen. You no more know where she came from, or why, than I do."

Hermione was quiet for a moment. Then - "Why did you choose me for this?"

The cold ran free from his soul, gathered again, poised to break.

*No.* But the wave was too powerful. "You were the logical choice. Your mind sees patterns, breaks, inconsistencies. Your questions. Your rogue talent for Arithmancy."

"Professor Sinistra would have served you as well in that area."

"She is not a member of the Order."

"You are a spy, Severus. You could have worked around that to get the information you needed."

The wave was gathering in strength, speeding straight at Hermione.

"There was an element of expediency in my choice - time being of the essence."

"What you mean is that you could overcome my defenses more easily."

He turned then, to look at her, eyes hard, and the wave broke. "I didn't have to. You volunteered." *Just like Lily.*

She acknowledged the cold wave in silence. Then, very quietly, she said, "You gave me little choice."

His voice matched hers. "We all have choices, Miss Granger." *Lily had a choice, too.*

"'Miss Granger'?!"

Her shout rang in the kitchen. Tayet let out a sleepy note of complaint.

Her voice dropping, closing the distance between them, she hissed, "You might as well call me a Mudblood - it's what you did to her. Oh yes, I saw that memory too, Severus. I know exactly what you're doing. And why. And I think it's pathetic." Inches from his face, she stopped. "Harry was right. You *are* a coward."

His clenched his fist.

She looked him steadily in the eye. "Yes, Severus, be afraid of Harry. Be afraid of me. Be afraid of Tayet. Because we're one and the same. The power that saved Harry Potter is the same power that killed Albus Dumbledore. It's called 'hope.'"

A muscle jumped in his cheek.

"It's also called '*yours*'."

He felt her words like a slap, but his face remained impassive.

She turned her back on him and looked at the sleeping phoenix. "Be afraid of it if you want to. It will probably make little enough difference, in the end."

Thoughts shaking, she reached her mind for the comfort of Tayet's existence. *Hello, little one.* Ignoring Severus, she Transfigured a parchment into the kind of perch Dumbledore had had for Fawkes, cupped her hands around the ashes and the sleeping bird, and set them carefully on the stand. *What's this? Feathers, already?* "Hm."

Something in her tone pierced the competing echoes of her words in his mind. Bent over the stand, her hair twisted to lie over one shoulder, her eyes gleaming, she was completely absorbed in thought.

"How quickly do phoenixes come to full maturity?" she asked, as though her previous words had not happened.

*She is ruthless...* "Fawkes would go from chick to adult in a few days."

"Ah..." And her face was alight again, from something internal, something he could neither see nor perceive.

"Hermione, I - "

"Not now. I'm thinking."

"Yes, now," he insisted, reaching for her arm.

She sidestepped his hand, saying firmly, "No, Severus. I need to think. And quickly. We don't have much time." Returning to the table and reaching for her quill, she said, "If you wish to be useful in the meantime, you might figure out what a baby phoenix eats."

His response was as automatic as though she were a professor and he her student. "Fireflies. They eat fireflies."

"Then I suggest you find some."

He was dismissed.

A few minutes later, Severus Snape, sans frock coat, was standing in the back garden of Number 12 Grimmauld Place, angrily waving fireflies into a jar with his wand.

Seeing his own sacrifice confirmed had been no shock. Seeing hers... "*You*"? Damned ambiguous pronoun.

Hermione had received the indication of her death with an aplomb almost equal to, if less sardonic than, his own. Practical. Pragmatic, even.

*Ruthless.*

He could not be as pragmatic about hers.

A peremptory wave of his wand, and several fireflies zoomed into the jar.

He had feared, when she had worked the equation that would result in Molly Weasley's name, when she had inflected the symbol of their joint working with that of the healer, that by imposing her will on events she would become trapped in the web that was drawing them all inexorably toward the end.

A rather rapid end, if Phineas Nigellus could be believed.

Another imperious wave. More fireflies.

Severus suspected that Phineas Nigellus had reported Dumbledore's message accurately enough. "...if you hadn't murdered him, he'd have to fire you."

Out of nowhere, he chuckled. *True, on both counts.* Even if she loathed him after what he'd just said. He sobered instantly.

One week. He did some rapid figuring. The dark of the moon, then. The death of the old moon; the birth of a new.

*Bloody metaphors.* The former Potions master had worked for Dumbledore for too many years, in too many capacities, not to know a metaphor when he saw one. And the birth of a new phoenix was a great bloody metaphor, a cacophony of hope exploding the measured cadence of despair.

He scowled.

Metaphors depended on hope for their existence, for their effect. Troublesome. Chaotic. Created in the hope of being decoded later, they were questions asked in blind faith - faith that they'd even reach an ear, never mind find an answer. And the damned things didn't have answers. They just spawned more questions.

Neither subtle science, nor exact art. Bloody riddles. Enigmas. Guessing games.

Logic didn't apply.

He snorted. He preferred knowledge, even when it cut. You could count on pain to be real.

A light wind brushed his hair in his eyes as he looked through the rippled glass window at Hermione, bending over her work, at the curve of her cheek. He squinted, and her image blurred before him.

What in blazes was she up to now?

A firefly crawled out of the jar and onto his finger. He tipped it back in and flicked the jar closed with his wand.

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Confronted with the imminence of her own mortality, Hermione was grimly making a to-do list.

1. Tayet. (Name? Check Lily's book?)
2. Tell Minerva. – Hogwarts.
3. Find cup. Transfig. (Minerva.) – Hogwarts.
4. Tell Molly. (Minerva; Hermione?) (Family? Molly's dec.)

She closed her eyes briefly.

5. How to destroy: Research.

*5. How to kill your friends: Research. How to die: Research.* She rested her head in her hand.

*How to kill him...* She groaned.

Tayet sang a low gentle note.

Hermione looked up to see the phoenix watching her.

The birth of a phoenix could not be just a coincidence. And patronuses did not just appear unbidden. Unless...

Unless...

Unless there was a way around the Indemnity sacrifices - at least theirs - and unless...

... unless they *both* already believed it was possible.

Only that would explain the spontaneous appearance of both patronuses. Only something so profound as to circumvent the need for conscious memory, for the willing of



happiness, for the focusing of a spell... No, they had just – appeared.

It was impossible. But it had happened anyway.

Love? Hermione considered. More than that. Hope. No... even more. She closed her eyes to better hear her thoughts. Passion, desperation, sacrifice. Two names on a parchment. "You." Yes, well. Love, hope, faith. *"Do not mistake Dumbledore's faith for stupidity."* Dumbledore. Fawkes. Phoenixes. Faith. Belief in the unseen. Unknown. In the impossible.

She shook her head. There was something there, but it was still just a hazy shape in a fog glass. She would find a way around it. She would bloody well create one if she had to.

Hermione looked out at the dim, hazy white shape in the garden.

Tayet cocked her head and whistled, two low throaty notes.

Even as her heart tightened, Hermione couldn't help smiling. "Yes, he is, isn't he?"

Tayet trilled at Hermione, and, apparently satisfied, tucked her beak back under her wing. Growing feathers was tiring. She didn't have much time.

Her plumage ranged the dark end of the spectrum. Dark green. Indigo. Purple. Midnight.

*Apf*, Hermione thought, rising to join Severus in the garden.

Severus. A problem in a word; in a word, a problem.

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Sources: The thinking behind chapter owes a great deal to the kindness and inestimable wisdom of Fr. Andrew Greeley. He is a constant source of encouragement and inspiration.

## Trapped

*Chapter 21 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: Fireflies are caught, Severus is ensnared, everyone is trapped, and Tayet is hungry.*

A/N: A million thanks to Luna305 for the lively canon debate and to Anastasia for providing confirmation. :)

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*Severus. A problem in a word; in a word, a problem.*

-----  
The door creaked as she entered the walled garden. He looked up.

In the dark, clutching a jar of fireflies, with the wind dusting his hair across his pale face, he looked, to Hermione, impossibly young.

"Patronuses can't lie."

The defensive mask started to slip back into place, but she placed her hand on his cheek and said, "No."

He stared at her blankly for a moment, both hands on the jar between them, then a shift in the way he was holding his head and he nodded.

Apologetically.

Hermione's lips twisted slightly. *Good enough.*

"You were speaking of patronuses," he said after a moment.

"Did you call yours?"

"No."

"Neither did I. Have you figured that out yet, Severus?" she said, smiling slightly, wistfully, her fingers losing a battle with the breeze as she tried to keep his hair out of his eyes.

"I presume you have."

"Of course," she ran her fingers more deeply into his hair and held it away from his face.

"And it has something to do with hope."

"More than that."

*Bugger.* He wasn't sure where this conversation was leading, and he wasn't sure if he was a passenger or if he was tied to the tracks somewhere ahead of its onrushing progress. Either way, he wasn't happy.

"They could not have appeared if we didn't believe there was a workaround to the Indemnities. Or to ours, at least. The rest " she shook her hair out her face. "I don't know yet. Ours was the one we were working on at the time."

*Ours.* "You have decided it's both of us, then?"

"It has to be. If it were just one or the other, the formula would have resolved right away. I had to add... him..." She felt her cheeks flush, but did not move away.

"James," he said, quietly.

Her eyes searched his face. He brought his hand up to cover hers, and leaned his cheek into her palm, looking at her.

"So what is it," he said, drawing her hand to his mouth, "this 'more than hope' you speak of?" He breathed the words into her hand and rested his lips against her palm. "Love, I suppose?" A hint of a self-mocking shadow in his tone.

"Well... um..." her heart was beating faster. Hearing that word in his voice was doing all sorts of interesting and unpredictable things to gravity. *I could just...* "Well... no, actually. I mean, yes, that's more, but no, it's not what I was..."

His eyes sparkled at her in the light from the fireflies he held between them, then he could not help himself. He threw back his head and laughed, helplessly, a gentle celebration of her confusion. "Just tell me, Hermione." His tone grew calmer, but no less gentle. "Tell me."

"Faith... I think." She glanced at him, wary, anticipating his cynicism.

"Faith." He repeated. Faith, which ran counter to everything he trusted, up to the point at which the impossible happened. Beyond that, he had nothing.

No one did.

"The patronuses were visible evidence of faith. Proof. Of faith. It's a paradox. It's impossible. But - " she shrugged. "But there you are. We can believe in the impossible because we already have done."

"So, all we have to do is do the impossible, then?" - his tone still held an echo of his laughter.

"Yes." She sounded both serious and undaunted.

"Or die trying?" gently, that note of laughter persisting, deepening.

"Well, yes, that's self-evident," she said, drawn into his voice, her heart warming in counterpoint to the mist that was rising beyond the garden walls.

"Yes, it is, isn't it," he breathed, brushing his lips once more on her palm, parting, opening... tasting..*Salt.*

Her breath caught, and, still holding the erratically flashing jar, he reached around her and drew her closer to him.

"And this, Hermione? Is this self-evident?" he said, tilting his face to hers, close enough for breath, his lips a shadow's width away from hers.

"What?" she whispered.

"This."

His lips on hers, a glow open, warm, soft, brief real present a gift. Asking nothing.

Signifying everything.

She opened her eyes and ran her thumb along his cheekbone, his hand still covering hers. "Severus. I'll find a solution. I will - "

"Tomorrow, Hermione. Tomorrow is time enough for everything."

It wasn't a lie, exactly. Not as long as tomorrow was still the truth.

She opened her mouth. He thought for a moment she was going to argue. He waited.

"Tomorrow," she agreed, and she kissed him.

A low melody arose from the kitchen. Phineas Nigellus appeared in Mrs. Black's portrait frame. He looked at her questioningly. She put a finger on her lips and shook her head.

"I think," she said, quietly, "that they've awakened the phoenix."

"Phoenix?" he mouthed.

She nodded.

"A new one?" he whispered, eyes widening.

She nodded. "I think so."

Phineas Nigellus had not experienced shock in several centuries, so it took him a moment to identify it. Then he nodded. "I'll inform Albus. If that dratted old cat isn't in there," he muttered.

Phineas Nigellus was gone before Mrs. Black could wave him to silence.

She went back to listening. Tayet's first song slow, mournful, peaceful; a promise of rest loosened something in her heart she'd held tight since hearing the news of her younger son.

"My baby," she said softly. "My baby."

-----

Dumbledore listened with peaceful eyes.

Then he closed them and went back to sleep.

-----

The mist was rising, but it did not spill over the garden wall. The wards were keeping it out. Which meant

"Hermione," Severus breathed. *"In the house. Now."*

They slipped into the shadows and into the house.

*"Upstairs."*

Hermione nodded and swiftly gathered Tayet in her hands.

Out of the kitchen, into the dark hall. Past Mrs. Black's sleeping portrait. Up the stairs. Another flight. Another.

Down a low-ceilinged hallway, a pause at a section of exposed brick chimney, his wand out, a muttered word, an opening.

Hermione whispered, *"Accio Lily's book."* The book flew into her free hand as though it had been waiting for her summons.

They were inside. The bricks wove themselves shut.

A flame. A lamp. Hermione's eyes were wide but not panicked. "Dementors again."

"Breeding."

"Do you think they're here particularly?"

"I'm not sure. Best not to take the chance." His mind was racing. Assessing. Considering.

He looked at Tayet. "I suspect she changes things somewhat."

Hermione instinctively held Tayet more closely. "The wards?"

"Possibly. The birth of a new phoenix isn't exactly the kind of variable one plans for when constructing defenses. And the emotion involved was..." He looked at Hermione, her eyes alert, calm, focused, yet still, somehow, warm...

"... extreme," she finished for him. "But the Secret... ?"

"... will hide the exact location, yes. But Dementors are hunters. They will have sensed the emotional flare. They know that there is something in the area; something in them scents a feast. They will not stop looking now."

"But the Secret will hold?"

"Probably." He sounded worried.

"Severus... How much danger are we really in?"

"You and Tayet? A fair amount. Random Dementors don't care about the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. They care about food. And - "

"What?"

"The Dark Lord, Hermione. Any change in concentration, any heightening of Dark activity, and he will notice. His attention will be drawn toward Grimmauld Place. The area. And I - "

"Will he order you to investigate?"

Severus nodded. "One of us, definitely. Probably myself."

"How much time?"

He shrugged.

"Oh, dear." Placing Tayet on another hastily Transfigured stand, Hermione stood and stroked the phoenix gently. "What is this place?" she asked, after a moment.

"A bolt-hole. Hidden physically and magically. Most of the old wizarding houses have them. Malfoy Manor has at least six, that I know of."

She looked around. The room was small, the wood bare, the roof beams and back of the chimney exposed. There were no windows. A few trunks, a cracked mirror, a hat stand. A tin box hanging from a beam, suspended by string the color of rust; an alcove on each side of the chimney, separated from the main area by dark curtains whose ends dragged the floor.

"I would have thought wizards would Apparate rather than hide," she mused.

He leaned back against the chimney. "Children, Hermione."

"Side-Along-Apparition works for..."

"Not if there are several." He closed his eyes. He'd seen entire families die when Disapparation could have saved some of them. Their instinct was always to stay together. It was always fatal.

"Oh... she said, sitting down on the edge of a trunk. She looked at him, at the look on his face. "Oh."

He said nothing for some time.

"You didn't fully answer my question. How much danger are you in?" she asked.

He looked at her through hooded eyes. *A great deal.* "Almost none."

"Because you're safe - from them," she gestured vaguely downwards.

That explanation would do. "As much as anyone can be."

"That's good. I mean, it's horrible, of course, but it's good... right now, anyway."

"At the moment it is convenient," he said.

Adjusting herself on the trunk, she muttered, "I would hardly call this convenient."

"More so than the alternative, Hermione. Much more so than the alternative."

She looked at him curiously. "Where do you go when someone comes here?"

He answered calmly. "To his side."

"Oh."

"It's the safest place for me, Hermione. And for now my safety is paramount."

"So why didn't you?"

"Disapparate?"

She nodded.

He closed his eyes, still leaning on the chimney. He'd known what she'd meant, of course. But how to answer, when his reaction had been instinctive?

*Hm.* Honestly. "I couldn't leave you, Hermione." Against his conscious will, his reflexes had been retuned he should have Disapparated first and thought later. *Dangerous.*

But something bigger was forming in his mind. His eyes flicked back and forth as though he were reading the air. "Hermione," he began.

"Yes?"

"Why didn't they Disapparate?"

"Who?"

"Lily and... and James."

She looked at him and her eyes grew wide. "They only had Harry."

"Exactly. So why?"

She thought. "Anti-Apparition Charms?"

"They could have dropped those in an instant, and fled, and lived. It would have been James' first instinct, being pureblood."

"They had to have been trapped." Hermione thought hard for a moment. There was something she half-remembered... something from *The Daily Prophet*... last summer. "Amelia Bones."

"Hm." He turned that thought over in his mind.

"Everyone said Voldemort must have killed her personally... the way he killed... um... yes. Right. Anyway. There was no way out. Muggles call it..."

"A locked-room mystery."

Of course he would know the phrase. "Why didn't Madam Bones Disapparate? Everyone said she was extremely powerful - surely she could have dropped her own Anti-Apparition Charms."

He nodded. "Easily."

They looked at each other, and they knew.

Voldemort was using a trapping spell, something unknown to the general wizarding population, who thus had no defense against it. Something only he knew?

Now they knew that he knew, and he didn't know that they did.

And what they didn't know, they could find out. And use.

Very slowly, they smiled. The smiles were nearly identical. Equally dangerous, equally not nice.

Not because they had an answer, but because they knew they'd found the right question.

One of them, at least.

At that moment, another one of those questions woke up and let forth a piercing, plaintive cry.

She was hungry. And her feathers itched.

## Mist to Rain

*Chapter 22 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: An untangling web and an interlude for Severus.*

A/N: A note to readers: Tayet promises she will wake up soon. :)

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*She was hungry. And her feathers itched.*

-----

Severus trailed his finger down Tayet's increasingly iridescent plumage as she settled back to sleep. *Lovely.*

She let out a note of agreement.

Severus chuckled softly.

Sitting on a Transfigured armchair, her legs tucked under her, her head resting on her hand, Hermione asked, "How long do you think I'll need to stay in here?"

He shrugged. "Until daylight, probably. If nothing happens between now and then, we can assume that the wards will hold."

"They'll go away then?"

"Not unless something wanders by that appeals to them more... and that's not bloody likely. But if nothing happens tonight... Dementors are efficient. If there's a way in, they'll find it quickly." He looked at her and hesitated.

"What?"

"You would be safer at Hogwarts."

Two evenings ago she and Ron had gotten their pointed revenge on the Dursleys for their ill-treatment of Harry. Two evenings ago she had arrived in the kitchen. Two evenings ago she had fallen into this web, this labyrinth of silence that was memory, myth, and magic, and ever since she had been following the thread laying before her, a few inches visible at a time, her path proscribed by the past and future of this man, this man whose arctic eyes and infernal passion both repelled and compelled her.

She would be able to see the Thestrals now. She wondered what they looked like. Even the illustrations in the Care of Magical Creatures sources she'd checked remained blank, until...

She ran her fingers over her eyes. "Safer at Hogwarts. Yes, I suppose I would be. But how long will Hogwarts remain safe without my work here?" she smiled, a sad smile, to be sure, but the courage in it, her acceptance, her commitment – all were unmistakable.

"Succinct, and accurate." His eyes reflected some new measure of respect, and the last traces of some old shadow fled from his features. *Innocence lost.*

"Besides," she continued, adjusting in her seat. "Do you have any idea what effect Apparition might have on a fledgling phoenix?"

"No."

"Me neither." She rested her head on her hand again and closed her eyes. Lily's book nudged her. Sighing, she opened her eyes. "Hello, there," she said to it tiredly, and opened the back cover to thumb through the index..

Transfiguring the broken mirror into a seat for himself, and the hat rack into an ottoman, Severus sat back and steepled his fingers.

*Faith.* He snorted. He was really out of his element.

She looked up, and he waved her back to the book. "Read," he said.

He looked more tired than she felt. *Of course he does.* She turned to the middle of the book.

"Tayet," she began, aloud. "Goddess of Weaving."

"Webs." He snorted, beyond irritated.

She glanced at him as if to say, "What did you expect?" and continued reading. "Associated with Anubis, funerary rites, and the underworld, via the cloths used in mummification to bind the body and spirit for its passage." *Binding. Spirits. Souls. Oh, gods.*

He snorted again. *Really.* If it hadn't been completely impossible, he would have suspected the meddling of a certain former headmaster. It simply reeked of the kind of thing he would have enjoyed.

Hermione continued reading. "Represented in funeral rites by a linen curtain" – she looked, involuntarily, at the strangeness of Severus Snape in white – "hung in the chamber of Anubis, symbolizing the liminal point between..." *Bloody hell.*

He looked up sharply, just as she let the book fall to her lap.

"... between the known and the unknown, I presume?" he drawled. Had Dumbledore been alive, he would even now have been flowing up the spiral stairs outside his office, spoiling for another tempestuous debate on the relative merits of order and chaos.

He was definitely in the mood to argue with Dumbledore.

Eyeing Hermione speculatively, he decided she would do in his stead.

She was gazing at Tayet, her mind roaming freely. *Tayet and Anubis. So, she looks to him, then.* She felt a pang of envy, which she promptly squelched. He needed the phoenix bond more than she did. Still... she sighed, her hand coming up to trace the circle on her heart.

Her sigh – or, more accurately, the memory of her breath on his neck, that last night –

drove the argument he was preparing out of his head. *Chaos.*

She couldn't feel it through the cloth. She listened with her mind. The wind in the image was gusting, rushing, its "voice" – for so she thought of it – no longer screaming, just a low, distant keen. *That's an improvement, at any rate.*

He watched her hand, hypnotized as she undid one of her buttons and pulled the cloth aside.

She glanced down to check it. The circle was, perhaps, slightly more full than it had been. Not by much; just enough that she didn't doubt her perception. She pursed her lips and rested her chin in her hand, one finger curled over her mouth. So much still to be done. How to destroy... how to heal... how to... her eyes closed.

He watched her sleep.

It was the longest time he'd gone without consciously directing his thoughts since one Saturday afternoon twenty years before.

Lily's book seemed to sigh in Hermione's lap as it slipped out of her hands. Silently, he caught it before it hit the floor.

Its bloodstained cover warmed under his touch, and, resting his arm on the back of Hermione's chair, he leaned his forehead on the book - feeling the rough weave on his skin, the worn corners, a thread from a frayed corner brushing his eyelashes.

*Lily, he thought. I'm sorry.*

The thread flicked to his cheek. It might have been moving in his breath.

*Forgive me.*

The thread brushed his eyelid closed, lingered, and was still. It might have stopped when he stopped breathing.

Tayet murmured a soft, sleepy note.

He started breathing again. He opened the cover, and read the inscription one more time. He smoothed his hand over the page, lightly outlining the witch's smile with his fingertip, stopping to rub his thumb over the wizard's too-small, wrinkled robes... He started to close the cover, then stopped, closed his eyes, and raised the book a last time, to breathe the scent of the slow, spiraling steam.

As he inhaled, it changed.

Before, it was autumn.

Now it was rain.

## Yesterday and Tomorrow

*Chapter 23 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: A different kind of locked room, and a different kind of mystery.*

A/N: Thanks to Luna305 for beta-during-thunderstorm (crazy wench), and to my partner in "Don't flinch yet; ok, now would be good; helLO, what are you thinking?!", Anastasia, who saved Snape from me, me from Snape, and me from myself in this chapter.

---

*Before, it was autumn.*

*Now it was rain.*

Severus felt his heartbeat, steady, as he breathed in the scent of rain. *The first time is the hardest.* He held the book in his hands, watching as it shrank, smaller, smaller, growing darker, blacker, his blood on it joining, shrinking, a red spot moving to an end, tendrils extending, shrinking, smaller, and finally, it sat on his finger, antennae waving, its light glowing, then fading.

"Tayet," he said quietly, so as not to wake Hermione. He extended his finger carefully toward the phoenix.

Tayet's eyes opened, black, glowing, hungry, reflecting the yellow-green light. She followed the light, alert, opening her beak.

He tipped the firefly in. He supposed it was a kind of immortality.

Tayet looked at him questioningly but made no sound. He touched her head gently, and she closed her eyes, leaning into his finger.

His expression was unreadable, and there was no one to read it.

He sat on the floor and rested his elbows on his drawn up knees, lacing his fingers together loosely, examining them through a fall of wind-blown hair. His eyes were alive with a newfound lack of doubt and a lack of reserve that still spoke deeply, resonantly of the tremendous will and force behind them. His eyes would never be innocent, but it had been a lifetime since they had been this clear.

He looked up at the sleeping witch, and around at the Spartan room in which they would spend the next several hours. He was damned if he'd spend it sitting on a bare plank floor, watching her sleep.

A low noise in his throat. Predatory. Paradoxically tender. Oh, yes. A bit of... hm... rearranging was definitely called for.

The curtain over one of the alcove rippled as the room behind it became larger. A fresh, insistent wind blew from Severus' wand and the air in the bolt-hole changed, grew cleaner, deeper, softer...

He paused, and changed the curtain from non-descript, dusty charcoal to the rich, deep red of glowing coals, a dying sun.

He looked at the ceiling, considering, then gathered his will. Slowly the ceiling transformed into an opaque, swirling cloud from which a gentle green rain fell, disappearing before it touched the floor.

He considered Hermione's sleeping form, and her clothes became a heavy black silk cloak, wrapping her in cool simmering midnight indistinguishable from his own

He dropped to his knees before her, his arms on either side of the chair. Leaning in to the smooth hollow of her neck, he exhaled her name, warm, on her skin.

She awoke, alive.

"After the initial release, one often finds that subtlety has its own, even greater rewards," he murmured, hands drawing the silk up her arms, chill, slick, soft, warming under his hands.

"Severus," she whispered.

Hands sliding around her shoulders, he gathered her close, stroking the silk against her, a rustle, an enticement, a promise. Hands wrapped in silk to her face, drawing the cloak with it, inside, nervous, aware, each breath a friction against the impossibly smooth seduction...

*His cloak?* fleeting, thought, gone.

Thumbs moving the silk on her face, hands hidden, covered, in the endless folds... her eyes open, looking to his, black, deep, impossibly warm, blazing, comforting, terrifying. She gasped and turned her head, suddenly, surrender, leaning her face into his hands, rubbing the silk against his fingers, friction, surface tension drawing it over the back of his hands.

"Yes, Hermione." His voice an incoming tide, tangible, patient, unsatisfied.

His hands firm on her face.

"Look at me." His voice barely audible.

Deep in his eyes, filling them, toward her, of her, for her, she saw him dream in his eyes.

And she was broken, terrified, gentled, powerful.

He saw it all.

He knew she could say no; she knew she couldn't.

They were both right.

"Do you want this, Hermione? All of this?"

She had no words.

Small smiling lines appearing at the corners of his eyes, he asked, "No?"

His silk-entangled fingers pressing, dragging the cloak down her bare arm... "Or I think yes."

She nodded.

...and across her collarbones...

...down to her heartbeat... and over... silk in silk drawing silk aside, exposing, brushing skin, lightly, cool, chill, friction, skin tightening, warming...

"Yes," she murmured, her eyes not taking her eyes from his.

"Surely, it cannot be that you have no questions..." he drawled, amused.

She tried not to ask. (Knowing hands not touching rustling drawing silk moving silk, silk falling open, closing, folds of silk changing - shiver - patterns, cool... *Just feel...*)

She really did try... But yes questions. (The play of silk... *Just feel...*) "When we - before... when you - it was... desperation, sacrifice, blood... yes?"

He smiled, a knowledgeable smile. *Innocence lost.* "What you are really asking me is if, when I took your innocence, so roughly, was it beyond my control?"

Silk moving slowly, sudden

- she caught her breath and whispered, "Yes, that's what I'm asking."

"That was passion. Life, flying in the face of death. My passion, and also yours - " he arched his eyebrows and moved, deliberately...

- silk - slow... Her breath shuddered.

His voice, low, careful, "Was it beyond your control, Hermione?"

...chill ...smooth ...skin open, outward, reaching - She shook her head, and whispered, "No, it wasn't."

He drew his silk covered hands across her chest, covered, not touching, but

"Real passion isn't pretty, Hermione."

Her eyes were closed, her head tilted back, her throat, an offering.

His eyes glittered.

- a corner of the cloak drawn quickly, firmly down her neck "No, not pretty..." he whispered. "I filled you with the echoes of my fractured soul, and you forgave me and I made you scream, Hermione. I made you scream before I ever touched you and yet you let me touch you again."

- a whisper of silk "I wanted you to."

"When I took you, on the floor, and held you, trembling, shaking, lost... and you sighed, you cried out... I am alive in your breath, Hermione, in your voice..."

His hands still silk on her sides, smoothing, down - and -

"No, passion's not pretty. It's dangerous. It breaks. It opens. What I did to you, for you, because of you; and what I may yet have to do... so very wrong, in so many ways - And yet - Hermione, believe me..." his voice dropped, urgent, impossibly low, and the silk, hands, slipping, on her skin "...as I took you, and you held me, perfect, whole, unbroken, and it was wrong - I enjoyed it. You. Us." His hands tightened, possessive. "Immensely."

The wind, the silk, the breathing, the heartbeats silent.

His voice rich, resonant, full, silk up her neck, under her chin, behind her ear...

"Nothing here is beyond my control, Hermione. Nothing, except..."

...his hands firm, strong on her hips, his lips warm on the corner of her eye...

"... except you," he finished, glorified, resigned.

Both hands heavy with silk, he drew her towards him, to her feet, closer, and his hands, then, skin, under the cloak, warm, around to the small of her back, pressure, closer, the linen rough on her skin, inflamed, wool, scratching, the silk, cool...

She leaned into him, felt his body, covered -

He smelled rain.

She opened her eyes and looked up. She saw the clouds on the ceiling, whirling in concert with the mark on her skin, the mark whose voice was no longer keening, just circling, an endless sigh, relief, pain, pleasure, relief, pain...

"I made you my shadow, Hermione," he murmured. "I buried my emptiness within you; you forgave me, and I branded you with your own forgiveness. This vacuum, this storm," he looked at the sky, "it's mine. It's what I have left."

She nodded.

"But I can give you what I no longer have."

He turned her toward the curtained alcove, standing behind her, wrapping his arms around her, keeping the cloak closed against the circling wind.

She had a wild imagining of what lay behind it. "And that is?"

"Myself."

He waited. His hands twitched, tightened on her arms, revealing his uncertainty, his trepidation.

She leaned back, into him, eyes glinting, smiling when she knew he couldn't see. "What you're feeling right now, Severus? That's called 'hope.'"

He tensed, but her mercy was swift.

"And my answer is yes. Of course it is." She took his hand and drew him toward the curtain, very gently adding, "You maudlin old bat. What did you expect me to say?"

-----

It's not actually impossible to lie about love to someone who has the evidence of your broken soul emblazoned over her heart, but it really is the height of bad taste.

Not to mention cruel.

For once, and for reasons he didn't fully understand, Severus wanted to say something, but he was at a loss.

He lay thinking for a long time, running over the possibilities. "*I might love you, if I could*"? That would simply not do. "*I don't love you, but only because I can't*"? No better. "*You probably will save this maudlin old bat from himself, but we'll both probably have to die to accomplish it*"? Accurate, but hardly appropriate, given the circumstances.

He scowled, and thought some more.

Finally, he found his voice. "Hermione?"

She curled against him, drifting, aware. "Mmm?"

"Hermione, I -" He didn't seem to be able to finish.

Her eyes narrowed in the dark. *He is not going to say that.* "Don't - " she began.

"Hear me out," he insisted, irritably. "And do listen carefully."

She knew that tone. She rolled her eyes, which he could not see, but nodded against his chest.

"Hermione, it's too soon for truth, but it's also " he swallowed nervously, "it's much too late to lie."

She frowned as she puzzled it out.

Then she hit him with a pillow.

He raised his eyebrow in the darkness. She didn't need to see him to know that he had.

## Movement

*Chapter 24 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.



*Summary: A man dreams, a phoenix flies, and a mind awakens. McGonagall looks out the window, and Dumbledore coughs.*

A/N: A spiffy new quill to Anastasia, who sees what ends up on the cutting room floor - I could not ask for a better writing partner. Special thanks to Melenka for her wisdom, and to my beta Luna305 for her patience.

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*He raised his eyebrow in the darkness. She didn't need to see him to know that he had.*

-----

A misty dawn was breaking over Grimmauld Place, and Severus kept his silent vigil over the woman in his arms, in the low light from the cloud circling above. Somewhere beyond it, on an imaginary horizon, the sun was rising.

Hermione had fallen asleep, hours earlier, her breath on his neck, warm, smooth, even.

Odd.

His arm had fallen asleep shortly after Hermione did, but he refused to move it. True; in his world, not being able to feel that particular arm was something of a blessing. Not being able to feel Hermione's skin was almost an even trade.

Almost.

He had never held a woman while she slept.

He had never watched a woman sleeping.

He had never felt a woman's breath on his neck, calm, satisfied, triumphant, vulnerable, and known what it was to dream, watching her dreaming, wondering what she was dreaming.

She whimpered in her sleep, and he hoped it wasn't about him.

And then she smiled, and he hoped it was.

He held her closer, deliberately tracing the graceful, complicated pattern of her hair as it lay on his chest.

He leaned his head against hers and didn't worry about his arm.

The feel of her hair on his cheek, though. That was... bothersome.

Her lips, parted, warm on his neck also bothersome.

And the feel of her body in his arms, still half-tangled, where she had fallen, collapsed, laughing *A glorious descent...* - most unnerving. He was nearly certain that the road to hell was paved with Hermione's laughter.

But... ... *a pillow?* he mused, turning his thoughts of her over in his mind. *That will not happen again - oh, bugger.* The bloody otter. Playful. He grimaced. It would almost certainly happen again.

Bad enough that she was brilliant. Bad enough that the blood magic he had not consciously invoked another thing to figure out later that it held them bound in ways that were still a mystery. *Another tie...* Bad enough that she was water, rain in the wind.

But really, an otter? Infuriating.

Setting his thoughts to "barely tolerant," he wondered, briefly, if her patronus would change.

Probably not. It was just the kind of irritating thing she wouldn't do. No, Hermione Granger's patronus would not change. Not even if she had really fallen in...

He inhaled through his teeth. Fingernails.

Hermione was waking up. Her eyes were soft, sleepy, and...

... *hungry?* He chuckled, and, reaching his good arm over her, cupping her shoulder, he drew her onto him. Absent her weight, the blood rushing back into his arm flamed almost as badly as a Dark Mark call.

Waking, she was feeling. And, feeling, her body remembered, and she dug her fingers into his shoulders. She still wasn't fully awake.

One arm aflame *Just blood...*, the other languidly stroking her back, Severus felt her remember, and laughed, low, rich, and dark.

"*Do that again,*" she requested, not entirely politely, in his mind.

A reflex - *Occlumens*. His eyes searched her face, alarmed.

"*I don't think that will work right now,*" she thought, seriously, still not quite awake.

Aloud, he said, "You are no Legilimens, Hermione."

He received an image of her looking around, as if in a room, arms open. "*Beg to differ.*"

"How?" He half sat, leaning against the headboard, and she looked up at him grumpily before finding and settling into position that was comfortable.

She curled with her head in his lap. "*How should I know? I sort of woke up in here, and all of the reference books are downstairs. Come back inside, Severus. My thoughts are getting cold.*"

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"*Fine,*" he growled in her mind. "*But rest assured we will discuss this further, later.*"

Her thoughts laughed at his irritation.

If it was the road to hell, and if he had any farther to fall, he had no plans to saunter vaguely downwards. A few more hours before she had to report. "*Hm...*"

She caught his tone. "Good morning to you, too."

"Isn't it."

"You're in that kind of mood, I see." She sounded... delighted?

"Bother."

"Yes, I rather suspect you'll find that I am!" She shrugged. "Most people do."

What he wanted to think was "I am not most people," but what came through was "Skin might just be better than coffee."

Both. Both would be good.

He refused to contemplate the fact that she might be a morning person.

"I'm not. I do my best work at night."

"Really," he thought dryly.

He found the fact that when she blushed all of her did rather intriguing.

Hermione reached for a pillow, and in one lithe movement he had her on her back, hands held over her head with one hand, and the other...

"Don't even try, Hermione."

She laughed again, and then, some time not too long later, she cried his name, a challenge to the inevitable and indifferent sky.

"Glorious..."

He had forgotten that she could hear him.

They both had forgotten that Tayet could hear too.

The phoenix swept into the room, circled, and landed on the headboard, watching.

"Blast!" and "Oh, dear" ricocheted off of each other in their minds.

They winced.

Tayet trilled. It was a glorious morning, and she felt like flying.

Launching herself off of the headboard, she aimed for the cloud.

Thud.

"Squerk!"

Tayet landed on the bed between them, looking embarrassed.

They both erupted in laughter in each other's minds.

Tayet did an avian impression of Severus' most intimidating scowl.

They laughed harder.

"Well, it's not the way I expected that to happen..."

Severus arched his eyebrow.

"You laughing, inside my mind." Hermione stretched. "Still. It is rather an amazing feeling."

-----  
*Accio buttons. Reparo.* Severus looked out the open window to the garden where Tayet was practicing gliding, apparently oblivious to the mist that rose outside the garden wall.

So far she had shown no signs of wanting to venture further than the garden, for which he was obscurely grateful. She had executed one or two acrobatic dives that had put a lump in his throat. *Damn bird's feathers barely have the ashes off them,* he grumbled to himself, *and already she thinks she can play Quidditch for England.*

Tayet zoomed through the window to chatter a trill at him, then zoomed out again.

Severus snorted, bemused. He considered his frock coat for a moment, then set it aside. It was rather a touch warm for wool.

Summoning another mug of coffee, he turned a chair around and sat at the table, leaning his arms on the chair back. He drew the stack of parchments to him and, sipping his coffee, began, dispassionately, to consider the problem of how to destroy the inanimate Horcruxes.

-----  
"I assume that is your report, Miss Granger?" Minerva looked up from her work, then peered more closely at Hermione. There was something different about the girl.

Hermione swallowed. "The location of the fourth Horcrux, and..." her voice came out scratchy, and she finished very quietly, "... and the next name." She handed the parchment over and stood, waiting. *I can't look. I have to look. I don't want to -*

Minerva inhaled sharply, once, and dropped the parchment on her desk. Instinctively, she looked to Dumbledore's portrait. He was snoring softly.

"You're..." Minerva's throat was dry. "You're sure?"

"I'm afraid so, Headmistress." The title was another thing entirely in this office.

"Well," Minerva began, her voice a shade off from its usual brusqueness. "That's a bit... unexpected. But - " She cleared her throat and glanced out the window, toward the Quidditch pitch, seeing something older than today through the diamond panes. "Yes. Well."

Hermione looked at the floor, at the wall, at the Sorting Hat sitting, quiet, on the bookshelves.

"The connection?"

"I'm sorry?" Hermione asked.

"The connection between me and Hufflepuff's cup, child," Minerva said, her tone even more clipped than usual. "If I am to... hm..." she swallowed. "Forgive me. If I am to function in this capacity, I should like at the very least to know why."

Hermione thought, irrationally, that were it not for the fact that the headmistress' eyes were bright, one might have thought she had just caught four First Years out of bed after hours.

"The connection. With Molly and the locket, you said it was 'motherhood.' What is it this time, Miss Granger?"

Hermione could not look at her. "Marlene."

Minerva sat back, weakly. "What did you say?"

Hermione glanced at the headmistress. She had gone nearly transparent. "Marlene. It was her... them... that he... Voldemort... in order to..." She couldn't finish.

Minerva stood and walked haltingly to the window. Quiet for a moment, she watched the pennants flying over the pitch. *How often I've remembered...* "She loved Quidditch, you know."

Hermione glanced up, nervous, wishing she could decide what to do with her hands.

"My daughter. She played for Gryffindor with Potter. James."

"She was in a picture. Mad-Eye had it - "

"Yes. She was in the Order." Minerva swallowed, leaving her memories reluctantly and returning to the present. Turning to face Hermione, she almost smiled, almost apologetically, and said, "You still haven't told me the connection."

"Headmistress, I... I... Minerva..."

Minerva drew herself up straighter. "It's all right, child. Whatever you have to say can but sting, in comparison."

Hermione hesitated, but said, "I believe that the connection is... well... failure. Specifically, a failure of protection."

Minerva's hands twitched, and she stared at Hermione.

Dumbledore's portrait shifted in his sleep.

"I'm sorry," Hermione whispered, unwilling to look away.

After a moment, the headmistress' proud bearing seemed to deflate. "Yes," she said to herself. "I could not protect any of them. Marlene, her husband, my... my grandchildren." She returned to her desk somehow older than she had been a moment before. Gathering her wits, she continued, "I tried, of course, but - " she reached for her quill and the stack of parchments she had been working on when Hermione arrived. "But I failed." The quill paused. "Of course. That's obvious, isn't it."

Hermione watched as Minerva McGonagall transformed slowly back into her usual professorial demeanor and said nothing for several minutes.

When this most subtle transformation was complete, and Minerva spoke again, it was with the voice of the head of the Order of the Phoenix. "Have you any idea yet what the destruction of the Horcrux will entail?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Or its location?"

"It's... um, it's here. At Hogwarts - in the Trophy Room."

Minerva looked as though she'd eaten something particularly sour. "Presumably it is Transfigured?"

Hermione nodded, apologetically. It was a particularly nasty irony. "Probably Tom Riddle's Award for Special Services to the School; possibly his Medal for Magical Merit."

"I shall call Alastor in and we shall examine both." *Damn you, Riddle.* A flinty resolve grew in her eyes, revealing a fierceness of which Hermione was both a little frightened and, obscurely, proud, seeing another facet of what made the older woman a true Head of Gryffindor. Minerva continued, "He does have a crude sort of pointed predictability, Hermione. That becomes clearer with each new bit of information, and hinges with the findings of others, and with recent developments."

*Developments?* Startled, Hermione asked, "Is Harry okay? The Weasleys?"

"There was a minor altercation last night in Hogsmeade the Aurors received a tip regarding plans to attack an unknown target, and made several arrests. Based on your analysis so far, I think it is possible probable that the planned attack was aimed at me."

"Professor McGonagall, do you believe that Voldemort knows we know about the Horcruxes?"

The older witch sighed tiredly. "I wish I knew, Hermione. I devoutly hope he does not."

"It's uncanny."

The headmistress nodded. "Indeed." She eyed Hermione speculatively. "You had no knowledge of last night's events when you arrived this morning?"

*Last night's events. Oh, gods, not another one of these conversations,* Hermione thought, panicking slightly. *Not now.*

Minerva saw the girls' cheeks flush slightly, saw her breathing rate increase. "Hermione, I am well aware that you have a contact of whom you will not speak."

*HELP,* Hermione thought frantically at Dumbledore's portrait.

He didn't move.

"And I understand and respect your desire to keep your association and the nature of your interactions a secret," Minerva continued.

*This is so not happening.*

"But, child, I must warn you, again, about the Dark. You are in very real danger of seduction."

This last warning completely overwhelmed Hermione's acting ability. Blushing furiously, she stared at her feet.

"Whereas I will not press you for information as to his or her identity..." Minerva was watching Hermione closely, and her blush deepened slightly at the word "his." "...it would be most helpful to the Order were I to have some idea, at least, of the position your source enjoys."

*Position?!* Hermione's thoughts reached out wildly for balance. She concentrated on her breathing, knowing that the actual information Minerva was requesting was crucial, indeed.

"I believe, Headmistress, that my... ah... source is positioned quite close to..." *Bloody hell!* Her brain provided the phrase "the top," but she absolutely refused to speak those words for fear of losing her composure completely.

Dumbledore's portrait coughed in his sleep, and Minerva looked up hopefully. *Still asleep. Oh, Albus. We have much to discuss before I join you on that wall... Wake up, wake up.*

But Dumbledore's portrait continued snoring, smiling as though he were having a rather pleasant dream.

Turning her attention back to Hermione, Minerva said again, "I understand. You trust the information or, in this case, the lack of it?"

Hermione nodded.

The headmistress weighed the merits of her earlier suspicions regarding the source's identity. *Yes, very likely young Malfoy; probably through his family connections. The information will be erratically timed, then, but reasonably reliable.* Aloud, she said, "Very well. A position of strength, then."

Hermione gulped.

"That will be sufficient for all but the most sensitive purposes."

Hermione wished devoutly that this interview would end. Without moving her head she was terrified that she would do something, say something that would betray... well, everything she searched Dumbledore's portrait with her eyes. One eye screwed itself more firmly shut than the other. *A wink?! Oh good gods!*

"Headmistress?" she ventured.

"Yes, of course, you will wish to return to your research."

Hermione said nothing. It seemed the best course.

"It is absolutely crucial, Hermione, that you not overlook even the smallest detail."

Hermione nodded.

"Very well." The headmistress hesitated. "I will not speak with Molly until you know more about what the process is likely to entail. Do please be careful."

Hermione nodded, and turned to leave.

"Hermione, I - " There was a strange note in Minerva's voice, one Hermione had never heard before.

Hermione turned.

"Thank you, child." The voice of a mother.

Hermione's eyes filled with sudden tears. "Minerva... I'm... I'm so sorry," she said, her voice ragged, but firm.

Minerva nodded. She'd heard the force, the fierce commitment in the girl's tone. And perhaps something that was almost... *Protective?*

Sighing, Minerva reached again for her work. War made them all older than they should be. Even the children. Especially the children.

When the scratching of her quill reached his ears, Dumbledore's portrait peeked through his eyelashes at his successor. Masking a sigh behind another snore, he closed his eyes again.

## The Best In Us

*Chapter 25 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: How to destroy the Horcruxes.*

A/N: My eternal gratitude to Anastasia/tfs for reading this very, very late at night.

Note to readers: If oxygen is needed, a phoenix will fall from the overhead compartment. Please put your own phoenix in place before assisting those traveling with you.

---

"We can believe in the impossible because we already have done."

"So, all we have to do is do the impossible, then?" - his tone still held an echo of his laughter.

"Yes." She sounded both serious and undaunted. Chapter 21

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... Dumbledore's portrait peeked through his eyelashes at his successor. Masking a sigh behind another snore, he closed his eyes again.

-----

In the kitchen at Number 12, Grimmauld Place, Severus' coffee was cold. He sat, still, eyes unfathomable. He reached automatically for the cup, oblivious to its utter lack of warmth.

"There was an attack planned last night. On Minerva," Hermione said, accusingly, appearing in the kitchen. "They were stopped in Hogsmeade."

Severus spurted his coffee over his mug and hand.

"Did you not know?"

Muttering a fast cleaning spell, he did not look at her. "Hermione, you know very well where I was last night, yet you apparently wish to blame me?" Damn the woman; she was impossible.

Hermione's eyes were still snapping, but she faltered.

"In my position I am sometimes compromised by the fact that the Dark Lord does not tell me everything. He is, after all, a reasonably capable strategist. I? Appear near Hogwarts? Do endeavor to *think*."

Tayet flew in and landed on the table, looking calmly at both of them.

In the hallway, Mrs. Black strained to hear.

"Yes, of course, Severus," Hermione snapped. "I shall *endeavor* to think. Heaven knows it's a strain for me, but for *you*, I shall certainly *endeavor* to exceed my usual dunderheaded standards."

She turned on her heels and wheeled out of the kitchen.

Neither one of them remembered that she had Apparated without setting off his phoenix charm.

Tayet, claws clicking on the table, walked up to Severus and poked her beak at his heart. She tilted her head at him inquiringly, hooting a question that was equal parts amusement and concern.

Severus' eyes widened. *Bloody ridiculous bird. Ridiculous woman. And what the hell is wrong with my heart?* He pulled his shirt aside and looked. Faintly outlined on his pale skin, the white circle of phoenix tears was still present.

Tayet trilled, and flew out of the kitchen after Hermione.

"Who let the purple chicken into my Ancient and Most Noble House?" Mrs. Black cackled. The night she had spent dreaming of her past, of her humanity, was but a fleeting memory; still, some of the acid was gone forever from her tone.

Her sense of humor, however, was likely to remain constant. Severus scowled at her as he stalked past.

"And ooooh, the bat's in a temper."

He paused. "Are you by any chance related to Peeves, Mrs. Black? Shall I consult the genealogy of which you are so... understandably... proud?" He arched an eyebrow at her as she sat in her frame, speechless, and spun away.

The absence of his cloak did nothing to dispel the illusion that something rippled behind him as he strode away, an elegant figure of feral, restrained power.

"Lucky little Mudblood," Mrs. Black muttered.

He paused in his progress. "I heard that," he intoned, and turned to face her once more.

Undaunted, she met his eye squarely. "You were meant to. Obviously."

His eyes sparkled with black amusement, although some shadow lingered there, untouched. He inclined his head, and went to find Hermione.

Mrs. Black turned to find Phineas Nigellus sitting next to her. He glanced after the departing wizard and shook his head gravely. She frowned.

Hermione wasn't in the library. Severus rested a hand on the banister and looked up through the open stairwell. Not on any of the landings either. Sighing, he Apparated into the bolt-hole.

No Hermione.

He sat on the still-rumpled bed in the curtained alcove. "*Tayet?*" he thought, not sure that this method of communication would work.

Distantly, he got an impression of aching sadness, which grew as he tracked it silently through the house.

He found Hermione in a deep window-seat in one of the third floor bedrooms. Tayet was perched on her knee, whirring at her as she absently stroked her wings.

Hermione turned her face away as he paused in the doorway, brushing her cheeks with the back of one hand. "Have you made any progress on how to destroy them?" she asked, her voice empty, an echo of itself.

Severus supposed he should have expected that question. He stood in the doorway, uncertain as to whether he should answer the question or address the deeper one of her distress.

Tayet looked at him as if to chide him for standing still.

He crossed the room and leaned on the other side of the window. "Some," he replied evenly.

Hermione stroked the phoenix, wishing that his presence could ease the emptiness she felt. *Molly. Minerva. Hagrid.* She leaned her head on the window glass. "And?"

He hesitated, then sat in the other end of the window recess. She shifted her feet to make room for him. Tayet rustled, but stayed perched on Hermione's knee. Hermione continued to stroke her wings.

Severus reached a finger out to Tayet, touched her feathers, and then covered Hermione's hand with his own, stopping her movement.

*Oh, no.* Hermione swallowed and closed her eyes. Severus having to touch her to talk was never a good sign. The glass was cool, smooth against her forehead. *This is how my friends are going to die. Ron's mother. My favorite teacher, the one I wanted to be like...* "You've figured it out, then."

"Yes. It's rather simple, really," he said quietly.

"Simple," she repeated dully, her voice hollow.

He rubbed his thumb over her hand, on the line where her fingers met the phoenix's wings.

"They need only take them through the Veil, Hermione."

Hermione caught her breath, and the light from the window blurred beneath her eyelashes. "Wh Why can't they throw them through?"

"Dumbledore tried, Hermione. The Horcruxes have no agency, only soul only something that possesses intent can pierce its barrier."

"So... oh, gods, his hand."

Severus moved his thumb, gently. "Yes," he said softly.

She lifted her head and looked at him. "But that means they don't have to die at all... oh... but - Oh." She leaned her head back on the windowpane.

"I could delay their deaths, but Hermione, that was Dumbledore's choice. It may not be theirs. And it would be... complicated, given my situation."

Not looking at him, she said, "He stayed, in part, for you, you know."

As soon as she said it, he knew it was true. He held himself very still, knowing, then, how Draco must have felt under his whip.

Hermione was silent for a long time, picturing the Veil, a grey center in a grey room, an innocuous, almost trivial, bit of fabric, silent, almost no substance, moving slightly, always moving, gently, timeless... not watching, not waiting, just... there. Whispering.

Severus' breath whispering on her skin. Severus' hair whispering on her skin. Severus' fingertips whispering on her skin.

Severus' voice whispering in her mind.

Fleeting. Soft. Simple.

*"You are in real danger of being seduced."*

Her throat tightened.

The question was in the air before she could think to stop it. "And the rest? The animate Horcruxes? Nagini, and..." She couldn't say it aloud. She looked the end of the question at him.

He saw it in her eyes fear, acceptance, rage, denial, courage. He drew one knee up and wrapped his arm around it. His voice low, careful. "The snake is straightforward. The Dark Lord tends to keep her close. It is unlikely that any but a direct attack will succeed, and unlikely that Hagrid will survive his retribution. He will be... weakened, inevitably, long before he reaches Nagini."

Hermione leaned her head on the window again, seeing Hagrid's eyes crinkle and his beard betray his encouraging smile... *"Our Hermione,"* he had called her. *Oh, Hagrid.*

"Of all of us, Hagrid is strong enough, resistant enough to get close enough," Severus continued.

"And only Minerva can handle the Transfiguration," Hermione caught his train of thought and continued it. "And only mothers can match the mothers' sacrifices. As Dumbledore was father and grandfather, to all of us; his strength his wisdom... and Ginny... her trust, her innocence... They're requiring the best we have in us."

Finally, unmoving, she spoke. "I'll tell Minerva. Tomorrow. Unless you think -"

"Tomorrow's time enough, Hermione."

She knew tomorrow for the lie it was, but nodded anyway.

Then something in the quality of his silence made her turn her head to look at him.

He was waiting, watching her. And his eyes seemed to whisper something that he could not say, asking her something, asking her to ask.

"And us?"

He had no answer he wanted to give that would not be a lie.

"Potter's father died buying her a chance to run."

"I'm not going to run, Severus," she said quietly.

"No," he agreed, too easily.

She looked at him, startled.

A deep, rasping breath, then - "The equation doesn't balance that way, Hermione. It's not a one-to-one mapping. There's an inversion. One over seven; seven over one. You are not the inverse of Lily."

Mind a swirling mass of white noise, she searched his face, grasping at the fractured shards of order, forcing herself to focus, to race through the memory of the formulas, seeking the edge she needed, the one that would cut her mind, would sever her from hope unless she could do the impossible and fight it, knowing equally that all would be lost if she failed, that they would lose everything in victory.

He waited.

And then she found it. "You. You counterbalance Lily. You have all along."

He nodded, and only years of rigid self-control allowed him to hold her gaze. If she had the courage to face this, he owed her the courage it cost him not to look away.

"I... I balance James," she said slowly.

He nodded. "Yes."

Her eyelids dropped and she seemed to search for something. The best that was in her. *Love, then. The kind you'll die for... ? Do I have that in me?* She looked at him, waiting, his hands, his face, his eyebrows, his eyes, watching her. *Might as well face it, Granger.* Finally, she returned his gaze, which had been steady, if guarded, throughout her inspection. *He knows it, too or he will, in a minute. Steady...* Her voice strangely clear, a tone from a bell, high in a tower, resonant, a call, a reminder, a comfort, and a challenge. "How. Tell me how."

Had he not been broken, he would have been undone. "Patterns, Hermione. Echoes. Inversions. I've played them out, all the variables, the scenarios, the likely arrangement of the principle actors, the choreography of the dance... For you to... live, long enough, to survive until Nagini dies, you will need to be protected, until.... The best person to do that is me."

"How, Severus," a note of steel in her tone, the blade with which she was keeping everything else at bay.

"And then... when it is time..."

An Unbreakable Vow, a Compulsion - only these could have forced his next words from him.

She watched his soul, in all its shattered beauty, fill his eyes.

"When it is time, Hermione, I will kill you."

## Point / Counterpoint

*Chapter 26 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

*Summary: Finally - and about bloody time, too.*

A/N: Special thanks to Melenka for a pinch-hit beta and a grateful nod to Indigofeathers for an excellent music suggestion. Anastasia's contributions are myriad and fundamental - I've run out of eloquent ways to thank her; this will have to do: \*low sweeping bow\*

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*"When it is time, Hermione, I will kill you."*

-----  
Tayet crooned, softly, plaintively, and looked from Severus to Hermione and back.

Hermione's eyes emptied until their depths matched his own. "Oh. Okay... Okay... Oh."

He didn't dare move he just sat watching her, the shards of his soul tearing him, from the inside.

"I - " she began.

Tayet crooned more insistently, and stretched her beak out to poke Hermione in the heart.

Hermione ignored her.

"Hermione, I..." Severus began, then stopped.

Tayet poked Hermione again, harder.

"Tayet, what," Hermione said, returning as if from across illimitable distance. "Oh."

She pulled her shirt aside and looked at her mark. The circle was darker, blacker, and very nearly filled.

"Well," she breathed. "It seems that I'm going to restore your soul by dying. At your hand." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Lovely. What an *honor*."

"An honor I share," he said, darkly, his voice breaking corners at impossible angles. Almost to himself, he added, "Mercifully, I will not have to live with that memory for long."

"No..." *Oh, gods. After he... Oh, gods, Severus.* "No, I suppose you won't."

Tayet threw her head back, opened her beak, and let forth a long, wailing cry.

Severus and Hermione looked at her.

She launched herself off of Hermione's knees, her talons ripping the denim, drawing blood. She circled the room once and vanished.

"Ow."

Severus' hand was over the wounds instantly, murmuring, healing.

She reached up and brushed his hair off of his forehead, and, at her touch, his arms were around her, crushing her awkwardly to him, his head collapsed on her bent knees. His hold was almost painful, but she didn't wince. She continued to stroke his hair away from his forehead, his hair falling back, away, falling back, a black whispering, always already falling. He groaned.

"Shhh," an arbitrary sound. "Shhh. I forgive you." More arbitrary sounds, arranged, conveying meaning. It was all arbitrary, all arranged, a monstrous algorithm cleaving meaning, creating meaning, an allegory for something, and for once she didn't know. "I forgive you."

He held her for a long time, cheek pressed on her knees, clenching her shirt in his bloody hands. Without knowing, not knowing, she took his hair, falling always, already falling, and, dividing it, began braiding.

The pain had cleared part of her mind. "We'll find a way, or not. But we will."

"Hermione," Severus began, entranced by the weaving motions of her hands in his hair. To still those hands... her eyes... her mind... no more questions... rain... His voice broke as he tried again. "Hermione - "

"Shhh, Severus, faith, remember?" Her hands froze mid-motion, and he looked up.

His eyes widened in fear at the look on her face.

"Oh, no."

"Hermione?"

And, unbidden, a memory of the night before, of the morning after, flooded her eyes, and she let his hair fall and put her hands on his shoulders, dropping her head, reaching out for him with her mind.

Her mind touched his; the same memory. Suddenly he was tired, very tired, and very, very angry.

She rested her cheek on his head and murmured, "Faith, Severus. The best that's in us. You already have hope a broken soul isn't what prevented that, just your... history. And..." her tone changed. "Love. Well, I have that..."

He raised his head, and she looked at him, slightly apprehensively.

Severus' arms tightened around her, even as he was disconcerted by the shadow of the girl replacing the woman and then disappearing again.

"Severus, Lily's sacrifice was made in faith faith that Harry would live to fulfill the prophecy, but she was no more blind than Dumbledore. Between the two of them, they placed the future of the world on your shoulders they had faith in you, yes, but for both it was based on knowledge." She let that sink in before continuing. "Thus the Indemnity requires of you your faith. A faith equal to Lily's. From you." A weary, mirthless laugh.

"Ah. I see your point that may very well be impossible, given - "

Tayet reappeared with a furious screech.

"But the beauty of it is that you can believe in the impossible, because you already have done," said a calm, polite voice. "And given appropriate circumstances and ample motivation, Severus, who can deny that more may be possible than not?"

At the sound of the voice Hermione and Severus both froze, looking at each other, then they turned, slowly.

"How wonderful to see you both again," said Albus Dumbledore. He was sitting in Phineas Nigellus' portrait frame.

Hermione and Severus jumped away from each other.

Dumbledore smiled. He had never seen Severus Snape blush. "Wonderful."

Tayet gave a self-satisfied trill, and tucked her beak back under her wing. Growing feathers was tiring, after all, and popping about from place to place had made her feel vaguely ill. Flying was much more the thing. Thinking about flying there was something moving in that blue moving lake by the castle, and maybe she could catch it, maybe it might taste good, the sun sparkly on the water... she fell asleep.

-----

Mrs. Black elbowed Phineas Nigellus sharply in the ribs. With her bustle and his absurd pantaloons, her frame was crowded. "What is he telling them up there?"

"I'm sure I have no idea," he said, affronted.

"Phineas Nigellus," she said sharply, "don't use the headmaster tone with me. I was in Slytherin too," she reminded him.

"At this precise moment I have no idea what he is telling them," he expanded.

She glared at him. "Obviously. But the gist, Phineas Nigellus. The gist. Surely you know that much."

Phineas Nigellus smiled wickedly.

Mrs. Black gathered her skirts and prepared to switch frames, but he caught her by the bustle and yanked her back.

She slapped him. "You lecherous cretin, how dare you!"

He glowered at her, then withdrew to the far edge of the frame and crossed his arms, wondering how long Dumbledore would need his frame.

For a time, silence reigned on the ground floor.

"I could just - " she began.

"No."

"Just to the hall."

"No."

She huffed and refused to look at him for at least a quarter of an hour.

Behind the glower, Phineas Nigellus was amused, but no Slytherin is ever truly patient unless in the service of some greater plan, and even then it was a question of



appearing to bide one's time rather than accepting long passages of it. Centuries in an administrative office, even a magical one, will put a thin veneer of patience on even the most cantankerous of personalities, but it was, finally, only a veneer.

He looked at the ceiling. He wanted to know, too.

Severus found himself at a loss. How to apologize for killing the man who had ordered him to. How not to want to kill him again for... everything. How not to crumble, how to express relief, how to hide his connection to Hermione, how not to hide it... Stuck in a shifting quicksand of agony and absurdity, he said nothing.

"Ah, Severus," Dumbledore began kindly, "an awkward moment, indeed. I would think a greeting would be sufficient."

"Albus, I- Good afternoon, sir." *Sir?* He swept his hand across his eyes. Chaos.

*He calls him "Sir"?* Belatedly, Hermione remembered her own manners. "Good afternoon, Professor. We've I've missed you." She smiled at him, just a smile, just sad, just relieved.

Dumbledore turned to her and returned her smile, gently. "Good afternoon, Miss Granger. I trust your family are well?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, good, most excellent Grangers. Very scientific, very logical."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Severus, if you would do yourself the great service of not fretting overmuch about killing me - for which I've not thanked you properly; my apologies - we have an important matter to discuss." He looked over the top of his spectacles at the two of them deliberately not touching each other "Or, perhaps, two matters; yes, yes, two, I think... and very little time. Phineas delivered my deadline, I understand, and, as I do not imagine that he can keep Mrs. Black from eavesdropping for much longer, let me proceed. What I have to say to you both must be held in the strictest confidence."

Severus snorted, but not unhappily. "You were ever a force of chaos, Albus."

"And you far too married to order, Severus. Far too married. Until you weren't."

"At which point you would always take the other side of the argument."

Dumbledore nodded his calm agreement. "There are always aspects of one in the other, Severus. Your insistence upon binaries... To be expected, of course, but..."

Hermione had the feeling that she had missed most of this conversation. Which she had, of course; it had begun right around the time she was born. *Oh, dear.*

"Miss Granger, there is no need to blush. As Professor Snape ah, yes, therein lies the crux of it. As Severus is no longer your professor, at least, not at the moment, and as I am no longer headmaster, I will not pass judgment on you. Either of you. This is war." Disconcertingly, he smiled. "I must confess, though, I have enjoyed your conversations with Minerva. Well played, Miss Granger."

Severus arched an inquiring eyebrow at Hermione, who blushed harder.

"Don't ask. Just don't."

Dumbledore continued, "Language itself, its interplay of light and shadow, sense and nonsense - a point in favor of chaos, is it not, Severus?"

"More to the point, what is yours, Albus? If indeed you do have one," Severus drawled, finding some semblance of equilibrium in the familiarity of their long-standing debate.

"I should have thought it was obvious. Simply this: have faith. Both of you."

He smiled at them calmly.

"That's *it*?" Hermione blurted, astonished.

"Not quite, Miss Granger."

*Canvas cannot twinkle. That just impossible.*

Very seriously, Dumbledore eyed Tayet, before continuing, "Do remember that having once believed the impossible it seems quite likely that one may do so again." He looked at them gravely until they nodded, then he beamed at them. "Excellent. One more thing, before I go. For the creation of a most charming phoenix, 50 points to Gryffindor. And, to Slytherin, 51 for the phoenix, and one to grow on." He chuckled, and the frame was empty.

His voice echoed in the empty frame. "Not a word to anyone. Especially not Harry..."

## Timing

*Chapter 27 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

**Summary:** *The turn of a friendly (?) card.*

A/N: Anything remotely exciting in this chapter is dedicated to the divine Anastasia.

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*His voice echoed in the empty frame. "Not a word to anyone. Especially not Harry..."*

-----

A fire glowed in the hearth and Hermione and Severus were surrounded by books in the library at Grimmauld Place, working on the trapping spell. Tayet was perched on the mantel, occasionally preening, occasionally gliding over to the table where they were working. Feathers itched, and she was not a patient bird.

In the hallway, Mrs. Black and Phineas Nigellus were playing rummy. Mrs. Black was winning.

At the Burrow, Arthur and Molly were enjoying a cup of tea while Harry, Ron and Ginny were outside stargazing under the watchful eyes of Tonks and Kingsley. Everyone's clock hands were still stuck on "mortal peril." Molly didn't even look at it any more.

At Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall and Alastor Moody were in the Trophy Room, blinking before a noxious cloud of oily smoke. As the smoke cleared, a badger device was plainly evident on the side of a cup. It had been the Award for Special Services to the School after all.

In the Entrance Hall, Argus Filch was scratching his stubbly chin. He could have sworn that the giant hourglasses had been emptied after term, and now Gryffindor and Slytherin appeared to be nearly tied. "Ruddy teachers," he grumbled to Mrs. Norris. "Always messing about."

Hagrid was sitting in the Forest with Grawp, roasting something on a stick over an open campfire. Grawp looked up at the sound of a twig breaking and grunted. As silently as he could, Hagrid put down the stick and reached for his crossbow.

A tongue of red flame suddenly shot between them. Grawp charged into the underbrush.

"Grawpy, no!" Hagrid bellowed, doing his best to dodge the spells that were arcing from every direction.

The campfire burned down slowly, oblivious to the sound of cracking limbs, falling trees, hoarse shouts and gurgling cries that died away to nothing.

A little bit before midnight, Grawp and Hagrid returned to the campfire scorched, bleeding, but still whole, Grawp swinging the body of a dead Death Eater by the ankle.

"We got to get back to the castle, Grawpy. Get yer things."

A large boot kicked dirt onto what remained of the campfire and stomped out the remaining coals, and the forest was dark. Eventually the night noises started up again.

-----

Hermione's hair was escaping from her usual messy knot, and a long curl swayed every time she bent to make a note. Severus found himself staring at it as it brushed her neck. Her hair glowed warm in the firelight.

Tayet glided over and landed on his book. She looked from him to Hermione and clacked over to Hermione and tugged the curl with her beak.

Without taking her eyes off of the page she was reading, Hermione twisted the curl back into the knot and absently patted Tayet.

Satisfied, Tayet, looked at Severus, who closed his eyes briefly and went back to his work. Tayet glided back to the mantel.

-----

"Another hand?" Mrs. Black asked Phineas Nigellus.

He nodded.

-----

Hermione eyed the stack of books on Severus' side of the table. He had reserved most of the Dark books for himself, and she had, uncharacteristically, not questioned his decision.

She looked at his face, which was impassive, only his cold eyes revealing that whatever he was reading was testing his self-control. Seduction or repulsion; he was keeping one or the other at bay.

She had no idea which one. Maybe both.

She looked at him some more, at his hand curled on the book's spine, fingers splayed on the cover, the other, ink-stained like her own, twirling the quill one way, then the other.

One way pause the other pause one way pause

His hands. The memory of what his hands could do. Something in her abdomen tightened. The thought of what his hands would do. Something in her mind cringed.

She wondered if it hurt to die.

Tayet glided over and rubbed against Severus' quill hand. The hypnotic motion stopped. Tayet looked apologetically at Hermione, and glided back to the mantel.

Hermione sighed soundlessly and bent back to her own book.

-----

"I knock on 2," said Phineas Nigellus, laying down his cards.

"Are you sure?" Mrs. Black inquired, stealing a glance toward the library.

"Quite," he replied.

She lay down her cards. All were in sequence or in groups, save the ace of hearts.

"My hand," she said.

They both sighed.

-----

"If you were in Molly's position, would you want to know earlier or later?" she asked suddenly.

"I am, and I do know, and my own answer looms so large that I cannot answer that question for anyone else," he said, not lifting his eyes from the page.

"Okay."

"Gin," said Phineas Nigellus.

"You were bound to win one eventually," said Mrs. Black. "Law of averages."

"Again?"

They looked toward the library, and Mrs. Black began shuffling.

Some time passed.

"Why does Dumbledore insist on secrecy? Especially with Harry?" she asked.

Reaching for a different text, Severus said, "Do you really think the Order would let me live long enough to convince them of my real part?"

"Maybe," she replied.

"Really?" His tone was deceptively light as he opened the book. "And how many of them would I have to neutralize in order to remain alive until they were convinced?"

"Moody, certainly. Fred and George. Ron. Oh. Yes. That wouldn't exactly make your case, would it."

He continued, "And if by some unthinkable miracle it did, do you believe Potter would not betray my allegiance before the Dark Lord, at the end? Even a glance would be enough, Hermione." He looked over the top edge of the book at her. "Is he that good an actor?"

She had to admit he was not.

He dropped his eyes. "The element of surprise is crucial, Hermione, and not just for the Dark Lord. For Potter, as well."

Harry looked at Ginny's hair, alive in the dim moonlight, and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

In the empty office, Dumbledore looked calmly at the waning moon.

"Shall we, dear?" Arthur asked.

Molly smiled, put her knitting away, and took her husband's hand.

"Hagrid, he simply cannot stay in the castle, but I agree that you both must remain within the grounds." Minerva Transfigured a few rocks into a shelter. Her wand hand trembled slightly.

Neither Hagrid nor Grawp noticed.

*To hell with it*, Harry thought, reaching out to touch Ginny's hair.

But at that moment, Ginny laughed at something Ron had said, turning her head. Her hair just brushed Harry's fingertips before his hand curled around air.

Severus was reading a text so old that it hardly qualified as a book. The pages had been cut from a scroll before being roughly sewn together. He sat up straighter, suddenly alert, and re-read a section. "Hermione."

She looked up. The circles under her eyes were bruises in the lamplight.

"Foris Clausa. The closed door."

She reached for it, but he held up his hand.

"What?" she asked.

"Don't touch it. Just read."

She nodded, but asked, "Why?"

"This codex will kill any Muggleborn who touches it. The Curses on it are arcane. I cannot even make notes from it, not even in summary."

She sat on her hands.

She started reading. Foris Clausa was a foundation spell, a spell which initiated a pre-determined sequence in this case, to trap a witch or wizard for the purposes of casting the Killing Curse. "The Foreclosure Curse the only way to release it is for the original caster to cast Avada Kedavra else it traps its own caster." She scanned the rest of the page.

He nodded.

"Why isn't this a listed Unforgivable?"

"I suspect no one remembers it. The state of this book suggests it may be the only copy in existence. Possibly it was listed at one time, and got buried in its own logic. If the caster fails, he dies; if he succeeds, he casts another Unforgivable, and the question becomes rather academic."

"Oh, dear," she said, still sitting on her hands. "Um... could you maybe..." she gestured with her chin.

He drew the book away from her and set it safely on his side of the table.

She brought her hands back to the table and looked at him for a moment.

He saw the combination of terror and courage in her eyes. Devastating. He reached for her hand.

She looked at him seriously. "You'll be able to cast it?"

He just looked at her.

"Foris Clausa, I mean. It requires intent."

He knew what she meant.

She would not release his gaze.

"Yes," he said quietly, his thumb a caress on her hand. "I'll be able to cast it."

Something in her gave way. If she had to die, why did it have to be him? "Why you, Severus?"

His tone was clinical. "Potter's success depends on timing. I can control that."

She inhaled sharply.

"And I won't allow anyone else to touch you, Hermione. If it is all I can give you, I can give you a clean death." He covered her hand with his own, then withdrew. "The others his followers would use you first, to make you suffer. I will prevent that."

"You can control both? The timing and... that?"

"I believe so."

"And if you can't?" she pressed, struggling to keep her voice from rising.

"Then I can still control the timing."

The hair on Hermione's arms raised. She knew that was the right answer, the only answer, but... She swallowed nervously. "Severus," she said, after a moment, "you'll have to mean it. The Killing Curse."

On the mantel, Tayet tilted her head, and said, "Whirp?" Her voice was liquid, low.

"The Vow, the Compulsion for Potter to succeed, the Indemnities must be satisfied; to protect him, and his mission, I will do it, or I will die. The knowledge that I am protecting you from something worse will prevent my choosing the latter, in the moment." He paused. "It has before."

"Dumbledore," she said.

He nodded bleakly.

"And... after? You... what will happen to you?"

"Well, it is possible that one of the other players may attempt revenge. Moody" - his lip curled - "if he is there, if he survives, he will certainly try. He's been thirsting after me for years." His eyes glinted sharply - even eagerly.

The sight threw Hermione briefly back into First Year Potions.

Severus' memories were darker, and lasted longer, and they ended, as they always did, with Dumbledore. Forcing himself back to the present, he continued, "I will probably be alive to the end, and then the victor will kill me. The Dark Lord, for failure; Potter, for success." His lips twisted at the irony.

She watched him as he looked at the dark window.

He exhaled. "I suspect that in the end things will happen rather quickly." Mostly to himself, he added, "They will have to."

"Whirp?" Tayet asked again.

That broke the moment.

"I don't understand how any of this will neutralize the scar Horcrux," Hermione muttered.

"I don't know, Hermione. The scar that connects Potter and the Dark Lord belongs to the two of them; I suspect that depends on Potter. Once it is neutralized, the Dark Lord can be killed, and it will be over. Or it may work the other way around." His voice softened, tightened. "No matter what is happening between us, Hermione, you and I are not the main actors."

She thought about that for a moment, and then he saw resolve grow in her eyes, in the set of her jaw. "Oh, yes, we bloody well are."

-----  
Mrs. Black laid down her cards and shot a triumphant look at Phineas Nigellus. "That's game," she said.

-----  
Tayet glided to Severus' shoulder and looked at him very seriously before rubbing her head on his cheek. Then she turned suddenly and began to preen, warbling at him for assistance. She was one day old, and she was growing as fast as she could.

And everything itched abominably.

# Will

Chapter 28 of 34

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

**Summary:** *She's back. He's back. And so's he.*

A/N: This chapter is dedicated to Corazon ~ wishing you a speedy recovery! \*hugs\* Thanks to Luna305 for being an exacting beta.

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*"No matter what is happening between us, Hermione, you and I are not the main actors."*

*She thought about that for a moment, and then he saw resolve grow in her eyes, in the set of her jaw. "Oh, yes, we bloody well are."*

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*She was one day old, and she was growing as fast as she could. And everything itched abominably.*

-----

Severus was stunned. "'Yes, we bloody well are'?" he repeated. "Hermione, it doesn't work that way."

"Severus," she said sternly, "the end will be about Harry and Voldemort. Fine." She waved her hand dismissively. "Harry will do what Harry will do, Voldemort will do what Voldemort will do, and meanwhile the rest of us will... what? Lie about like Puffskeins, hoping we get stepped on at the proper time? Host an elaborate drown-our-sorrows fest? Skulk in the shadows, bowed, not broken, dignified, courting and cursing our own *meaningful* ends?"

His eyebrows had been edging upwards since the word "Puffskeins"; now they seemed to be permanently lodged in his hairline.

"Thank you, no. There are ways around all of these Indemnities. Dumbledore would not be bloody twinkling unless he thought so. He loved us, Severus - *all* of us, maybe especially you yes, you. You are absolutely the kind of infuriating creature he would take perverse delight in loving."

*Perverse?*

"Yes, perverse. No, Severus, not Legilimency. I've spent the last six years of my life decoding your face, Harry's sulks, Ron's moods, and Dumbledore's wise, cryptic nonsense. I read Professor Umbridge, and Cornelius Fudge, and knew it was a trap at the Ministry. I have been wrong once - *once* - when I was eleven years old." She paused for breath, rattled; she'd been wrong about him and the Sorcerer's Stone but she wasn't going to tell *him* that.

She didn't need to; his lips were already twitching and his eyebrows were slowly re-accustoming themselves to gravity.

"This is insane, Severus, absolutely insane. For six years I've been assimilating into a world I didn't bloody well know existed. Why do you think I read every bloody book in the library? And now I'm stuck in this house - "

And his eyebrows shot up.

"With *you*, my former *teacher*,"

He flinched.

She raised her eyebrow at him. "It's a little late to flinch, Severus. Really." And she was off again, up, away from the table, hands on her hips. "You know damn well I'm falling in love with you and I know damn well why you can't say the same in return. You've been using yourself, Severus - you, who've been used by everyone, what's one more? - using yourself as bait, to trap my mind, my heart, my soul, and my - " *Just say it, Granger.*

*Restraint, Snape...*

"... and my body, and it's worked, oh, gods, how, and I've fallen, - "

*Glorious*, his thoughts groaned.

" completely, irrevocably, and it's wrong, and I love it, and I love you, and it doesn't matter, because I'm going to die, you're going to die, we're all going to be dead because no one will say his name, or your name, or that prophecies are absolute bunk just excuses masquerading as explanations. A grand inevitable plan, a sop to everyone's cowardice. 'I don't have to do anything; the Chosen One will do it for me, poor dear boy.' Which is just letting Voldemort's choices dictate reality because it's easier than *thinking*." She snorted. "Sheep," she said with distaste, then turned, eyes aflame, "Well bloody hell, Severus, but who are the current architects of that grand plan now? Who? I ask you!"

He felt it would be prudent at this juncture to say nothing.

"We are, Severus. We are." A sweeping gesture, encompassing him, Tayet, their notes, the books, themselves. "We have all the pieces I know we do it's the way Dumbledore's mind works and the way you were counting on mine working. Don't question faith, Severus, not when it's standing right in front of you."

Tayet crowed triumphantly.

"All I wanted was to go to *school*. To *learn*. It's what I *do*. And I learn very, very quickly." she spat finally, and glared at him.

One eyebrow this time.

"Stop that. You know what I mean."

"Indeed. That does not, however, negate my response."

"Don't distract me. I'm about to make a grand pronouncement."

Of this he had no doubt. He did, however, hold the thought of distracting her in reserve, and not too far in reserve, either. She was really quite spectacular.

She turned on her heels and sped to the kitchen.

*What? Blast.* He went after her, demanding, "What are you doing?"

"Taking this war to Voldemort, Severus," she informed him, as if she were late for the Hogwarts Express and the First Years were running amok on Platform 9 3/4.

"What?" He lengthened his stride.

"I'm Flooing Minerva..."

He stopped in front of Mrs. Black's frame. He, Mrs. Black, and Phineas Nigellus exchanged a look, a look that required no translation because it had not changed in centuries the look of Slytherins in the presence of a rampaging Gryffindor.

Tayet zoomed into the hallway.

"... and then I'm..."

The kitchen door swung closed behind her, and he was through it like a shot. "And then you're what?"

*Thud.* Tayet hadn't flown fast enough.

Hermione looked at him with another look that had not changed in centuries, a particularly Gryffindor look, though only seen rarely from the males of the house. It was the look she had given Draco Malfoy. Once.

Draco would run before it, now, although he would seem outwardly to be walking.

Severus was not Draco. He closed the distance between them, captured her lower back with his hand and pressed himself against her. Very quietly, he said, "You were saying?"

"And then I shall burst into flames if you don't kiss me," she smiled. *That* smile.

He laughed throatily. "Floo Minerva." He dropped his voice and hissed one word into the skin behind her ear. "Hurry." He caught her skin between his teeth closed them, sharp, not painful, and she felt his tongue on her skin and

- her hands flew to his arms, clenched, hard -

- then she pushed him away.

"Oh, I will, Severus. I will." Her eyes searing, slow, before she turned to reach for the Floo powder. "One thing."

A rumbling sound that she took for an affirmative.

"Do you know where you can lay your hands on Peter Pettigrew?"

It was definitely not the way he had hoped that question would end.

A very aggrieved looking Tayet appeared and landed on the table. She glared at the kitchen door, glared at Severus, rustled her wings, and preened her tail feathers.

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"Headmistress?"

Minerva looked up from her paperwork at the sound of Hermione's voice from her private quarters. Rising from her desk, she hurried to the hearth.

"Miss Granger? What is it, child?"

"Is Hagrid okay?"

"Yes, he and Grawp are both how did you know?"

"Would you please ask Professor Dumbledore's portrait to join us?"

Minerva looked at Hermione sadly. "He's still slee - "

"He's faking. Tell him, please, that if he doesn't join us I would be happy to make a full report in his absence."

Minerva hurried into her office, casting an apprehensive look over her shoulder at Hermione.

Severus sat down beside Hermione with a mug of coffee and ran a fingertip lightly along the line where her jeans met her ankle. She batted at his hand. Tayet trilled.

Minerva returned, completely ruffled, and Dumbledore appeared in one of the frames on the wall behind her. Minerva was staring at him, and he was staring at Hermione. Neither one looked particularly happy.

"Excellent. Thank you, Headmistress. Thank you, sir."

He nodded, but said nothing.

Minerva finally sputtered, "How long have you been awake?"

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak, and Severus' hand trailed higher on Hermione's leg. Severus squeezed her calf, and traced an idle fingertip lightly back down to her ankle. She smacked him on the thigh. He smiled into his coffee.

"I'm sorry, sir, but that will have to wait."

Both professors stared at Hermione.

"Professor Dumbledore, you are aware of the Indemnities, yes?"

He nodded.

"Are you aware that I have finished the list?"

He nodded again. "Phineas Nigellus..."

"Yes, of course he would have."

"Finished it!" Minerva said, shocked. "So quickly?"

Hermione sighed inwardly, and asked Dumbledore, "Are you aware of the workarounds?"

Minerva drew herself to full height. "You've found a way?!"

"Two. So far. The inanimate Horcruxes. Yours and Molly's."

Minerva's hand fluttered to her chest and she groped behind her for the nearest tangible object. Her hand came to light on a bookshelf, on which rested a picture of a family. Hermione couldn't see their faces clearly, and she didn't want to.

Dumbledore regarded Hermione with keen interest, but he did not seem surprised. "So, Miss Granger," he began.

Following the line where her jeans met her lower back, Severus drew a light, slow, deliberate line on Hermione's back. Then his fingers brushed her wrist, then her ankle, then his hand pressed firmly on her right hip.

"Excuse me for a moment, please."

Minerva's hearth was empty, and she turned to Dumbledore's portrait.

"How long have you been awake, and why haven't you told me? And how does Miss Granger know?" Her features expressed equal parts relief and disapproval, and the lines etched on her face showed that this particular two-part response was one of much use and long familiarity.

"All in good time, Headmistress," he inclined his head slightly. "All in good time." He regarded her hearth serenely. "Which should arrive rather shortly, if I read our good Miss Granger correctly."

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"What are you doing?" Hermione hissed.

"I should have thought that was obvious," Severus replied, dark eyes moving over her face with a promise of what would follow.

"Not now."

And his eyebrow raised again. *A challenge. Delightful.*

As Hermione returned to the Floo, his hand was on her back, sweeping around her waist, hand opening on her stomach, his thumb caressing minutely, slowly, but inexorably upward. He set down his mug and came to his knees, his other palm flat on her back, following the muscles of her spine, fingers curling around her ribcage...

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"Professor Dumbledore, if you would be so kind as to outline the list to the headmistress, I would be most appreciative."

"Miss Granger, I must insist - " Minerva began.

"Let her finish, Minerva," Dumbledore said calmly.

"Pettigrew. We need to find Peter Pettigrew. Quickly."

The former headmaster smiled quietly. "Well done, Miss Granger."

Minerva's nostrils were flaring but she had the sense to keep quiet, for now.

"Stop that," Hermione said, irritably.

"Miss Granger!" Minerva protested.

Laughing suddenly, Hermione said quickly, "I'll report back in the morning," and her head vanished from the hearth.

Minerva frowned and turned to Dumbledore's portrait, palms out in exasperated helplessness. "The girl is overwrought, Albus. And you," she began, eyes frosty behind her square-rimmed spectacles, "owe me an explanation."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. He was already editing his response.

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"You bastard!" she yelled, jerking back into Severus' arms and twitching away from his fingers. "Tickling me, during a conversation like that!"

"Pain is not the only distraction, Hermione. And the two of them have much to discuss."

She twitched, anticipating more tickling. He chuckled, but his hands stilled, possessive, strong, unmoving.

Pulling her to him, sudden, almost roughly, he warned, "I will not promise to stop, Hermione, not when your skin is alive to my wish." Holding her close, he turned his attention to the top button of her blouse. "So many buttons. So little time. No man alive could resist..."

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If either "man" or "alive" really applied, there was one who could, and he was in the park across the street from Number 12 Grimmauld Place, red eyes scanning the row of houses, seeking, sensing... he could almost taste her... somewhere close... somewhere very close... somewhere...

"Wormtail," he whispered, eyes unblinking, still sweeping the houses. "Your arm..."

He reached out the tip of his wand.

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In the kitchen, Severus hissed in pain.

Hermione's eyes were enormous. "Again?"

"Not a warning," he gasped. "Now." In one smooth movement, he was masked and gone.

Tayet screamed.

## Fury

*Chapter 29 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: Thanks to Luna305 for the beta on this, and to Anastasia and Indigofeathers for sending some very necessary assistance. :)

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*"Not a warning," he gasped. "Now." In one smooth movement, he was masked and gone.*

*Tayet screamed.*

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In far less time than he expected, Severus appeared before Voldemort. Pettigrew was cringing nearby.

Severus knew instantly where he was and his heart pounded once, hard, but he stood silent, unmoving, until Voldemort acknowledged him

"Severus."

"My Lord," Severus said, a perfection of outward calm.

"Something is happening here... I sense a shift, a change."

Again, his heart. He said nothing

"She is here. She is nearby. I can feel it."

And again.

"Yes... something is happening. Quite close by." Voldemort turned his eyes on Severus. "Do you not feel it, Severus?"

Severus inclined his head.

"There is a silence here that cannot completely mask the sound behind it. Hidden, yes, masterfully hidden - but perhaps not hidden quite well enough."

Severus's eyes were hard, and behind them, he was exerting every nerve to keep his wand hand from tensing.

Voldemort inhaled deeply, opening his mouth to scent the air. "I taste fury, Severus. Fury. Delicious." One pale hand reached out to Severus' arm.

*Occlumens.* Only long habit smoothed the surface of Severus' mind. He pushed only his very real curiosity to the fore.

The hand paused mid-air. Fingers curled, beckoning.

Severus stepped closer, and a mist began to curl around his feet, rising, trailing off in long, coiling tendrils toward the silver sliver of moon.

"Find her, Severus. Find her, and bring her before me. She is nearby."

Severus inclined his head once more.

The mist rose.

"You know whereof I speak? Do you feel it, Severus?"

"I do," he replied, eyes signifying nothing.

Voldemort's eyes glowed in the darkness. "Do you not ache to enfold this fury, to bend it, to crush it to you, to burst its new ripeness on your tongue, savoring every last sensation as it dies?"

Severus inclined his head, not trusting himself to speak.

"Chaos," Voldemort's voice rasped horribly. "A new force of chaos, growing, yes, somewhere close, so close..."

The mist swirled around Severus' waist. Pettigrew's hands were trembling, twitching.

Voldemort's stirred the mist with his fingers. Shaped, the mist licked at them in a deepening eddy. "They can sense it, Severus, and I can sense their hunger."

Severus willed himself not to tense.



"They seek a feast. I will not take their leavings. She must be brought to me, whole."

Severus spoke carefully. "I wish to understand you, my Lord."

Pettigrew's eyes widened, darting from Voldemort to Severus and back.

"A dangerous ambition, Snape."

"I would not fail you in this, or in anything."

Voldemort closed his eyes and swept his fingers through the mist. "Something grows... a new insult... female... unprecedented..." Voldemort's tone was sibilant, unreadable. He opened his eyes and looked at Severus, burning. "Identify her. Find her. Bring her to me."

Severus' eyes turned to Pettigrew. "Assistance could prove... useful..." A note of cold balance in his voice, his own authority and power, but calibrated; no challenge to the Dark Lord.

Voldemort's mouth opened. On the face he had worn long ago, it might have been a smile. "Of course. Wormtail will provide you every service."

With calculated negligence, Severus extended a gloved hand and rolled up his left sleeve. Wormtail did the same, slowly, fear showing clearly in his eyes.

Voldemort spun his face around and leaned toward Wormtail, hissing.

Wormtail flinched, but moved closer.

Voldemort's wand touched Severus's Dark Mark, then Wormtail's, then Severus's. "Until I release you, Wormtail, you respond to his summons and obey his orders as though from my tongue."

"Yes, M-master. Thank you, Master."

Severus's eyes were icy fire as he rolled his sleeve back down.

The mist swirled into the vacuum left by Voldemort's departure.

"Await my call at Spinner's End, Wormtail," Severus ordered.

"B-but... the Ministry..."

Severus silenced him with a look. "Spinner's End."

He waited, cloaked, masked, in the mist, until Wormtail had Disapparated.

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Despite Hermione's attempts to calm her, the phoenix was still screaming. Tayet popped out of the kitchen, and then back in, and then out, and then in. Each time she appeared, she screamed again.

"Tayet, what? What?" Hermione asked, half panicked and half annoyed.

Tayet popped out again, and Hermione shoved the kitchen door open. "Stay put! Wherever you are, just stay put!"

Phineas Nigellus and Mrs. Black had their hands over their ears, but they nodded toward the front parlor. They winced as Tayet let forth a particularly piercing shriek.

Hermione ran to the parlor.

Tayet was perched on the back of a low Victorian sofa and was glaring out of the window. She looked at Hermione scathingly and then returned to her vigil.

Hermione knelt on the sofa and looked out.

She gasped. There, in the park, she saw Voldemort, eyes glowing; Severus in his Death Eater robes; and a hunched, cringing figure whose hand was glinting in the dim moonlight.

She flattened herself on the sofa, dragging Tayet down onto her stomach, eyes wide, heart pounding in her ears.

Tayet let out an irritated "Squeep!" and poked her heart.

"*Are you a witch or not?*" - a voice from a distant memory. *Right.* Hermione gripped her wand and peered over the back of the sofa.

A darker figure against the night. A faint glow of moonlight caught the mist swirling around Severus' boots as he took a step closer to Voldemort, pale ghostly wisps curling upward, twining around his legs, curling and reforming.

Hermione inhaled sharply as Voldemort's hand extended toward Severus' arm. *No*, she thought firmly, as if she could obliterate Voldemort with thought alone. Tayet whirled her agreement, and the low rumble emanating from deep in her throat sounded distinctly like a growl, a growl that was echoed by Hermione.

Woman and phoenix watched as the mist rose higher, as Voldemort trailed his fingers through it, as he *-laughed?* - and as Severus proudly extended his arm, rolling up his sleeve.

A trick of the mist in the moonlight illuminated his skin, the Dark Mark all the blacker for the contrast.

*Tayet*, Hermione thought, without taking her eyes off of the silent power play unfolding before her. Some movement told her Tayet had heard her, and she continued, *I'm going to kill him.*

A whirring agreement.

Voldemort's wand extended toward Severus' Mark. Woman and phoenix held their breath. Was this the call to the rest of Voldemort's followers? Was this the signal that would begin an attack?

Hermione eased herself off the sofa, wand at the ready, hand reaching for the mirror in her pocket. As soon as Voldemort's wand left Severus' forearm, she touched it.

It was so cold it burned.

*Not now.* The thought came through with a crystalline edge, but with a hint of... satisfaction? No. Something darker. Her stomach fluttered with anticipation.

Voldemort reached to touch Severus' mark again, and she let go of the mirror.

But when Voldemort and then Pettigrew finally disappeared, she brushed one finger lightly over it.

Mist glowing pale fire, swirling around him, Severus turned, proud, intent, and, across the distance, looked directly into her eyes.

She felt his hand over her heart, trailing downward...

Tayet warbled richly and disappeared.

*Now?* she breathed in his mind.

His thought curled around her mind. *Now.*

He started for the house and Disapparated mid-stride; his voice still echoed around her mind and he was before her, his gloved hands on her hips, his eyes intense behind the mask he still wore as he bent and claimed her lips with his own.

*Mine*, she thought, her voice wrapping his mind in a fury of possession as she ripped off his mask. He groaned and pulled her sharply against him. Her mental laughter registered low in his spine and his hands were behind her, grasping, drawing her to him, under her, lifting her.

Her arms around him, clawing his shoulders from behind, the long, liquid sound of silk tearing as she clenched his shoulders, the muscles in his back extending as he carried her, wrapped around him, across the room to the wall opposite the window.

The wall hard, unyielding at her back, his presence, warm, dark, alive, insistent, in front of her, she raked her fingers into his hair and forced his head back just far enough to see his eyes.

Breathing hard, his hands between her back and the wall, pressing her, holding her, her only balance his weight, the wall at her back, his strength, pinning her.

Hard leather pushing her hair aside, cupping her jaw, so hard, cool, smooth, not skin, *"In these robes... Wrong..."*, his thoughts railing at the finite limitations of reason...

Hands tightening in his hair, *"Do you care?"*

*"Yes."* His breathing ragged.

Tighter, pulling her eyes demanding, a flicker in his. *"Will that stop you?"* she breathed he heard the challenge lurking in the depths below the question.

Eyes hard, a dark flame, searching, seeking *"Never."*

And his lips were on hers and his hands flat against the wall, moving, his cloak billowing behind them.

Buttons open gone

*"The cloak stays, Severus."*

A wicked smile. *"My orders are to find you."* - lips, tongue, teeth, neck, collarbone, shoulder, biting, hard, harder

*"And so you have."*

Pinning her firmly to the wall with one hip, a change of angle, sweeping her hair aside, one gloved hand on her shoulder, up her arm, pressure, arm against the wall, hand running upwards underneath her arm, higher, closing over her own, holding her tightly.

Her breath shallower, eyes a deepening dance of anger, determination, something deeper. Growing... Her cheek pressed into his other hand, hard, dark, not alive... her neck bare, smooth, breathing, vulnerable...

*"I sense a shift, a change,"* he whispered, his mental voice a rush of wind over water.

It rippled her mind. *"Hmmm..."*

*"He told me he can feel the chaos growing..."* A strong, subtle movement against her.

His teeth on her collarbone, biting, gently, her free hand, fingernails into his skin, urgent... he moved again, intently, and again, slow, again, purposeful, again, calibrated, his power, his own

And he

And

And

Then

- and as he watched, eyes wide, black, amazed, enthralled - she closed her eyes - inhaled, sharp - biting her lower lip, to keep from -

More... he wanted... *"He told me that there is a silence here that cannot completely mask the sound behind it. Hidden, yes, beautifully hidden"* he drew the words out in her mind, his movements more intense, deepening, *"- but perhaps not hidden quite well enough,"* and he growled her name into her ear, "Hermione." He chuckled, and drew his hand deliberately back down her arm...

She dropped her hand to his collar, roughly pushing it aside and scratching his neck as he moved again, her fist closing in reflex.

Low, so low, in her mind, his voice everywhere, filling her, *"I taste fury, Hermione."*

And she moaned.

*"A fury I ache to enfold, to enflame, to release into the night, savoring every sensation as it flies, as it destroys -"*

He stopped moving, for one aching, agonizing, no movement, poised

She clutched him as if she might die.

Her breathless mind screamed *"Now!"* and he

*"Fly, Hermione."*

He held her, watching as she

Then, with impossible tenderness, he brushed a stray hair off of her forehead and gathered her gently in his arms.

## Divergent Roads

*Chapter 30 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

**Summary:** *Phoenix song. A question. An answer.*

A/N: This chapter is dedicated to Potion Mistress and Anastasia, for different reasons. Thanks, as always, to my beta, Luna305.

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*Then, with impossible tenderness, he brushed a stray hair off of her forehead and gathered her gently in his arms.*

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Boneless, weightless, without a thought, without a name, she floated, drifting... his voice was her sky.

Fingers hair skin falling, floating, returning...

... and her arms around his neck, shoulders, breathing, returning...

... and she was home.

*"Welcome back, Hermione."*

She felt his lips on her forehead, alive, joy, and she opened her eyes into his

*"Timeless,"* he thought, forgetting that he was still in her mind.

She smiled and raised her fingers to his face, tracing an eyebrow, an eyelid, gently, eyelashes.

His eyes closed, his face relaxed, his lips parted... "... oh."

Her smile deepened, and her hands, knowing, embracing his face, her thumb along his lip

And his eyes half-opening, warm, closing, and, with a kiss, a hello.

And his arms tightened around her, possessive, protective, freedom, eternal.

She smiled and it was again ageless. She kissed his forehead and breathed, "Dangerous."

One side of his mouth twitched. "Indeed."

Leaning his forehead against hers, then a decision, a motion, and he carried her to the sofa, and through the mist, the moon, waning, pale, silver.

Leaning on his chest, his cloak furled over them, she considered his face, and he watched her considering, and, finally, as was inevitable, his questioning eyebrow broke her quiet contemplation and she laughed softly and asked her inevitable question.

"Where do you sleep?"

He chuckled. Impossible that after everything she wouldn't know. "The third floor," he replied, drawing her close in his arms, kissing her hair. "Where we spoke to Dumbledore."

She was quiet, a hand on his chest, half-consciously tracing the phoenix tear brand as if memorizing a circle, but her eyes were intelligent. "Severus, I - " she began, then went quiet again.

"Hm?" Her hair against his skin. Glorious.

"Are you sleepy?" She blushed.

He chuckled again. "Are you saying that you'd like to go to bed, Hermione?" His voice was kind, but not without its usual edge of amusement.

She nodded. "Someplace real."

His heart tightened.

"You're real, Severus; you're real. You touching me is real. But we, this" she blushed harder "we're not a place, not really."

He closed his eyes. He wished they were.

Although he did not allow it expression, she sensed the sigh he withheld and reached up to touch his hair, one wisp of it still slightly woven from her mindless braiding, so many hours days? she wasn't sure any more. He hadn't taken it out... and she ran her fingers through it, releasing the strands.

His hand reached up to stop her, but she was done. This time he did sigh.

"Severus?"

When he didn't speak, she sat up and looked at him more closely.

He mumbled something, too softly for her to make out the words.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing."

"Please tell me," she said, gently.

He looked away then, and his glance fell on a patch of paling moonlight on the floor, bleaching the rich burgundy carpet to a reflective charcoal.

"Please?" she repeated, quietly.

He started to speak, but his voice wasn't working properly. He cleared his throat, and turned back to her, his eyes glistening. "Put it back?"

Hermione blinked, but she nodded. They both sat straighter, the cloak pooling to their waists, around her hips, and she combed his hair through her fingers. "If I put it lower, um... no one will see it."

"I am not ashamed, Hermione," he said calmly.

"I didn't mean it's just he might notice," she finished.

After a moment, he nodded. "Lower, then."

He leaned his head into her hands, and her fingers started weaving. Tayet appeared on the back of the couch and, after watching for a minute, warbled approvingly.

For a few minutes the only sound in the room was the soft slip of hair and the rustle of silk as one of them shifted.

He watched her face as she focused on his hair, forcing himself to keep his breathing even. The moonlight refracted through the mist paled her skin, her hair, leeching color, and shadow, stray bits of light through the old, rippled glass window. The only darkness her eyes and the slowly whirling cloud on her chest. Almost full. He wondered what would happen when

"There." And she frowned, "Except I have nothing to fasten it with."

Tayet crooned a single note of paralyzing sweetness. She leaned in and dropped one tear on the end of the braid.

*Done.*

Severus and Hermione looked at each other questioningly, and, realizing that the voice belonged to neither of them, looked at Tayet.

Silhouetted against the glow from outside, her iridescence was muted only the colors of her tail feathers were discernable, and only by their varying shades of grey. Severus and Hermione both reached out to touch her feathers, and, as their hands met, Tayet closed her eyes and sighed blissfully.

At last, the itching had stopped.

They sat silent for a moment, hands touching, looking at Tayet. She was almost the size Fawkes had been her plumage rich, full, and elegant.

Their hands parted as each traced a long curling feather.

Even in the dim, waning moonlight, they saw it happen the feather under Severus' finger a deepening shadow; the one under Hermione's taking on a pale, luminescent gleam.

Neither of them dared to breathe.

Tayet opened her eyes and looked at them seriously, then tilted her head and began to sing.

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Phineas Nigellus grumbled awake and looked at Mrs. Black. "Well, it's better than the shrieking."

Mrs. Black looked at him strangely, then pulled two pieces of torn handkerchief out of her ears. "What did you say?"

He tipped his head toward the front parlor, but she'd already figured out his meaning, if not his words.

She twisted her lips thoughtfully. "Bit of a different tune this evening, wouldn't you say?"

"How so?"

She shot him a scornful look that would have done Minerva McGonagall proud. "Philistine," she scoffed, tucking her torn handkerchief into her beaded reticule. "Can't you hear it?"

"Hear what? It took an Act of Merlin to sleep through - " he waved his hand in the direction of the parlor. "It's a simple charm, the Silencing Charm," he said, aggrieved. "Do you suppose they don't know *how*?"

Mrs. Black regarded him with pursed lips for a moment, but the corners of her eyes would crinkle. They gave her away before she spoke. "I dare you to ask him."

Phineas Nigellus shushed her. "Cease your prattle, witch."

She hit him with her reticule, but fell silent, and they listened.

-----  
Severus and Hermione listened, spellbound, as Tayet wove her song from shadows and moonlight, notes pearls dropping into water, rain falling into wind, fire glowing into fire, water swelling, rippling, breaking dazzling rejoining - separated, woven, blended, separate.

He was never certain, he would never be certain, and he was, had always been, precise, exact, a chain of edged metal, of ice, out of a fire endlessly burning, in a world constructed of absolute, sharp, jagged clarity.

The clarity of spaces in a shattered soul.

Even were he given a chance, he could never explain how or when it happened.

Maybe it happened when she flew.

Maybe it happened when she sang.

Maybe it happened when he reached unconsciously for Hermione's hand as the song unfolded around them, or maybe it happened when he found her hand already reaching for his.

Whenever, however it happened, the edges that defined the empty spaces where he had once been whole would never again be as jagged after Tayet's song.

The whirling clouds on Hermione's chest slowed their circling, evened, smoothed, billowed gently, softly.

Hermione listened as its voice whispered in counterpoint to Tayet's song, "Shh..." An arbitrary sound. I forgive you. Forgive yourself. Severus, please.

Tayet's song swelled, broke, washed over them as perfectly as phoenix song must. Time matters differently to a phoenix.

The whispering "Shh..." from Hermione's heart lingered, softly, as the song ended.

But Severus only heard his heart beating in the silence. Maybe it was enough, for now.

Tayet looked at them sitting, still spellbound. "Whirp," she informed them definitively.

Severus stood, still holding Hermione's hand. He looked at her, sitting, the moonlight fading on her skin, at his cloak pooled around her, draped over her leg, and his throat tightened.

He hesitated.

But then, with a slight movement of his head, he gestured a question.

Hermione's breath caught as Tayet's tear in his hair caught the very last of the moonlight. She answered with a slight pressure to his hand.

His eyes softened. He did not let go.

They went upstairs.

## Into That Good Night

*Chapter 31 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

**Summary:** *A tale of two pillows.*

A/N: The title of this chapter is taken from a Dylan Thomas poem. It's worth reading... Thanks, as always, to Anastasia and Luna305.

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*His eyes softened. He did not let go.*

*They went upstairs.*

When they reached the third floor landing, Hermione looked at Severus. "Um... my trunk... I need to..."

He nodded, strangely formally. "*Accio Hermione's trunk.*" He squeezed her hand and waited for the trunk.

She slipped into the bathroom at the end of the hall, and looked in the mirror.

She scarcely recognized the creature before her. Wild hair, knowledgeable eyes, and a small billowing cloud of darkness over her heart. She would not have believed it several days earlier. She was not sure she believed it now.

She gripped both sides of the cold porcelain sink and leaned her head over, breathing deeply. *Oh, Granger. What have you gotten into...*

An excellent question.

She was good at those.

She glanced at her eyes in the mirror, and then began a clinical appraisal. They were, undoubtedly, darker. Sharper. And deeper.

And her former Potions teacher was waiting for her.

*Oh, dear.*

At that moment, the former Potions teacher was in the hallway, casting an apprehensive eye over Hermione's trunk as it hovered innocuously, awaiting direction. *Dammit, Snape, just do it.*

But he could not. He could not, somehow, bring himself to levitate Hermione's trunk into his room in Harry Potter's house. His perfect execution of an intricate, improvisational masked dance on the tight-rope of truth that comprised his life as a spy was built on a rigid sense of honor it was his only safety net. He knew this, and he reveled in the sometimes agonizing friction between his honor and his cynicism the friction kept him sharp.

It also kept him from moving Hermione's trunk the final distance into his room.

He scowled at the inoffensive trunk. This didn't help. It didn't even really make him feel any better.

Tayet zoomed up the stairs and landed on the trunk, looking at him, amused. "Whirp," she suggested.

"That helps not at all, Tayet."

She rustled her wings and smirked at him. "Whirp," she insisted.

His scowl deepened. "Bloody conspiracy of one, you are."

She seemed to scowl back. Otherwise, she didn't dignify his statement with a response.

Hermione opened the bathroom door to discover Severus and Tayet apparently engaged in a scowling contest.

"Um... if I could perhaps..."

They turned to look at her.

"I well I need my toothbrush," she finished inanely, not quite sure what she had interrupted.

Tayet fluttered to the banister as Severus released the Wingardium spell on the trunk and turned toward the bedroom. He stopped at the door and reached for the handle, but did not turn around.

"Hermione," he asked, too calmly.

Her hand clenched around her toothbrush. "Yes?"

"Do you want this?"

"Do I... what?" she asked, startled.

"The reality."

She stood then, holding her toothbrush.

He heard her start to say something, but held out his hand.

More harshly than he intended, he began, "We all have choices, as you've so accurately noted. It is one thing, Hermione, to relinquish control in passion. Blood magic, sacrifice, and whatever she - " a gesture behind him toward Tayet, who was still perched on the railing " represents."

Hermione stood still, looking at his back.

"It is another matter altogether to make a choice while standing in a hallway, holding a toothbrush. There are many rooms, Hermione, and you have as much right to any of them as I have. More, actually. But I hope - " He swallowed. "I hope you will choose mine."

She stared at him, not knowing what to think, let alone say.

"It means something to me, Hermione," he said, quietly.

"Of course it does. It means your heart still works."

He turned and faced her, a low anger surfacing.

She held up her hand. "I meant that. Don't cheapen it."

He looked at her, and said, "You know I can't love you," putting a careful inflection on the word "can't."

She nodded, understanding. "I don't imagine you can, with a broken soul."

Tayet lamented her agreement.

Standing with one hand on the door handle, head held at an odd, self-deprecating angle, he said, "If - no, when I can, it may be too late."

"No."

Something snapped. "Hermione, you can't know - "

Something else snapped. "I don't have to know. I have faith. In me. In her. In you. And in us."

Tayet's humming changed key fuller, deeper.

"Go to bed, Severus. I'm going to brush my teeth, and I will join you in a moment."

But halfway down the hall, she paused, and he felt it. He stopped, halfway through the door.

Without turning around, keeping her voice low, she asked, "Would you?"

"If I could."

"Then if you would please get my trunk out of the hallway."

"Of course."

Satisfied, Tayet zoomed downstairs.

-----

She appeared in the doorway.

He tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

She tried to hide the fact that her hands were shaking.

Neither was particularly successful.

He had turned down the covers for her.

She had left her hair down.

Both were exceptionally grateful.

He lifted the covers for her.

She couldn't not smile as she slipped under them.

His arm covered her shoulders.

After a moment, he asked, "Do you want another pillow?"

"No, thank you. This is good."

"Yes."

Neither dared to breathe.

After another moment, she said, "I'd only hit you with it anyway."

He chuckled. "Indeed."

They both started breathing again.

Drawing her close, he kissed her gently. "Goodnight, Hermione."

"Goodnight."

Neither closed their eyes.

"Pleasant dreams," she said, finally.

"Yes," he said, looking into her eyes. "They are."

-----

In her private quarters, Minerva McGonagall finally asked the question she'd been worrying in her mind for far too long. "How could you have been so blind, Albus?"

"Minerva, as I told Harry, I was never omniscient, merely intelligent. My mistakes, when I made them, were proportional to my abilities."

"An enormous 'mistake' to trust Snape, Albus. One might be tempted to call it 'tragic.'"

He corrected her instantly. "My death was not tragic; just the inevitable result of a mistake of mine." He paused briefly. "For something to be truly tragic, Minerva, one must be torn between love and duty. I faced no such dilemma. I expect you to remember that." He looked at her as though she were once again a student, and not Headmistress of Hogwarts.

"Thank you for the Muggle Studies lecture." She fixed him with a sharp look. "Why have you been pretending to be asleep? I am in no way ready for..." she gestured. "I'm neither strategist nor philosopher, Albus. I cannot lead them the way you could."

"That is not for you to do, Minerva. It is for Harry. Soon. Sooner than you think. For him to succeed he must follow a path only he can choose."

A wry look. "So you allowed yourself to be killed oh, yes, Albus, I figured that much out; young Malfoy, disarm you? Please. You allowed yourself to be killed to fulfill your role in some Muggle paradigm, in which the white-bearded wizard must die in order for the young hero to... fulfill his destiny?"

Albus' eyes twinkled.

"I did pay attention in Muggle Studies, as you well know," she reminded him.

"Then it should come as no surprise that I did not awaken instantly as a portrait, nor that I will ask you to keep my alertness a secret from Harry and the rest of the Order for a while longer."

She sat, exasperated. "Really, Albus. How am I-"

He interrupted her, speaking sternly. "I ask no more of you than I've asked of others, Minerva. In fact, a good deal less. There are those who are preparing Harry's path water will always run downhill, Minerva, and there are those who even now are grading the terrain to see that it does. For you to reveal that I am awake could skew that path, and the results could be disastrous."

"Albus Dumbledore, you are a manipulative old coot."

"Rather," he agreed, unapologetically. "I find it more efficient than endless explanations." His tone lightened. "A stance you will come to appreciate when the Board of Governors meetings resume."

She glanced at him sharply. "When? Not if?"

"I believe so, Minerva. However, as you've had occasion to notice, I have been wrong before."

She was quiet for a moment, weighing the lightness of his tone against the enormity of his meaning. Finally, she sighed, but rallied enough to ask, "As you've not really answered any of my questions, should I even bother asking how Miss Granger fits in?"

Albus' face grew serious. "No."

Minerva's eyes flew to his. "And... her source?"

Albus said nothing. Minerva knew him well enough to realize he looked slightly worried.

Her eyes widened, the beginnings of alarm. "Her information, then? Can we trust it, Albus?"

"Do you trust her Arithmancy skills?" he countered.

"Implicitly."

"Her Arithmantic analysis would not work were it based on faulty information, Minerva."

Minerva felt a twinge of exasperation. This conversation seemed to be leading backwards, and yet its logical pattern was so familiar that her next words were not what she expected. "I miss you, Albus. I miss you terribly."

"You will join me up here eventually, Minerva hopefully not as soon as you expect to. Forgive me if I wish to seek to avoid hastening that eventuality."

A look passed between them, and, although her eyes glistened, she smiled slightly.

"Besides," Dumbledore continued, summoning a twinkle with a nearly invisible effort, only just visible, and only to Minerva. "Your language is quite... colorful, when dealing with owls from the Ministry. Pray, enlighten me how does one go about doing that with a haggis, exactly?"

Had Minerva McGonagall had a pillow and a slightly different temperament, she very well might have hit his portrait with it.

Instead, she merely said, "Really, Albus."

## The Dying of the Light

*Chapter 32 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

**Summary:** *Morning meetings and occasions of doubt.*

A/N: Thanks to Luna305, ever-patient beta, and Anastasia, as always, for inspiration. The title of this chapter is from the same Dylan Thomas poem as the title of the last.

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Hermione awoke the next morning thoroughly entangled in the sheet. Severus' leg was thrown over hers, and his arms had snaked around her during the night, nesting his fingers in her hair. *Wow. Good morning, Granger.* She smiled slightly, and relaxed into the feel of his breath on her neck.

As she opened her eyes, she felt him smile. Or perhaps smirk. She couldn't tell. She hoped it was a smile.

"Are you smirking or smiling?" she asked.

"The woman even awakens with a question," he said.

"Of course. Which is it?" She stretched against him and his hand moved to her stomach, keeping her close. He lightened his hold until with every breath her skin brushed his palm.

"There is a difference?" he asked archly, burying his face in the riot of her hair.

"Mmm, from you, perhaps not," she consented, covering his arms with her own. She thought for a minute and then smiled again.

"I trust your dreams were pleasant?" he murmured.

She frowned, the images of her dream fleeting, elusive. Something about Dumbledore, a cabinet, and candles was drifting on the edge of her memory, but she couldn't hold on to any of it. "Yes... I think so... You?" she asked.

"If could shake the feeling that I still smell roses - " he frowned.

"Roses?" she felt a laugh starting. Really, it was too much.

"And something disturbing about Draco."

"Roses and Draco?", she remarked skeptically. "Disturbing, indeed."

"They may have been two different dreams, Hermione," he grumbled.

"What time is it?"

"Nearly seven, I should think."

"Time for a shower, then," she said, pulling the covers back.

His arms tightened around her. He had other ideas.

She did get her shower eventually one that took rather longer than she had expected.

-----



By 9 a.m., though, they were seated at the kitchen table, their damp hair cool, drying in the summer heat, watching Tayet whizzing about the garden, where she was apparently playing a one-sided game of tag with a confused butterfly.

"Um..." Hermione began, putting down her tea, unwilling to break the spell.

"Yes. Well," Severus cleared his throat. They could delay this conversation no longer. "The timing is largely up to Minerva, of course," he began, then leaned his head on his hand, tracing a pattern on the table next to his coffee mug.

Both of them were wondering whether Hermione's workaround would be effective, or whether tomorrow's sun would rise on an Order bereft. Rather briskly, Hermione asked, "Do you have any idea how to get Pettigrew into the Ministry? He *is* wanted."

As *am I*. The thought sprang unbidden to Severus' lips, but he refrained from voicing it. "We shall have to wait until night, of course, although that is no guarantee that the Department of Mysteries will be empty. We will have to risk that. You and I shall Apparate to Spinner's End there's little left of it, certainly nothing the Ministry nor the Dark Lord would find valuable, and it scarcely matters if we are glimpsed by Muggles."

Hermione was obscurely grateful for his focus on detail -*Of course, Granger; he's been strategizing for years.* - and nodded.

"I have decided that I shall place Wormtail under the Imperius Curse and order him to obey your commands until such time as you return control of the spell to me," he began, stopping at the look on her face. "Hermione, it is the best way."

She stared at him, daunted by the thought of having anyone especially a Death Eater, especially *that* Death Eater but anyone, really under her control. She exhaled slowly, and nodded, but asked, "Why you?"

He sighed, and his eyes shuttered, but not before she glimpsed the sadness in them. "Have you ever cast an Unforgivable, Hermione?"

She shook her head.

"It is a far, far better thing to keep it that way," he said quietly.

She closed her eyes. Another soul deep blow probably a bruise, by comparison, but still. "I you think it will work, to transfer control that way?"

"The control will be mine throughout, Hermione; you will merely direct it, as I cannot be there."

"So I'll be..." she frowned, thinking. "I'll be acting sort of like a human wand, then?"

"If wands had the ability to respond appropriately to changing circumstance, yes but the analogy serves well enough."

She could see him pushing his emotions away, again, as always, in the face of necessity. Something in her rebelled even as she knew his plan was their best option. "Severus, I - " she looked at him seriously. "Is there another way to - "

"I dare not appear at the Ministry; he will never go willingly; although you are potentially powerful enough in terms of raw magic to control him, I will not allow you to - "

Her eyes sparkled dangerously.

"Hermione," he said very seriously. "These are not ordinary circumstances. I've placed the future in your hands when they were the best ones. This is not Arithmancy, Hermione. This is my arena."

"Darkness," she said flatly.

He nodded. "In which I have but one equal."

She couldn't deny the truth. "I still hate it," she muttered.

"Good. Use that hatred, when the time comes," he said. "It will keep you whole."

They reached for their mugs and, as if by tacit agreement, looked out the window toward what they instinctively felt was their best hope. Tayet was perched on a low branch, and a yellow butterfly was fluttering near her head.

Severus and Hermione watched as the butterfly circled Tayet's head. The phoenix was flapping her wings for balance as her head veered wildly, trying to keep the butterfly in sight. The butterfly landed innocently on Tayet's beak and beat its wings slowly.

Tayet froze, appeared to go slightly cross-eyed, and then let out a screech. She zoomed in through the open window and landed on Severus' lap, hiding her head under his arm, trembling.

Severus looked almost as astonished as the phoenix.

Hermione tried valiantly not to laugh at the pair of them, but even as her heart lightened at Tayet's antics and Severus' expression, she could not help but admit that she knew exactly how Tayet felt.

"She wants comforting, Severus."

What he wanted to say was, "It was only a butterfly," but what came out was a half-strangled, "I see that." He stroked Tayet's back. *Foolish bird*, he thought, not unkindly.

Tayet crooned softly.

Still stroking her feathers, he thought, *I know exactly how you feel, little one. I'm not fond of surprises either.*

"I'd best get to Hogwarts. Molly will need some time to..." she couldn't finish.

"Get us a time, Hermione."

She nodded, expressionless, and reached out to touch his cheek, kissing him softly, covering his hand on Tayet' feathers with her own, and Disapparated.

-----

Minerva looked up as Hermione entered her office. Dumbledore was sitting calmly in his frame, toying with a Remembrall.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," Minerva said, no trace of emotion in her voice.

Hermione sighed inwardly. "Headmistress," she said, nodding. "Professor Dumbledore."

He looked at her kindly, and inclined his head, but said nothing.

"Albus has informed me that we must keep the fact that he is awake a secret for a while longer. He also tells me that the timing of all of this seems largely to be in your hands." Minerva's brow furrowed disapprovingly. "I confess that, in the absence of the whole picture..." a piercing look at Hermione "But in most matters" - she turned a weather eye on Dumbledore, who returned her look pleasantly "his counsel usually proved wise, in the end."

Minerva waved Hermione to a seat, steepled her fingers and peered at Hermione over the top of her spectacles.

Hermione settled her mind as she sat down.

"Tea, Miss Granger?" Minerva offered awkwardly. She seemed reluctant to begin the conversation.

Something in the headmistress' tone told Hermione not to delay any longer. "No, thank you, Headmistress. I've just now had breakfast."

"Very well." Minerva paused briefly, then said, "The list, then, if you please."

Hermione closed her eyes and swallowed. "Molly for the locket. You yes, well. Hagrid, for Nagini." Her voice broke as she saw Minerva's brow furrow and her eyes glisten. "And... and - " she swallowed again, preparing to lie.

"And that is quite enough to be getting on with for now," Dumbledore broke in serenely. "I find that breaking large tasks into smaller ones often allows for far greater accomplishment, in the end."

The two witches shot him two very different looks. Despite herself, Minerva was not without a burning curiosity regarding the final name on the list; Hermione, by contrast, was trying not to appear too relieved.

"Miss Granger, you believe you have found a workaround for the first two, yes?" he looked at her, a glint of warning in his eyes.

"I believe so, sir."

"Pettigrew?" Minerva asked, her lips twisting in revulsion.

"Yes. His arm may allow him to release the Horcruxes beyond the veil without incurring the same sort of... reprisal that Professor Dumbledore experienced."

Minerva turned this over in her mind. "How so?"

Hermione sat straighter. "Piercing the veil requires agency, or intent," she began, in her best classroom voice, "so only a living creature can pierce the veil. However, no living thing may return from beyond it. It's simply not allowed."

"The undiscovered country, beyond whose bourne no traveler returns," Dumbledore quoted softly.

Hermione looked at him, startled. "I didn't know you liked Shakespeare, sir."

His eyes twinkled. "A poor player, but there are those who love him," he consented.

Minerva snorted and reined them in. "Proceed, Miss Granger."

"Yes, of course, Professor," Hermione said. "What lies beyond the veil is a Mystery; it is forbidden. To touch what lies beyond it is punishable, evidently, by..." she paused, her mind flooded with what would happen if her plan failed, but she rallied, shoving doubt aside, and pressed on, "... by death."

Minerva turned her face away and looked out the window.

"It reverses the natural order of things to contaminate life with death," Dumbledore added softly, looking at Minerva.

"So it is when your child dies before you, Albus."

The silence hung heavy in the air, and, on the outskirts of it, Hermione sat very still.

With a visible effort, Minerva turned back to Hermione. "And Pettigrew's arm will circumvent this matter?"

"I believe it should, yes. What Professor Dumbledore did, insofar as I can see, was the magical equivalent of dividing by zero. It's forbidden; taboo; it's not done because it cannot be done."

Minerva looked at Dumbledore's portrait. "So naturally you had to try."

His lips twitched.

Hermione registered their exchange, but continued, "But although Pettigrew has intent, and agency, his arm is not truly alive, and therefore it may be possible for him to pass the Horcruxes through the veil without breaching the mystery he will not really touch what lies beyond it."

"And then we may simply walk away?"

"It stands to reason that if the Horcruxes are released behind the veil, the portions of Voldemort's soul they contain will no longer be accessible, to him, or to anyone, and thus the Indemnities will simply cease to exist."

Minerva rapidly evaluated Hermione's logic. Finally, she said, "An admirable solution, Miss Granger, but as yet merely a hypothetical one. How do you propose we find him, and persuade him to assist us with this task? Or, I should say, these tasks, there being two inanimate Horcruxes?"

Here Hermione stumbled. "My... ah... my source knows how to find him. And... and Pettigrew does owe a life debt to Harry."

Minerva treated Hermione to a look that stripped the marrow from her bones.

Dumbledore coughed. "Minerva," he said simply.

"Very well. Pettigrew is your problem, then, Miss Granger. I trust you are equal to the task of ensuring your source's continued cooperation?"

Hermione nodded, but inwardly groaned. *Oh, no. Not this kind of conversation again.*

"Very well," said Minerva, rising from her chair. "I shall Floo Molly and ask that she join us. She will need to be there, in case things go... Yes. Excuse me."

Hermione suddenly realized that she would have given anything to be facing another awkward conversation with Minerva rather than the conversation that was coming with Molly Weasley.

Minerva exited the office through the door to her private chambers.

Hermione glanced at Dumbledore, and a look of shared caution passed between them.

"Steady, Granger," he said.

She swallowed, drying her palms on her jeans. "Yes, sir."

They waited.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Is Harry up to this? Will he be able to convince Pettigrew?"

"Perhaps the life debt will be compulsion enough, Miss Granger, although Pettigrew was ever adept at finding loopholes. As for Harry - " Dumbledore opened his hands " - that remains to be seen. I suspect, sadly, that the final persuasion will have to come from another source." His eyes were compassionate, and she was reminded of how tired, how much older he had looked, that last year.

Hermione returned his gaze, then drew her spine straight and nodded once. "Yes, sir."

---

A/N on sources: Severus alludes briefly ("It is a far, far better thing...") to the end of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dumbledore's Shakespeare quotation is from Hamlet's description of death in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Dumbledore's reply to Hermione is the bastard offspring of Macbeth's definition of life as "a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage" and a statement made by Daniel Webster before the U.S. Supreme Court ("It is a small college, sir, but there are those who love it").

## The Road to Hell

*Chapter 33 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

**Summary:** *Molly, a mirror, and a mistake.*

A/N: Much gratitude to Luna305, who did more than beta this chapter.

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Minerva re-entered her office with a flustered but cheerful Molly Weasley, who was wiping her hands on a patchwork apron.

Hermione looked at one of the patches. It had a large orange and green sunflower on it. She had to look away.

"Hermione, dear," Molly said, coming toward her. "My hands are still wet - I was just finishing the breakfast things. There," she said, opening her arms and enfolding Hermione in a fierce hug. "I haven't had the chance to thank you, dear. You saved my life. I'm so grateful we all are Arthur, the boys, Ginny..." she beamed at her.

Hermione opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

"And as for that vile creature," Molly continued, rubbing her hands on her apron once more, a steely glint in her eyes. "I was glad to do it, Hermione. Glad. My brothers he was one of them - " Her hands kept moving.

The sunflower folded and unfolded as Molly twisted her apron.

Hermione looked at Minerva.

"Tea?" Minerva asked Molly.

"No, thank you."

Minerva gestured and two chairs appeared next to Hermione's. The older woman sat, Molly still toying with her apron.

"Hermione, dear, Minerva says your research is going well? We're so proud. And we have absolute confidence in you. Ron was just saying at breakfast - "

"Molly," Minerva began, her voice strangely hollow.

Molly looked more closely at Hermione. "But you don't seem to be eating. I'll Floo you your meals, dear; I'm so sorry, but with one thing and - "

"Molly," Minerva repeated.

" - and another..." Molly faltered, looked at Minerva. "I'm sorry, Minerva. You must have a million things to do." Leaning to Hermione, she finished, "Are you getting enough sleep, dear? You look pale."

"Molly," Hermione said, willing herself not to look at Dumbledore's portrait for help. He'd shut his eyes when he'd heard the Floo. "The Horcruxes. You know about them."

"Of course, dear. That's what your research is about, isn't it?"

Hermione couldn't look at her eyes. She stared instead at Molly's apron, recognizing in a far distant corner of her mind a maroon plaid patch as one of Ron's long-ago shirts. A scarlet and gold patch - an old Quidditch uniform. Charlie, maybe. And the pink square, a loose thread at its corner - the pink square must have blanketed a baby Ginny. *Oh, gods, I can't do this.*

"Miss Granger has some rather... unsettling... information," Minerva began quietly. "It seems that the destruction of a Horcrux requires a sacrifice in kind."

"In kind"? I'm not sure I follow," Molly said.

"The murders Voldemort committed to create them follow a kind of discernable pattern," Hermione began, glancing at Minerva, who nodded at her, ceding the floor, but remaining poised to assist. *A brilliant teacher... oh, gods...* Hermione forced herself to focus. "It seems that each Horcrux demands an Indemnity a sacrifice similar in kind or in situation to the victim used to create it."

Molly's hands slowed on her apron, moving slower until she was picking at the loose thread. Then her hands clenched. "Not Ginny," she said firmly. "She almost died once because of that evil diary. Not Ginny," she repeated.

"That Horcrux has already been destroyed, Molly," Minerva reminded her gently.

Molly's hands unclenched, and she smoothed her apron. "Then what - ?" she looked from Minerva to Hermione.

Forcing herself to meet the woman's eyes, Hermione said, "The diary was Voldemort's first his weakest. Ginny didn't have to - " She couldn't finish. She couldn't mention Dumbledore, either. She shook her head, and took a deep breath. "There is a necklace, a a locket, Slytherin's locket, that once belonged to Voldemort's mother."

"Who did he kill for that one?" Molly's face was hard.

Hermione's throat was so tight she could not speak. She had to be right about the workaround. She *had* to. Her own fists clenched.

Minerva saw, and answered for her. "An elderly witch by the name of Hepzibah Smith."

The name meant nothing to Molly.

"She had no children, Molly," Minerva said, "and..." Then she could not continue, either.

Hermione forced herself to rally. She spoke, low, barely above a whisper. "The Indemnity sometimes involves a kind of inversion."

Molly looked at them blankly for a moment, and then she paled.

Hermione was by her side instantly. "Mrs. Weasley, there may be a workaround. I think I've found one. Really. It should work - "

But Minerva's hand was on her shoulder. "Give us a few moments, child."

"Of course," Hermione said. "Shall I...?"

"I'll send one of the house-elves to find you."

As Hermione closed the door behind her, she heard a choked sob.

Hermione flew down the spiral staircase, past the stone gargoyle, and into the corridors.

She had no destination.

She just ran.

-----

"Molly," Minerva said. "Molly."

"Oh, Minerva. Arthur - the boys - I never imagined oh, gods, Ginny, my little girl - and..."

"Molly, dear, breathe."

"I was so concerned about them that I never thought that I might even after I oh, how will they manage?" Her huge eyes sought Minerva's. "Arthur can't cook!" Her eyes were pleading, then they brimmed over. "And... oh, Minerva..." she whispered. "Oh. Oh gods," and she leaned her head against the older woman's shoulder and drew a shuddering breath.

"I know, Molly. I know. Shh..."

-----

Hermione ran.

The look on her face scared Peeves.

-----

After a while, Molly's hands smoothed her apron once more. The thread holding the pink square had come loose under her worrying fingers and a small gap had appeared in the seam. She placed one fingertip on it and rubbed the edges of the cloth against her skin.

"Who else?" she asked, finally.

Minerva said nothing.

"Who else?" Molly demanded.

Minerva, who had been kneeling by Molly's chair, stood stiffly and reached behind her for the chair Hermione had vacated.

"One of them is me," she said simply.

Molly looked up, horrified.

"I failed my daughter, Molly. Tom killed her for a Horcrux. The connection is failure of protection."

"There was nothing you could have done."

"Then I should have died with them, Molly," Minerva said, her tone absolute.

No mother would argue. Molly was no exception.

"But I've been thinking," Minerva said, her tone brightening, brittle, but stronger. "I think perhaps I failed Tom, too."

Molly looked at her in amazement.

"He was two years behind me in school, Molly. I could, perhaps, have - "

"You were a child, Minerva," Molly interjected.

"So was Tom," Minerva countered firmly, her voice growing stronger. "So is Potter. And so is she," Minerva gestured toward the door.

-----

Hermione stopped running and walked determinedly three times past the same blank patch of wall.

A door appeared, and she went through it.

The room was empty save for a large mirror.

She didn't hesitate - she stepped up to it and looked, and saw -

*Severus, of course. No surprise...* He had wrapped his cloak around her shoulder and pulled her close. The pair in the mirror faced her, unsmiling. *Not pretty. Well, no, of course; it wouldn't be.* Hermione-in-the-mirror's eyes darkened as she pulled aside her collar. The cloud there was still billowing, the circle not quite full. In the mirror, Severus put a fingertip under Hermione's chin, and she turned to him, brushing his hair softly out of his eyes. They shared one stark kiss, and reached for their wands.

Never dropping their gaze from each others' eyes, unblinking, as if each moment spent in each other's eyes were precious, too precious to squander, as if each sight might be the last

Hermione held her breath.

Unblinking, gazing at each other, they drew their wands in unison, aimed directly at each other, and

"Miss?"

Hermione's head turned in reflex. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a flash of green before the mirror went dark.

"Dobby is being sent to find you, Miss. The headmistress is wanting you in her office."

"Thank you, Dobby."

-----

Darkness.

His arena.

His ally.

His recourse, his only safety.

His prison.

Everything he touched, marked by Darkness.

Lily.

Hermione.

(He'd turned her tears to black.)

Even Tayet.

He ran his finger down the blackened feather, and she sang a long, low note.

A seduction of darkness, getting darker.

Every Unforgivable, one step nearer a line -

And tonight, another.

Far, far better him than her.

It would cast a shadow on her anyway.

His shadow.

How dare he?

We all make choices.

What's one more?

Light casts shadows.

Darkness just is.

Unforgivable.

Not inevitable. Necessary.

Without darkness, light would need no name.

Neither can live where the other survives, but they cannot exist without each other.

He was certain of that now.

Faith in the face of uncertain justice was the purview of darkness. A faith reserved for thieves, spies, and murderers.

The innocent had no need of faith. They embodied it.

Fools couldn't see it.

Had he been a fool?

And the rest those who lived on the periphery of the real, lives of quiet assumptions and platitudes they might mouth the word, but were ignorant of its meaning until forced there by stupidity or necessity. In their hands faith became a defense, a shield which they often mistook for a weapon.

They sometimes called it "Harry Potter."

You could, he supposed, be bludgeoned to death with a shield.

Still.

Only those who felt the edge of the real on their throats could know faith.

He'd seduced her to within cutting distance.

She'd taken another step on her own.

Tayet was looking at him with eyes of endless night.

*Push it further, you think?*

She leaned closer to him, her eyes not leaving his.

*I presume that's a "Yes"?*

Faith.

An arbitrary set of sounds.

Only the unforgivable had any real need for faith. Real faith.

The unforgivable were why the word had been shaped from a set of meaningless sounds.

Faith. The word had been created because of situations like his. Because of...

*More...* He knew there was one more thought coming. One step, if he would but take it.

Because of Darkness.

Which marked everything he touched.

It was necessary.

Unforgivable.

His eyes widened slightly.

Faith.

The word had been invented for him.

Tayet sighed and rubbed her head on his cheek.

*Arrogance, Snape*, he thought wryly, reaching for his coffee.

But in the depths of his broken soul, he knew it was true.

She woman, phoenix; did it matter? had seduced him to within healing distance.

He'd taken another step on his own.

Tayet spotted a firefly and was off like an arrow. Memory became motion, and the time for thinking was past.

-----

"Two o'clock," Hermione said, coming into the library.

Severus placed a bookmark and sat up on the couch. He raised an eyebrow. "Not midnight?"

"Minerva thought it too symbolic."

"Hm."

"And Molly pointed out that there's a shift change."

Hermione sat in one of the armchairs and started a fire.

"Hermione, it's blazing out."

She nodded, drawing in upon herself as he watched.

He was up and kneeling beside her chair before she could crumble completely. "What?"

Drawing a ragged breath, she said, "Severus, I looked."

"What?"

"I looked. In the Mirror. Oh, gods, Severus."

He pulled her to his shoulder. She was shaking.

Tayet appeared on the back of the chair and peered at Hermione. "Squirp?" she asked Severus.

"I went to the Room of Requirement. I wasn't thinking. I just ran. And then I thought, 'Show me,' and it was there. The Mirror of Erised."

"Shh... Hermione. It doesn't show the truth." He stroked her hair.

She shook her head out of his hands, her eyes blazing madly. "Severus," she said, her voice rising in panic, "I don't *want* to kill you. I *don't*."

His hands froze midair.

"Squipl!" Tayet insisted.

"Tayet," Hermione moaned, drawing the phoenix to her.

"Squerk!" Tayet protested, wings rustling.

"Hermione..."

Hermione's hold on the phoenix tightened as she interrupted. "I can't kill you, Severus, I *can't*. I *can't mean it*. It's all going to fail because I love you! *You and your damned buttons!*"

"Squeep!" Tayet craned her head to glare at Severus.

*She loves... Damn it, Snape, think. Fast.* "Hermione, do you see buttons on this shirt?"

Startled, she looked at his shirt. It closed with a small tie at the throat. "N-no..."

"Would you have thought it possible?"

"N-no, I oh, don't. I know what you're doing."

"Distracting you, yes, so you can think properly. Until you can, I can't."

Hermione's hold on the phoenix loosened slightly. Tayet squirmed out of her grasp and perched on her knee. Hermione rubbed the back of her hands across her cheeks.

*Oh, Hermione*, he thought, through the pounding of his heart. "Tell me what you saw."

"You. Me. Together."

His heart jumped.

"We weren't smiling. We kissed, and..."

"Go on."

"And we pointed our wands at each other, and oh, the look on your face, Severus."

Tayet crooned a few curious notes.

He touched her hair. "It wasn't real, Hermione."

She looked at him. "Don't lie to me now, Severus," she snarled.

He gripped her shoulders so hard that she gasped.

"Damn it, Hermione, I'm not lying. Forgive me if I don't want to hear about how I look when I kill you. I would rather not know. *Just tell me what happened next!*"

She nodded and his fingers relaxed slightly on her shoulders. "And then..." she stopped. "Oh. Then Dobby came in. I saw a flash of green as I turned away."

"You didn't see yourself cast the Killing Curse?" His irritation was vanishing as quickly as it had flashed to life.

"No."

"Hermione," he said, exasperated, running his hand roughly through his hair.

"Um... I suppose I may not have to kill you."

He exhaled. "No. That timing wouldn't make sense, Hermione."

"Oh. Right. Timing," she said, her voice growing sharper.

Tayet leapt to the back of the chair again. Severus stood slowly and backed away to the fireplace.

"How could I forget? You kill me, but I don't kill you, because of the *timing*. Excellent. I feel ever so much better now."

"SQUEEP!" Tayet shrilled at Hermione.

"Oh, WHAT?" Hermione said, rounding on her.

"SQUEEP!!!" Tayet was worrying at her feathers with her beak.

Hermione looked at Severus, confused, and he took a cautious step closer. He shook his head. He didn't know either.

"Perhaps you bent one of her feathers, just now?"

They inspected Tayet's plumage as she continued her urgent grooming, but saw nothing out of place.

"I don't think so. Perhaps it's growing pains?" Hermione suggested.

His mouth twitched at the irony. He couldn't help it. "Perhaps."

Tayet finished her grooming, clicked her beak at them, and zoomed out the window. She was hungry.

Hermione turned on Severus, her anger still sparking. "How can you be amused, Severus? With everything we're facing?"

"I should have thought that was obvious, Hermione," he drawled.

Her eyes flashed.

"It takes light to create darkness, and light to cast a shadow. But without the shadow of darkness, Hermione, nothing would ever be funny."

"You find Tayet's growing pains *funny*?" her voice was ominous.

"Not hers, Hermione."

She looked at him steadily, and backed him slowly toward the fireplace. Drawing one hand up to the V of skin at his collar, she traced along the edge of his shirt.

His eyes narrowed.

She continued to trace, the lightest of touches, moving her fingertips to his skin.

Severus jumped as the fire grew suddenly enormous and roared behind him. His hands flew to his trouser legs, patting out the sparks.

Pocketing her wand, Hermione smirked. "How very amusing. I do believe I see your point."

His eyes narrowed suddenly. "My cloak. At the Quidditch match." He knew when he saw her expression. "That was you."

"Of course it was," she smiled sweetly.

"Hermione," he said, half-choking. "You were eleven."

"Twelve, but who's counting?" The corners of her eyes crinkled. "Oh, right. You are. Sorry."

He growled something incoherent at her, then winced as a spark burned through his trouser leg.

As he reached down to smother it, Hermione turned and left the library, laughing darkly.

Severus scowled. *I am on the road to hell.*

Sitting weakly in the armchair, he Summoned a brandy. Then his lips twitched.

*No matter. I'll die before I get there.*

## Damocles

*Chapter 34 of 34*

Hermione returns to Grimmauld Place, looking for answers. She does not expect to find Severus Snape. Best Fanon Het (Quill-to-Parchment, Round 2). Runner-up ~ Best HG/SS, 2006 OWL Awards.

A/N: As always, thanks to Luna305 for beta duty. Also thanks to Luna, Anastasia, and Tobert, for various inarticulate but fundamental reasons.

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*Summary: The minor fall, the major lift.*

### 34: Damocles

"No, Molly! I won't have it!"

"We have no choice, Arthur."

"There must be another way."

"This is the other way, Arthur. The other is... it's just..." her voice dropped, and she looked helplessly at him. "It's the back-up plan."

He stared at her, red-faced. "I'm not losing you as part of a back-up plan!" he shouted.

"Arthur!" she admonished him. The windows were open.

He lowered his voice. "If Hermione's plan fails, Molly - "

"It's a brilliant plan, Arthur."

"Logically, it holds water, I grant you. But... but Hermione is no strategist. Several dozen things can go very wrong, Molly, very wrong indeed."

Her voice was calm. "Even if the plan fails, Arthur, I assure you that / will not. Nor will Minerva."

"Molly - "



"Do you want our children to live their whole lives under He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Wondering when their own children are going to die? No, Arthur. There's nothing to be done. We have to give Harry a chance, no matter what it costs us. We made this decision, together, years ago."

"Molly, let me - I'll do it instead - "

"Arthur," she said gently, "it doesn't work that way." She waved her hand around the living room in the Burrow, with its usual chaos of the scatterings of 7 children – 9, now, including Harry and Fleur. "I'm the mother." She looked at him fondly, sadly, their history in her eyes.

It made him smile and broke his heart. A lump in his throat threatened to choke him. He reached out and touched the strands of grey in her still-bright hair.

She reached for his hand and kissed his palm, drinking the feel of his skin in through her own.

"Molly..."

"I have to do this."

He looked at her. Since he'd first seen her at her Sorting, he had never once felt so lost. He drew her to him, his hand on her hair.

"I - I know. I was just going to say that I'm coming with you."

She pulled away slightly. "Oh, Arthur, no – it's too risky."

"I insist, Molly. I'll not have you face this alone."

Her hands fluttered on his chest. "Arthur, what if something does go wrong? Bill is far too young to deal with this lot on his own, and him just married..."

"My mind is made up. The children are grown."

"Ginny..." she said, weakening.

He drew her close again. "Even Ginny is older than you think, Molly, dear, for all she's your baby." Fingers under her chin, coaxing her to meet his eyes. "Wasn't it you who used to say 'Witches mature faster than wizards'? You were about her age and trying to convince me... Hm. Yes." He cleared his throat sharply and glanced away, not wanting to think about what Molly had convinced him to do when she was only a few months older than their youngest child.

Molly sighed as she leaned into her husband's chest. She would not argue with him.

Not today.

"No heroics."

Arthur said nothing.

She patted his chest firmly. "Promise me, Arthur."

He closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of her hair. She smelled of flowers and bread, of dust-bunnies and daredevils and the children's thousand daily rounds of did-not-did-too. She smelled like home.

"Promise me."

"I – I promise."

-----

In the kitchen, Ron turned to Harry and gestured with his head toward the living room, a questioning look on his face.

Harry shook his head, and mouthed, "No idea."

The two left the house as quietly as they could, and, once they were out of earshot, they turned to each other.

"Doesn't sound good, Ron," Harry began, lamely.

"Not at all." Ron ran his hands through his hair, wishing they'd gotten to the kitchen a bit faster after the yelling started.

They looked at each other.

"Sounds like Hermione knows, though," Ron said darkly, as they sat down some distance from the house.

Harry nodded. "We could send Hedwig."

"From here to London and back? Not enough time."

"Floo?"

"With Mum and Dad snogging in the living room?"

Harry silently agreed.

"Apparate, then?"

"What, and bring the whole bloody Ministry down on our heads? Sorry, mate, but you can't move without half the Order and a team of Aurors for backup."

Harry grimaced and picked at the grass. "I hate this," he said, finally. "Not knowing."

Ron nodded, watching his parents through the window. Their obvious affection for each other usually made for unpleasantness in his stomach, but at the moment, he found it oddly comforting. "I swear, Harry, I'm going to go barking if something doesn't happen soon," he grumbled.

"Sure you haven't already?" Harry forced a smile.

Ron rolled his eyes. "No, I'm not sure. Mum and Dad snogging, and me not being ill? I must be mental."

"Completely," Harry agreed.

-----

Had she but known it, Hermione would have been shocked to learn that she and Ron were feeling exactly the same way.

She had just set Severus on fire. Again.

And laughed at him.

She watched a brandy snifter float through the hallway.

"Oh, dear," she sighed, leaning against the wall and closing her eyes.

"Don't worry, dear. Whatever it is you've done, he deserved far worse," Mrs. Black sniffed sagely.

"What has she done now?" Phineas Nigellus appeared.

"I set Severus'... erm, yes. I set him on fire."

Hermione winced as Mrs. Black's cackle grated against Phineas Nigellus' loud guffaw.

"I've just come from Hogwarts," Phineas Nigellus said.

"How's Minerva?"

"Hard to say. She's mostly sitting on her desk twitching her tail, staring at the old fool's portrait."

Hermione opened her eyes at that. "She's what?"

Phineas Nigellus' mouth twisted with amusement. "Sometimes she hisses."

Hermione blinked.

"Seems to bother him most when she purrs, though."

Hermione closed her eyes again, hearing an echo, "... *when it all became... too much... I could transform... my feelings were less – less human, less complex when I was a dog...*"

She'd not seen Sirius fall through the veil. She'd only heard, afterwards, mostly from Neville.

She realized that would like very much to see Neville.

Reaching a decision, she said, "Mrs. Black? Would you give Severus a message for me please?"

"Will you set me ablaze if I don't?" Mrs. Black cackled.

Hermione sighed. "Of course not. Would you please tell him that I've gone to visit my parents, and I'll be back in a couple of hours?"

Mrs. Black nodded, and Hermione Disapparated.

Phineas Nigellus and Mrs. Black exchanged a worried glance.

"She seem a bit off to you?" Mrs. Black asked.

Phineas Nigellus sounded uncharacteristically reflective when he answered, "A bit..."

They were quiet for a moment.

"Will she be ready?" he asked Mrs. Black.

Having heard the *pop* from the library, Severus came into the hall in time to hear the question.

"Ask him," said Mrs. Black, nodding her head toward Severus. "I'm just a two-dimensional excuse for a pretext, remember?"

"She's gone?"

"You drove her back to Mummy," wheezed Mrs. Black. Turning to Phineas Nigellus, she said, "Pay up."

Phineas Nigellus' eyebrows flew up, then, grumbling, he reached into his pockets. "Didn't think it would take this long," he muttered.

Severus' eyes narrowed slightly, but he refused to be distracted. "To her mother?" he repeated.

Mrs. Black's eyes sparkled dangerously as she counted the coins Phineas Nigellus had handed her. "It's a wonder she hasn't gone before now," she said, with affected disinterest. "You owe me two more Sickles, you lousy skinflint." Turning to Severus, she continued, "Stop glowering at me, young man. You've worn this mantle for so long you're forgotten its weight."

A protest sprang to Severus' eyes, but Mrs. Black held up her hand before he could speak.

"Wait. Think. You're supposed to be good at both."

Severus inspected his cuffs for several moments before he nodded curtly.

Phineas Nigellus looked at him appraisingly. "Figured it out, have you?"

"She's saying goodbye."

Mrs. Black snorted softly. Phineas Nigellus glanced at her. Mrs. Black pointed at Severus. "More."

"And she wants comforting."

Mrs. Black nodded. "It won't be enough, of course. But every young bride tries, once, when she realizes what she's done."

Severus blinked. *Bride?* He noticed abstractly that his palms had gone clammy.

She shrugged. "She'll be back – an hour, maybe less. Mummy can't fix the fact that the man she loves is going to kill her."

Snape's eyes glittered darkly, but he crossed his arms, surreptitiously trying to dry his palms on his shirt sleeves.

Mrs. Black spared him a glance before turning to glower at Phineas Nigellus. "Love, death, what's the difference, really?" She gestured impatiently at Phineas Nigellus. "Pay up."

Phineas Nigellus nodded his concurrence. "Either way, life as you knew it is over. One just takes longer." He handed two Sickles to Mrs. Black.

Severus raised a questioning eyebrow at their exchange. "One wonders what pretense you have for currency."

Mrs. Black cackled as the coins clinked together. "None, of course. But even in death, principles must be upheld." Mrs. Black tucked the coins in her reticule before turning to regard him, the amusement on her face wiped away completely, replaced with a grave pity. "Don't you agree, Severus?"

He nodded once; Mrs. Black returned the nod.

Severus turned toward the kitchen, muttering "*Accio coat.*" He was suddenly very cold.

-----

"Harry, dear," Molly called from the window. "Could you join us for a moment?"

Harry and Ron stood and brushed the grass off of their jeans, but Molly waved Ron back. "Just Harry, Ron, dear." She ducked her head inside before Ron could argue.

-----

After an hour, Severus started pacing in the library.

-----

Harry stared at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. "I – you – what? Hermione? What?"

"Sit down, dear. Here." Molly helped him to a chair.

Arthur said nothing.

-----

After another half hour, Severus rested his hands on the mantle and leaned his forehead against the wood. *I can't* warred with *Where is she?*

-----

Harry rubbed his hands on his jeans. "I don't understand. He'll do this because he owes me a life-debt?"

Molly looked at him gently. "We think so, Harry, dear."

Harry saw Arthur glance at her sharply.

"I don't understand how those work," Harry said. "Life-debts, I mean."

Arthur cleared his throat. "No one does, Harry. It's a mystery." His voice was steady, but his eyes were filled with desperate pleading.

Harry swallowed hard, and nodded. "Don't worry, Mr. Weasley. I'll make him do it." He thought, *Somehow*.

Molly's proud smile pierced his heart. "Of course you will, Harry, dear. You always have, haven't you?"

She hugged him tightly. "Now. Not a word to Ron. We'll be there and back before any of the others know we're gone."

Harry nodded, his mind still blindly groping toward some kind of alternative. *If I fail...* "What about the Aurors?" he asked distantly.

Arthur said, "Tonks and Kingsley will join us, naturally. I'll speak to him now. Excuse me, Harry." He turned away quickly, clearing his throat.

-----

The shadows were lengthening in the house as Severus swept into the hallway.

Mrs. Black was leaning her head against her frame, her eyes closed.

"Mrs. Black," he demanded.

She opened one eye. "Not back yet, is she?"

"An hour, you said."

"You're slipping." She closed her eyes, and he got no more out of her.

-----

As the last rays of the setting sun slanted through the diamond-paned windows, Minerva resumed her human form and, reaching for her quill, began to write the first of three letters.

-----

"An excellent dinner, dear. What a joy to have you all here." Arthur set his napkin down and smiled at his family.

Harry saw that the smile didn't match the look in Mr. Weasley's eyes. He wondered at what pretext they'd gotten Charlie back from Romania on such short notice, until he saw Bill and Charlie exchange a glance.

*They know.* Harry closed his eyes.

As Fred and George began another round of tales from their joke shop, Molly couldn't help but look at Percy's empty chair. Her heart closed in her throat. She forced her attention back to the twins.

No one moved to clean up the dishes. Ginny wondered, briefly, why her mother hadn't insisted, but was enjoying having all of her brothers home too much to give it more

than a passing thought.

-----

Severus sat in the Transformed chair in the library, swirling the air in his empty glass, staring into the still-warm ashes of the fire.

He suddenly sat straighter. *Slipping, indeed.* Shifting his weight, reached into his pocket for the mirror.

His hands were shaking as he touched it. "*Hermione.*"

He waited.

Nothing.

Then –

*"I'll be back soon."*

Then nothing.

*Where is she?* was replaced again, insistently, by *I can't.*

And as his mind slipped into the empty spaces where "I can" should live, he unconsciously rubbed his thumb over the smooth surface of the mirror.

-----

"Try not to stay away so long next time?" her mother said, giving Hermione a quick hug before turning back to the stack of bills on the kitchen table, her eyes already moving to check a column of figures.

"Tell Dad I - "

"What?"

"I'm sorry I missed him."

"It was a lovely day for tennis, dear, and you know he never sees Nigel these days."

Hermione nodded, but her mother said no more.

"Bye, Mum," she said finally.

Her mother waved.

Hermione looked away.

Once outside, her blurry gaze fell on the swing-set her parents had been meaning to remove for years. She went and sat heavily on one of the swings and wrapped her arms around the chain, leaning her cheek against the metal links that were cool in the fading dusk.

She felt Severus' thumb on her cheek.

And in Grimmauld Place, he felt her tear.

She felt his thought, the gentlest caress. "*Come home, Hermione.*"

Strange, how something so tentative could be so solid.

She touched her mirror as he thought again, "*Please.*"

He heard her say "*Yes,*" and she was in his arms.