

A Most Important Element in Water

by sylvanawood

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? ****Winner**** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Part I - Separation - Prologue

Chapter 1 of 29

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Part I - Separation

Prologue

The night was warm, quiet, and very dark. The salty air felt sticky, and no sound was heard except for the occasional hoots of ship sirens and the soft lapping of the waves against the rocks of the shore. A multitude of holes covered these rocks like pockmarks; some were large, some small, and some gaped like the toothless mouth of an old giant. Some of these mouths were barely more than rock overhangs, but others opened up to cave systems formed by labyrinths of passageways and large cavities.

In one of these large cavities, a tall, thin man with a bald head, red eyes, and a flat, reptilian nose stood motionless, staring at a man in black robes laying prostrate in front of him. Other people, wearing hooded robes and silver masks, surrounded them, keeping a respectful distance.

"Rise, my faithful servant!"

"As you wish, Master." Severus Snape, the man on the ground, rose slowly. His eyes were glittering through the slits in his Death Eater mask.

Lord Voldemort, his master, circled around him.

"So, here you are, Severus. Awaiting your praise and reward. Awaiting honour beyond your dreams. You, who have rid me of the enemy I loathed the most. The Muggle-lover. The blood traitor. Dumbledore." He completed the circle and faced Snape again. Then, he turned and looked at the other Death Eaters.

"What do you say, Death Eaters? Does Severus Snape deserve this reward? Has he acted in my best interest in assuming the task that was given to Draco Malfoy?" he asked quietly.

Some of the Death Eaters murmured, but none dared to speak.

"Was that devotion when Severus killed Dumbledore?" Voldemort continued in a smooth, low voice. "Was it devotion when he completed a task that I, myself, failed to accomplish? Or was it ambition?" He paused, looked around again, and then swept dramatically towards Snape, staring into his eyes. "Perhaps you now think that you are my equal, Severus? Maybe that you are even more powerful than I am? Perhaps you thought it was justified to dismiss the boy and show your own power? What do you say, you, who have tried to copy me for so long? You, who imitate the way I move, who mimic the way I speak? Perhaps now you aspire to think like me? Or to think for me? What do you say, Severus? Are we to call you 'Master' now?" He flung his arm out in a theatrical gesture and then rested it on his chest, head bowed in false humility. A few of the Death Eaters chuckled.

"May I speak, My Lord?" Snape asked quietly.

"By all means!" Voldemort hissed. "I daresay we all are breathlessly awaiting your report! And while you have our attention, perhaps you could enlighten us on the whereabouts of the boy and his mother?" While Voldemort's stance was still theatrical, his voice had become cold and threatening.

"I was not informed about Draco's plan, Master," Snape said. "When I heard about the Dark Mark over the Astronomy Tower, I hurried there immediately, because I knew that Draco must have tried something. On the way, I saw Death Eaters fighting Aurors and students, and it didn't look good. Our brothers and sisters fought bravely, efficiently, but they encountered fierce resistance. Reinforcements of Aurors and more students and teachers were to be expected soon. We would have been outnumbered.

On the stairs to the tower, I noticed a barrier that could only be crossed by Death Eaters, and I felt that speed of action was required, so I hurried up the stairs. I found Draco and some other Death Eaters on the ramparts, Fenrir Greyback among them. The boy stood there with a lowered wand and stared at Dumbledore, who was lying on the floor opposite him. Dumbledore didn't seem to have a wand and appeared very weak too weak to stand. The boy, or any of the other Death Eaters, could have killed him easily. It looked as though Draco had lost his nerve. I analysed the situation quickly and decided to act while the opportunity was there. Dumbledore was so desperate that he pleaded for his life. I killed him. Then, I fled the castle with the boy, urging the other Death Eaters to leave as well. We ran over the lawn towards the Forest, and I ordered Draco to meet me in the secret chambers at the Malfoy residence. Then I sent him to the Apparition point.

I was delayed by Harry Potter, who was being tortured by one of our brothers. I put a stop to it because I know that you wish the Potter boy to be undamaged, My Lord. The boy attacked me. I disarmed him and was about to bring him to you when I was attacked by a Hippogriff.

Some of the Death Eaters laughed maliciously, but Snape calmly pointed to a large slash on his shoulder. The wound was still bleeding lightly. "I barely escaped, but when I Apparated to Malfoy Manor, neither Draco nor his mother were anywhere to be found. I do not know where they went, but surely Bellatrix would know their whereabouts?" He paused and searched the group of Death Eaters for a familiar shape.

"We will get to this later, my silver-tongued friend," Voldemort said silkily. "Continue with your tale. We all wish to know how you will excuse your behaviour this time."

Snape bowed reverently and continued. "Dumbledore was so weak that he wasn't worthy of your attention any longer, My Lord. He was too weak to stand. Anyone could have killed him." He lowered his head and fell to his knees. "I never sought to be your equal, My Lord. I only try to follow your example in every way possible. If I have offended you by unconsciously imitating you, I can only hope for your forgiveness. However, if my arrogance has clouded my judgement, if I have failed you, My Lord, then I await your punishment. My life belongs to you, as always."

"Indeed it does," Voldemort said softly. He stared into Snape's eyes for a long time; Snape met his gaze calmly, unwaveringly. Finally, a slight smile curled Voldemort's thin lips, and he spoke softly, "I will punish you for your arrogance when you deserve it, Severus, but not now." He put a hand on Snape's shoulder and faced the other Death Eaters. "Look at Severus, my friends. Here we have a man who is a quick thinker, a man who knows how to seize his advantage. Severus has done well tonight. He will be rewarded. He will be honoured beyond imagination." Voldemort helped Snape to his feet. "But first we must find out what happened to our cowardly servants, the Malfoys. Then we shall decide how to punish them..."

"My Lord, please..." A female voice interrupted Voldemort, and a figure among the Death Eaters fell to her knees. "They must pay for their cowardice, but they are loyal, Master. Please..."

"Ah, Bella," Voldemort interrupted her. "You should know that my forgiveness is not infinite. You, who know me so well, you, who have been amongst my most faithful servants in Azkaban. You, who were always devoted to me... do you now put your family ahead of me?" He walked towards her, a terrible smile on his face. "Tell me, Bellatrix, where is your sister?"

"I do not know, Master," she shrieked. "I do not put them ahead of you. I would sacrifice everything and everyone for you! I did everything in my power to prepare the boy for the task."

"Is that so?" he hissed. "Then why, pray tell, did you not deem it necessary to inform me of the Unbreakable Vow Severus made with your sister?"

"You told him?" She stared at Snape accusingly.

"Of course I did," Snape said silkily. "Unlike you, I understand that earlier ties of kin and friendship are secondary compared to the bond that binds us to our master. You forced me into this oath with your distrust. Your presumed closeness to our Lord blinded you to the detrimental effect such an oath must have on Draco's mission. Narcissa put Draco's safety before the interest of our Lord, and you did nothing to stop her." Snape's lips curled into a sneer. "If I hadn't sworn the oath, you never would have believed me. We would have fought, and one of us could have been killed. That would have been a huge disservice to our Lord."

"You always were a sneaky bastard, Snape!" Bellatrix shrieked. "Isn't it amazing how you always twist and turn every word until you present yourself in a favourable light? You, who sat fat and safe in Dumbledore's lap all these years, while"

"Enough!" Voldemort ordered coldly. "I will be the judge as to who is faithful and best fulfils my bidding. I despise bickering among my Death Eaters. All of us here are your true family. Whoever was your family before you came to us no longer counts. You are just as guilty of holding on to sentimental ties of friendship as Bellatrix is, Severus. This will stop now."

"Yes, Master..." Bellatrix sobbed while Snape inclined his head in acquiescence.

"So, how shall we deal with the Malfoys?" Voldemort asked. "Perhaps I should forgive them, yet again, for putting their own interests above that of their master? I ask myself, is that fair? Is that the way to deal with servants who have failed me again and again? And I answer myself, 'No!' They need to be punished. They will be found and killed. They cannot be trusted and allowed back into our fold. They have outlived their usefulness."

"Master, please..." Bellatrix shrieked.

"Stop snivelling, Bella," Voldemort snarled. "It seems the time in Azkaban has muddled your brain. Where is the zest, the unwavering devotion of the Bellatrix I once knew? Surely your years spent in Azkaban couldn't have been as trying as the years I, myself, spent away from my body... powerless... alone, deserted by my servants."

Bellatrix fell to her knees. "No, Master. Of course not. None of us had to endure what you did..."

"Exactly. But did I give up in despair? Did I succumb to depression? No! I kept searching. I bade my time and grew stronger and look at me now! Your master is back. Lord Voldemort is back. Stronger than ever before, more determined and wiser than ever before." He paused and looked around.

The Death Eaters stood motionless, and not a sound could be heard except for the soft slapping of the waves on the rocks at the cave entrance.

"Tonight, one of my enemies... No, let's be truthful, my greatest enemy, was vanquished. Albus Dumbledore was a great and powerful wizard in his time. He was a wizard

who took it upon himself to oppose your master, to uphold the twisted ideals of the Muggle-loving fools at the Ministry. He was a wizard who denied my claim for power, for greatness. A wizard who lacked the vision to follow my design for a powerful, a better magical world. Tonight he was slain."

Voldemort paused for a moment. The Death Eaters still stood motionless. He spun around on the spot, looked at them all, and then he laughed, a high-pitched, shrill laugh.

"Rejoice, my Death Eaters, rejoice! For the enemy was vanquished by Lord Voldemort's faithful servant, a man who proved his worth once more through his deeds. Let it be known to all my Death Eaters that Albus Dumbledore was vanquished by my most trusted servant, by Severus Snape!" He walked back to Snape, who still stood in the centre of the circle, and put an arm around his shoulders. "Ask for your reward, Severus, and it will be yours!"

Snape fell to his knees again. "I do not need a reward, Master," he said in a calm, carrying voice. "If doing my duty has pleased you, then I have been rewarded already."

Voldemort smiled, clearly pleased.

"But, perhaps a humble servant may ask for a favour?" Snape continued.

"Ask, Severus, and if it is within my power to give, it will be granted."

"You are too generous, Master," Snape murmured. "I only ask that you let me complete what has already begun, what you have already demanded. Let me go after the Malfoys. Let me be the one who punishes them."

A choked sob was all that could be heard from Bellatrix LeStrange, but Snape continued candidly. "Let me show you that bonds of friendship mean nothing to me, compared with the devotion and admiration that binds me to you."

Bellatrix's sobs grew louder.

"Favour granted. Bring me proof of their deaths. The way you rid me of them is up to you," Voldemort said with a cruel smile. "And now you will go, my Death Eaters. Bellatrix, you will stay."

With a sharp, crackling sound, the Death Eaters Disapparated.

Chapter 1 - Frogspawn And Teacups

Chapter 2 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? ****Winner**** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

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Chapter 1 Frogspawn And Teacups

"So, you are interested in magic, too?" Sabrina said with a bright smile. She was a rather pretty girl with long, brown hair that was tinted red with henna. Her fashionable jeans and top were decorated with a multitude of necklaces and with tiny pearls of semi-precious stones, crystals and silver amulets. The silver bracelets on her wrists were jingling with every movement, and her perfume had slight patchouli overtones; it wasn't unpleasant, but persistent. She looked like a Muggle version of Sibyl Trelawney.

Ron looked at her round-eyed while Harry worked hard to suppress his giggles. Hermione gave them both a stern look and nodded solemnly.

"What are you into? Sunlight healing, crystals, angels? Or the Tarot?" Sabrina beamed, but didn't wait for a reply. "I, myself, prefer crystals and the pendulum. I also do aura reading." She looked at Hermione. "You, for instance, have a wonderful aura. It's very strong, very harmonic. I would say that you have a calming, healing influence on your friends. Wherever you are there's peace and harmony, isn't that right?"

Ron made a funny noise and started to cough. Harry patted his back and nodded. "Oh, yes, very calming. Absolutely..."

Hermione looked daggers at him, but couldn't keep it up and started to laugh. "Perhaps," she said, grinning. "I certainly always make an effort to keep these two out of trouble."

"There you have it. Sabrina is very talented." The fifth person at the table spoke up. He had been quietly admiring the talkative girl; it was clear that he was very infatuated with her.

Sabrina smiled at him fondly. "Her aura is almost as strong as yours, Dudley. And those of your cousin and his friend are interesting, too. A clear sign that you all should be friends. That will bring your energies into a fine balance. Good for the karma."

Harry barely suppressed a snort. He took another swig from his beer and winked at Dudley. "Sure, all peace and harmony between us, eh, big D?"

Dudley smiled sheepishly. "Sabrina taught me that it's good for my karma to make peace with you, Harry. I am strong. It is my duty to protect the weak."

"Is it now?" Harry sounded unconvinced.

Hermione thought that the change in Harry's bullying cousin had come too suddenly, too unexpectedly for him. But Harry seemed to like the beer, so maybe the evening wasn't so unbearable for him. He took another long gulp and emptied the bottle.

They were all rather plastered by now. The evening had started with an Indian takeaway eaten in a park and had progressed through several pubs where Sabrina, who was two years older than Dudley, had bought the drinks. Finally, they had landed in her flat where they had continued drinking. Hermione didn't think that Harry could have endured the evening without the amount of beer he was gulping down; he had looked as if he wanted to hex someone on more than one occasion.

Hermione herself was sipping a glass of cider; she had lost count of how many she had had that evening. The sacrifices one made for a friend... It had been her idea to

form a sort of alliance with the new and changed Dudley, so she felt compelled to at least pretend to listen attentively to the nattering of Dudley's girlfriend.

"I have some Scotch stacked away. Nicked it from my father," Sabrina said. "And then we can do a few Tarot readings. Or would you prefer the crystal ball?"

She looked directly at Ron, who jerked upright, and after a brief pause and a wink at Hermione suggested, "How about some dream oracle?"

"Ooh, that's truly esoteric," Sabrina gushed. "Are you keeping a dream diary? Do you do lucid dreaming?"

"Just the dream diary, sometimes." He grinned at Harry who hid his face in his hands. "Didn't you mention whisky?"

"Oh, yes, yes..." And she went off to fetch it, her slim figure followed by Dudley's stare.

"She's talented, she is," Dudley slurred. "Bestest girl in the world. So sorry, Harry. Will protect you from now on. My duty, y' know."

"Right," Harry said, still sounding unconvinced, but a bit kinder than before. The beer seemed to have mellowed his mood, so maybe now he saw some hope for Dudley after all. He smiled at Sabrina when she poured him some whisky.

Hermione declined, whispering to Ron that someone had to keep them from splinching when they Disapparated.

"You can stay overnight," Sabrina said, "no need to disappear. I have some sleeping bags around somewhere."

"No, we can't," Hermione said firmly, frowning at the longing glance Ron gave the bottle. "We'll be leaving Privet Drive in a few days, and we still have a lot of organising to do, haven't we, boys?" She looked at them sternly.

"Yes, we'd better go now," Harry said, his relief barely concealed. Clearly, he wasn't even half as drunk as he appeared.

"Sure, if you say so," Ron said, swaying slightly as he stood up. He put an arm around Hermione's waist.

"Wait," Sabrina said, "I have something for you." She held out some crystals, one for each of them. "This is for you, Harry. It keeps your mind focused and your energy flowing." She gave him an opaque, dark blue stone with white and grey streaks in it.

"This is for you, Ronald." He smiled at her and took it. "For some reason, I feel that your heart will need it soon. It soothes the pain of loss and gives you inner strength."

Ron's smile faded, and he looked worried when he took the rose-coloured, semi-transparent stone. With as large a family as his, and in the middle of a war, the likelihood of one or more losses was great. But that was something Sabrina couldn't know.

"This one here will make your speech clear and convincing," she said to Hermione. "Your wisdom and intelligence is concealed under your façade of book-learning, and it takes a lot of convincing to make others see this. This will help you with it."

Hermione thanked her as she took the blue-green, translucent stone, her eyes wide in surprise. Sabrina's words had sounded like rather good analyses of all three of them. But that wasn't possible. Sabrina was a Muggle, and Hermione didn't put much trust in divination anyway. Maybe Sabrina was simply a very perceptive woman... *Well, the stones wouldn't hurt*, she thought, and with a friendly wave to Dudley, who had decided to stay behind, they left.

The next morning saw all three of them in dire need of a Pepperup Potion, and Hermione was glad that she had brought a stock of basic healing potions along. The day passed uneventfully; as with every day, they mentally went through all possible places where Lord Voldemort's Horcruxes might be hidden and thought about possible ways to destroy them. However, when he saw how those speculations made Harry even more depressed than usual, Ron suggested a game of wizard chess.

They were still at it when the golden light of the late afternoon sun shone through the window in Harry's room on Privet Drive. One ray of sunlight found its way through the open flaps of the small tent that was erected in the middle of the room, the furniture having been pushed against the wall. Although the tent appeared tiny from the outside, the inside was very different. The canvas walls contained a spacious area with richly coloured carpets, comfortable divans, chairs, a table, the small chess table where Ron and Harry sat, and two separate rooms where they slept: Ron and Harry in one, Hermione in the other.

Hermione, who had been reading the *Daily Prophet* and lounging on one of the divans, put the paper down and studied her two best friends unhurriedly.

There was Harry, whose untidy black hair stood on end in all directions; a condition that wasn't helped by the frequent pulling and swiping of his hands. He looked worried and slightly annoyed; the progression of the game didn't seem to be in his favour.

And there was Ron, whose red hair was shining in the sunlight. He sat with a smug expression on his face. The game seemed to be going well for him, which wasn't surprising since he was the best chess player Hogwarts had seen in years.

Hermione smiled fondly. Ron had become far more than a friend over the last weeks after school had ended so suddenly and violently with Albus Dumbledore's death. Ron and Hermione had finally worked out their differences and admitted that they had fancied each other for a long time.

Ron looked up from his game and smiled back at her. *His smile had become far too charming*, she thought; to her it was almost irresistible. She sighed happily. Their understanding had brought her a hitherto unknown stability that made her happy and confident. As long as she could rely on that feeling, she thought she would be capable of facing the uncertain and dangerous path that lay before them.

Being with Ron was like coming home. He was her tie to the wizarding world, the anchor that grounded her. She finally knew where she belonged after searching for so long, always needing to prove to herself and the rest of the world that she was a true witch, and that she deserved her place at Hogwarts. To prove that she wasn't a freak, as the likes of Draco Malfoy wanted to make her believe.

The thought of Draco Malfoy caused her to shiver. She remembered what Harry had told them, how Draco hadn't been able to cast the Killing Curse on Dumbledore after all, and was almost sorry that she hadn't thought more kindly of him while she still had the opportunity. But it was too late for that, now.

She leaned back and remembered the day after Albus Dumbledore's funeral, the last breakfast of the remaining students in the Great Hall before the Hogwarts Express brought them back home, back to the illusion of safety.

They were all there, all the students that hadn't been taken home by their parents after the funeral. Each at their own table were the Gryffindors, the Hufflepuffs, the Ravenclaws and the Slytherins. Among the Slytherins, one particular seat was empty. Crabbe and Goyle still looked lost without their friend; Pansy Parkinson was subdued, but glared defiantly at everyone who dared to look at her longer than the blink of an eye. And then the owls came.

Hermione had started to read the headlines of the *Daily Prophet* when she heard a scream. Looking up, she saw that Pansy had jumped up, hands pressed to her mouth, eyes wide and unbelieving. The paper dropped from her fingers. She looked around wildly, started to wail and ran out of the hall.

Hermione was skimming the front page of the paper when she spotted it: a small article in the lower right-hand corner.

"Death Eater Revenge or Punishment of the Unwilling?"

Yesterday evening, the well-known style icon of pureblood society, Narcissa Malfoy, was found dead in her manor, her son Draco at her side. Mother and son seemed to

have been killed by the Killing Curse, as the Dark Mark was seen hovering over their house.

'I was never so scared in my whole life,' Samantha Smythes told our reporter. 'When I saw the Dark Mark, I thought my last hour had arrived.' Samantha Smythes, who lives next door to the Malfoy residence, was awoken by 'screams of terror and despair'.

Apparently, the residence itself remained undamaged; the Aurors who investigated the crime scene reported that nothing had been stolen or vandalized. 'They clearly came with the intent of murder,' Auror Dawlish told our staff. When asked if they have a suspect, he admitted that a thin, black-haired man with an abnormally large nose had been seen at the crime scene shortly before the Dark Mark was cast. The description fits the fugitive Severus Snape, who is accused of the murder of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore. Snape escaped without a trace, though, and the Ministry isn't any closer to catching him than it is to catching He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named himself.

'This is not true, we have some very interesting leads,' Ministry assistant Percy Weasley objected. He announced that the Minister will issue a full statement tomorrow. (see page 10 for more details).

Narcissa Malfoy née Black and her son Draco are survived by husband and father Lucius Malfoy, who is currently serving time in Azkaban for his involvement in last year's attack on the Ministry of Magic. Our reporters were unable to obtain a comment from Mr. Malfoy."

The Great Hall was shocked into silence. This was the second time that one of their own had been killed, and so soon after the murder of the Headmaster, and by the same person. Severus Snape, the ugly, loathed Potions teacher, had turned out to be a dangerous, murderous Death Eater. The shock couldn't have been greater.

It was a very subdued group that set out on the Hogwarts Express later that day, and an equally quiet, but determined, group that went to face the Dursleys, Harry's only surviving relatives, and forced them to accept them all in their home.

Hermione and Ron had insisted on accompanying Harry to the Dursleys' home. Harry had to stay with them one last time, to seal and complete the protection his mother had given him when she sacrificed her life for his own. This ancient and obscure protective charm would end on his seventeenth birthday, which was only a few weeks away.

Harry was the chosen one, the one who had been determined by prophecy and unknowingly marked by his enemy, the Dark Lord Voldemort himself. He had to kill Voldemort, but first he had to find and destroy the Horcruxes: vessels that housed fragments of Voldemort's soul, artefacts that would prevent his death, even should his body be destroyed.

After Albus Dumbledore, his fatherly friend and teacher died, Harry thought that he would have to go on alone. He didn't want to endanger his friends; he even broke up with his girlfriend. He felt that he needed to be unattached in order to be less vulnerable. Hermione and Ron had quickly cured him of that notion. They simply refused to leave him and followed him to the Dursleys' home.

Vernon Dursley's threats and complaints soon ceased when he realized that Ron and Hermione were of age in the wizarding world and perfectly free to use every legal hex and curse on him they saw fit. It was good for them that he didn't know about the Muggle Protection Act.

Petunia Dursley, Harry's aunt, only watched in stony silence, her narrow lips pressed tightly together, eyes flashing angrily.

Of course, she refused to feed them. However, after a day or two, she grudgingly allowed Hermione to use her kitchen after Hermione proved that she could keep the kitchen, and everything she used in there, meticulously clean. Hermione and Ron took turns Apparating to Diagon Alley to bring back the food and drink the three of them needed during their stay.

The strange and unusually mellow behaviour of the Dursleys was, of course, a direct result of Dudley's rebelliousness.

Dudley, the only son of the Dursleys, had come back from school oddly changed and with strangely outrageous ideas. He had lost at least two of his many chins and gained muscle instead, and although he still was big, he was now well proportioned. His behaviour was even stranger. He actually contradicted his father when he was ranting about Harry, Harry's friends, magic, and wizards in general. Dudley even apologized to Harry for the bad feelings of the past and wanted to make up for it. But worst of all, in his mother's eyes, he refused to be pampered and fed little morsels of his favourite food. He had the nerve to call the puddings and sweets 'unwholesome'. In short: it was all the fault of Dudley's girlfriend.

The new state of affairs had Vernon Dursley oscillating from fits of anger with a brick red face, bulging eyes, and a lot of yelling, to fits of quiet rage where he pattered through the house and constantly muttered threats under his breath. His small, pig-like eyes darted around in search of a new victim for his threats and accusations, and he had taken up his old habit of ripping out the hairs in his moustache.

It was the girlfriend's fault. And when it wasn't Sabrina's fault, it was Harry's fault since he and his lot had introduced magic, weirdness, and abnormal behaviour into Dudley's well-ordered world, an act which must have caused Dudley to fall for such a girl. Dudley, who was supposed to succeed Vernon at his drill company, now wanted to open a wellness centre with his girlfriend and to teach Asian martial arts. If there hadn't been that strong physical resemblance, Vernon would have seriously doubted that Dudley was his son.

Harry and Ron watched the behaviour of their reluctant hosts in bewilderment, Hermione with amusement. While Harry had accepted Dudley's apologies, he had remained wary and suspicious. He thought that such a radical change in his bullying cousin would be too good to last.

Ron was of the opinion that Dudley should be given the benefit of the doubt, but that it wouldn't hurt to do a bit of real magic in front of him from time to time, just as a reminder.

Hermione just went and talked to Dudley, and soon found out that Dudley's girlfriend was heavily into something that Muggles called 'New Age'. Sabrina called herself a witch. She taught Dudley about crystals, herbs, pendulums, and Tarot cards, and she was convinced that big guys who bullied smaller, weaker ones, ended up with bad karma. That was the end of Dudley's boxing career, and the beginning of his martial arts training, as well as the beginning of his spiritual journey. From now on, he wanted to be the strong man who protected those who were weak, and he would start with his cousin Harry.

Hermione was very amused when she heard that story, but she suppressed her laughter and encouraged Dudley in his newfound virtues, praising Sabrina's cleverness and Dudley's good sense. That had brought them the invitation.

Dudley had told Sabrina that his cousin was staying at his place, together with his best friends, and that they were interested in magic. Sabrina was burning to meet them and suggested inviting the three friends over for a night out. The invitation was accepted and the date set, and so they had met shortly before Harry and his friends would leave the Dursleys forever.

Harry strongly objected to spending time with Dudley, but, as Hermione pointed out, a Dudley who was Harry's friend and potential ally could be the best revenge Harry could possibly have on the Dursleys. That seemed to convince him, and he reluctantly agreed to spend an evening with Dudley and his girlfriend.

Hermione chuckled quietly. That get-together yesterday had certainly been something. Ron's face when he had learned about Sabrina's 'magic' had been priceless.

Hermione looked at Harry and Ron again and wondered if they were hungry. They hadn't felt much like eating this morning, after all that alcohol, but by now, the Pepperup Potion had done its work, and she felt a slight grumble in her stomach.

"Hungry?" she asked, standing up.

"Hmmm..." came an absent-minded grunt from the chess table. From the soft screams and clanking noises of battle on the chessboard, she guessed that the game was nearing its conclusion.

"I'll get something for us," she said and left the room, carefully checking the hallway for a roaming Vernon Dursley, but the corridor was clear.

When she arrived downstairs, she heard angry voices from the kitchen and approached cautiously.

"I forbid you to stay out overnight," she heard Vernon Dursley yell. "I forbid you to go out with that girl. As long as you put your feet under my table..."

"As if I cared... Try to stop me." Dudley sounded petulant, but determined.

"But Duddykins..." Petunia's shrill voice penetrated the closed door easily.

"Oh, stop fussing, Mum, I'm not a child any more," Dudley yelled and violently pushed the door open. He stopped short when he saw her, "Hi, Hermione..." he said, grinning, and stomped up the stairs to his bedroom.

His father rushed out after him, red-faced and sweating.

"You!" he snarled when he saw Hermione, but when she lifted her wand, he backed off.

"It's all you and your freakish family's fault!" he yelled at his wife, then ran out through the back door and slammed it behind him.

Petunia Dursley stood in the middle of her spotless kitchen, a plate of pudding in one hand, the other hand pressed to her mouth. She had a slightly dazed expression on her face.

"Hi," Hermione said, slowly approaching the refrigerator. "I'll just get a bite for the three of us. I'll be gone in no time..."

"The day when I never have to see any of you again can't come too soon," Petunia snapped. "I wish I had never laid eyes on that spawn of my freak sister, or that filthy stuff she left behind."

Hermione's head shot up in surprise and she bumped it on the refrigerator door when she turned around quickly, all attentive.

"Stuff? What stuff?"

"Some of her old school things, what do I know? Might as well be old frogspawn. It's all in that old trunk of hers," Petunia said dismissively. "Should have thrown that stuff out long ago..."

"You mean you still have things that belonged to Harry's mother?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

"Yes, but only because that old freak made me keep her old things after I agreed to take the boy."

"And you want to get rid of it?"

"Better today than tomorrow."

"Then why don't you give it to Harry?"

"Harry." Petunia spat the name out as if it were something foul in her mouth. "What would he have done with it, do you think? He'd have done more of his filthy magic, and I've had enough of that for a lifetime. He's turned out rebellious and unpleasant, just like that awful boy Lily was hanging about with all the time."

"You mean Harry's father, James Potter?" Hermione asked, intrigued.

"No, not him. He only came later. He was better looking... A bit better, at least," Petunia said, her nose wrinkled in disgust. "But that other one, that school friend of hers... He was as ugly as sin, an awful, mean, unpleasant boy... Sevitus, Servus, something like that was his name, one of those freakish wizard names..."

Hermione was shocked. "Severus? Severus Snape?"

"Yes, that's it. Do you know him?"

"Err, yes... He is... Err, he was a teacher at Hogwarts..."

"Oh well, that explains a lot. A creature like that in charge of children..."

Hermione would have loved to point out that Petunia Dursley wasn't at all concerned about who would be in charge of Harry while he was living with them, but then she remembered how vehemently the Dursleys had opposed Harry's going to Hogwarts. Maybe she did have some strange and twisted concern for her nephew after all...

"Shall I make us a nice cup of tea, and you can tell me the story?" Hermione asked amiably. "It'll be good to get it off your chest, and maybe I'll learn something that could be important for Harry to know. And you can forget all about it afterwards."

Petunia looked unconvinced. "What good would that do? Why should I care about what's important for the boy?"

Hermione studied her for a moment. "Tell me, Mrs. Dursley, why did you accept Harry into your home? Wasn't it because of family ties; because he is your sister's son?"

Petunia wrinkled her nose and spat. "Certainly not. It was him, that old freak, Dumbledore, who made me do it."

"What did he say? Did he plead with you? Or offer you something in return?"

"I don't know why I'm telling you all this," Petunia said nastily. "No, he didn't threaten me. He wrote me a letter... I'm not a filthy murderer, you know." She stared hatefully at Hermione. "He made it clear that only my acceptance of the boy stood between him and certain, violent death at... at that madman's hands. Dumbledore said that if we refused, we might as well murder the boy right away..."

Hermione gasped. "Dumbledore wrote that?"

Petunia Dursley laughed shrilly. "Oh, yes, he did. He called it 'being more merciful' than trying to keep the boy alive in an orphanage where he would have been sent if my stupid sister had had the decency to die a normal death and hadn't insisted on placing herself in the middle of a war with a madman."

"Oh!" Hermione's eyes flashed in anger. She knew that Harry would have preferred life in an orphanage to life with his abusive relatives. She had to swallow down a sharp retort, keeping her anger firmly in check. She did want to hear the story, after all.

"He also promised that we would be included in her protection, but we don't care about her magic, we don't want her filthy protection." Petunia narrowed her eyes. "We tried to get the magic out of the boy, make him normal, not someone to be ashamed of, but we didn't go far enough."

"What?" Hermione didn't want to believe what she had heard. "That's not... how would you... how could you possibly hope to get the magic out of him?"

"It's something I heard that awful boy say to my sister. What did you call him, Snape?"

Hermione nodded, all attention.

"Might as well start at the beginning and get it over with. Afterwards, I don't want to hear another word about it, ever again."

Hermione stared at her, nodded again, and poured another cup of tea for each of them.

"It was in the summer after their third year, I think. They were what? Fourteen or something like that. I am two years older, and I had just started to go out with Vernon..." She paused; her eyes were taking on a faraway look.

"Of course, she couldn't leave well enough alone. She would sneak behind us when we were alone and scare us. She even offered me one of her foul concoctions... 'This is a love potion, Petunia, it will make sure that your Veeernon lurves you forever, aaaahhh...'" Petunia's face was beet-red while she imitated her sister; her eyes burnt angrily. "My parents found her behaviour funny. Just like they found everything oh-so wonderful that their brilliant daughter, the witch, did. And then, one day, she wheedled them into inviting her school friend into our home, as if one of those freaks wasn't enough in the house... And they did, they invited that... Snape."

Hermione stared at her wide-eyed, her tea cold and forgotten on the kitchen table.

"His parents wrote to our parents and accepted the invitation. Apparently, his mother was very ill, and they wanted her examined in that freakish hospital of yours."

"St. Mungo's?"

"Yes, whatever. They asked if the boy could stay for a few days, and so he came." Petunia shuddered.

"They were together all the time, laughing, talking, snooping after me. They were together so much that I wanted to know what they were doing... My parents were such trusting fools... But I knew better, I knew what girls her age get up to. So I started to watch them and listen to their conversations when they weren't aware of it." Petunia shuddered again, her face taking on a totally disgusted expression.

"I heard how they discussed all kinds of things they did at school. And he told her snippets about their wizard world. About their wizard prison. About those foul creatures that guard the wizard prison..."

"Dementors," Hermione whispered.

"Yes, them. And he told her how they sucked every good feeling out of the prisoners until they were so wretched that they lost their magic..." Petunia looked triumphant; Hermione was very pale.

"When I heard that, I knew that my parents were just too weak to get rid of my sister's freakishness. A firm hand, strong discipline, hard work, and there wouldn't have been frogspawn dripping from her pockets, or rat's tails on our teacups each time she came home from that school..." Petunia almost smiled, eyes flashing. "And that was exactly what we tried with the boy. But we weren't hard enough." She frowned.

"Anyway, my brilliant sister couldn't hear enough of those tales. She asked again and again about all these abnormal things in their world. They had their heads stuck together all the time... and then she kissed him."

"She kissed him?" Hermione felt as if her eyes were about to pop out of their sockets; she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Yes. And it was she who started it, not him. It was so like her. She had always admired him. I have no idea what she saw in him. That greasy hair... Those awkward, jerky movements... And that nose... But my sister had talked of little else other than 'her best friend' ever since her first year."

"So did they go out together?" Hermione croaked, too shocked to speak clearly.

"I don't think so. I only saw them kissing once, and it must have been their first time, too. When they were done, they looked at each other, wiped their mouths on their sleeves and burst out laughing. 'Eeew,' my saintly sister said. 'That was strange.'

'I felt nothing, no heartbeat quickening, no breath catching in my throat, nothing,' the boy said.

'Me neither,' my foolish sister giggled. 'So maybe we don't fancy each other after all. What a shame...'

I couldn't believe it; they were experimenting. I was so disgusted that I huffed, and they realized that they weren't alone. My sister's room was next to mine, and they spent most of their time together in her room. Our rooms were connected through a door, and I could see and hear a lot through the keyhole... When they found out that I had been watching them, that boy whipped out his wand and hexed me."

Petunia ground her teeth, her eyes glowing angrily. "I had green polka dots all over my face and body, and those two almost exploded laughing. I was so angry. I ran to my parents straight away and told them everything. I had a date with Vernon that night, but of course I couldn't go looking like that."

Petunia breathed deeply; apparently she needed to calm herself. "Wouldn't you expect my parents to get angry and scold? Hah. Of course not. They lectured me, saying that listening at keyholes was wrong..." She stared out of the window and swallowed a few times before continuing.

"I was very glad when the boy left the next day. He was picked up by his father, who seemed to be in a very bad mood. He grumbled when he thanked my parents and then started to yell at the boy as soon as they left our house. I think that man had the right idea on how to deal with young freaks like that. 'Nothing helps,' the man yelled. 'All your foolish wand waving is completely useless.' With that he dragged the boy away, and I shall be very glad to neither talk nor think about him any more. And that was that."

Petunia rose and put the tea things into the sink. She never allowed Hermione to use cleaning charms in her presence.

Hermione sat stunned, still unable to speak coherently.

"Hold on," she finally said. "How could he have hexed you? The Department for the Control of Underage Magic would have sent an owl and threatened your parents with a penalty, surely? And someone would have come and reversed that polka dot hex?"

"Oh, no, not in our house," Petunia spat. "My parents were so proud my sister was a witch that they would have done anything for her. They went to that Minister of Magic and convinced her that small amounts of magic should go unpunished in our house. They argued that my saintly sister would be at a disadvantage if she couldn't practice some of her spells at home, like wizard children can. No one cares what they do as long as they are with their family. So that woman... Millicent something... gave special permission for underage magic in our home, and that's how he could hex me, the freak."

"I see," Hermione whispered. "That must have been Millicent Bagnold, the Minister before Cornelius Fudge," she murmured and then rose resolutely.

"Thank you for the tea and for telling me this, Mrs. Dursley."

She gathered the food for herself and the boys and went back to Harry's room. The boys still hadn't finished their game and hardly noticed that she was back.

Chapter 2 - Knew An Awful Lot About The Dark Arts, Snape Did.

Chapter 3 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognise belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 2 Knew An Awful Lot About The Dark Arts, Snape Did.

August 10th, 1980

My dear Harry,

This diary is for you. Look at you, how tiny you are. This wizard photograph was taken when you were two days old. Look at your little fists, waving at the camera. And your tiny footprints. Such a handsome little boy.

I will record all your little triumphs and tribulations here, and when you are older, we can look at these pictures and stories together and laugh.

Your mother, Lily Potter

August 25th, 1980

My dear little boy,

We had a visitor today. Albus Dumbledore, an old friend and teacher, came to see us, your father and me. He told us something that has upset me. You are in danger, my little son. There is a dark, evil wizard who wants to kill either you or another little boy who was born around the same time as you were. But, I won't let him harm you, I promise.

December 10th, 1980

Dear Harry,

Today was your christening day. You are officially Harry James Potter now. Look at that man in the picture, the one with the silly grin, the one who is holding you. Yes, that's Sirius, your godfather; he can't stop making funny faces at you, to make you gurgle. The other two are your dad's other best friends, Remus and Peter. And that's your dad and me peeking out behind them. There isn't anyone else here; we wanted to keep your ceremony a secret. We didn't want to draw the attention of those bad people.

Harry studied the picture from his christening day, smiling despite fighting back the tears. Sirius looked so young; and the funny grimaces he was making at Baby Harry made him laugh. They all looked so happy even Wormtail, the traitor. Harry leafed through the diary, scanning it quickly until he reached the last entry.

October 24th, 1981

Dear Harry,

You are such a lovely little boy, and you bring such joy to your father and myself. It is surreal to think that someone wants to see you to see all of us dead. But, I won't let them harm you. You will be safe, I promise. I have taken measures to protect you.

But, there is the possibility that your father and I may be killed and that you will have to grow up without our love to guide you. It is painful to imagine that you may have to grow up without your parents, but as you get older, you will realise that sometimes people have to make a choice between right and wrong. And that can mean having to choose between life and death.

We're in a war, Harry. Your father and I are fighting for our world, at the side of Albus Dumbledore, together with many other upright witches and wizards. There are things that are worth dying for, and a world of freedom for our children is one of those things. Furthermore, our war is personal because that bad wizard is out to get you. I will be giving you all the protection I can possibly give you, even if it costs me my life.

If we don't survive, my sister Petunia will bring you up. Life with your aunt may not always be easy for you, Harry, but believe me, there is a good reason for this. Petunia may be cold and hard on the outside, but she often means well. I hope she can get over her resentment of me and give you the motherly care I so wish I was able to give you. If she doesn't your godfather will see to it that she at least treats you well. And then, there are your father's two other best friends who will look out for you.

I will ask your father to write a few lines in this diary as well. Perhaps I am overly glum and we will sit together and laugh about this in a few years time, but I have a nagging fear in my heart that something bad will happen soon...

I will now go and pick you up from your cot, my little boy, and give you all the hugs and kisses I may not be able to give you in the future.

My love belongs to you, Harry. Always.

Your mother,

Lily Potter

Harry put down the diary with trembling hands and tears in his eyes. From the date, he could see that his parents had been killed less than a week after the last entry. He stared at it for a moment, glad that he was alone, glad that Hermione and Ron had gone for a walk to have a little time of their own. It was good to have this time to himself before the guests arrived at the Burrow for Fleur and Bill's wedding, before he and Ron had to share this room with the twins and Charlie. Right now, Harry felt very close to his parents and didn't want to share this moment, not even with his two best friends. He swallowed down his tears and started to search his mother's trunk for anything from his father.

There were several letters, some carefully tied in a bundle; others only single sheets, but none of them ended with 'Your father, James Potter.'

He would have to read them all. He grabbed the letters that were tied in a bundle and started to read.

Dear Lily,

It is really good to be back home with Mum and Dad, and away from the arrogant gits, but I miss you. Last week we went to Diagon Alley to get my new school things, and afterwards we visited my Uncle Caradoc. I've been in his library again, and have a few new spells we could try. Nothing dark, don't worry. But it sounds like fun.

I'll see you at Hogwarts.

S.

Hi Lily,

Guess where I am right now: Malfoy Manor. Oh, don't wrinkle your nose up; it's not that bad. Lucius' family is very nice, and the house is... wow! They are so rich. This is how I want to live one day, too. I so admire Lucius, his manners, and the way he talks... I feel so small beside him; I wish we weren't so poor.

Nevertheless, I miss you a lot. While Lucius is nice and everything, he isn't half as much fun as you.

They do have a herb garden you would really like.

I'll see you at Hogwarts, Room of Requirement as usual.

Cheerio,

S.

Lily,

I really like it when you call me 'Your Highness.'

I have that spell sorted out. Your sister (hex her for me, will you), or anyone else, won't be able to eavesdrop on us ever again. I called the spell 'Muffliato.'

My mother is much better; she will make a full recovery. Thank you for asking.

I shall see you at school.

Cheerio, Mudblood!

The H.B.P.

Harry dropped the letter as if it were hot coals. "*Muffliato*." He knew exactly who had invented that spell. This couldn't be... this simply couldn't be true... but the initials H.B.P. could only mean one thing... And, he did recognize the prince's handwriting. Harry started to shake. He paced the room frantically a few times and then sat on the floor and buried his head in his arms.

When Hermione and Ron returned from their walk, both slightly flushed, they found him still like that, shaking and curled into a ball.

"Harry, what is it?" Hermione rushed to him, putting a hand on his arm. When he looked up, he saw her concerned brown eyes looking down into his own, but hatred and anger made him unable to speak clearly.

"Snape," he choked out, grabbing the letters in his fist and shaking them towards her. "Snape wrote letters... Snape wrote letters to my mother." He swallowed hard and tried again. "Snape... they must have been something like friends, maybe even good friends, from the looks of it. And he betrayed her, just like Pettigrew, just like my father's friend did. They were their friends, and they killed them..." His eyes were shining with angry tears that threatened to spill over. He threw the letters at Hermione's feet and went to the window, staring outside and repeatedly hitting the frame with his fist.

"So it's true," Hermione said. "He and your mother were friends."

"What do you mean?" Harry was taken aback. "Don't tell me you knew about this?"

"Well..." Hermione hesitated. "I didn't know if all of it was true, which is why I didn't tell you earlier..." She told Harry and Ron about the visit of Severus Snape to the Evans' home.

"She kissed him?" Ron looked as if he wanted to throw up. "Slimy, greasy Snape?"

Harry shook his head. That was unbelievable... He was even angrier now than he had been when he read the letters. How could she? His own mother... He shuddered.

"Is there anything else in the trunk?" Hermione asked.

"More letters. Read them, if you want. I can't..."

Hermione took the next letter from the bundle and read out loud:

"Lily,

Why are you still mad at me? You know that I didn't mean it like that. How often have I called you Mudblood as a joke? And now you're all in a huff about it?

Get over it, will you? I had to stop you; you were smiling, for Merlin's sake. What were you thinking, smiling and defending me like a lioness that fights for her cub? I'm nobody's cub and you don't need to defend me. And your precious Gryffindor friends would only get nasty if they knew that you hang around with me. Not to mention my precious Slytherin friends who would want my hide for fraternizing with a Gryffindor.

Let it be, Lily. You know that it wasn't personal. You can't expect me to act rationally when that brigade of cowards is ganging up on me. Your precious Potter (do you really

think I don't know what's going on?) will get what he deserves, and your interference isn't needed.

Let's meet at the RoR, as usual, when school starts.

Damn, I should be the one who is offended. You humiliated me. I know you're playing with the gits, testing the limits of your power over them, over Potter, but leave me out of it, if you please. The thought of you fancying Potter makes me want to puke, but I suppose there is no accounting for taste...

Be cool, Lily. Friends?

Yours,

Snivellus

"Oh. What was that all about?" she asked.

Harry flinched. He had never told Hermione and Ron what he had seen in Snape's memories. He shrugged, mumbled, "Promises to murderers don't need to be kept," and told Hermione and Ron about the scene he had seen in Professor Dumbledore's pensieve: of his father and Snape sitting their OWLs, of his father and his friends bullying Snape, just like his cousin Dudley used to bully weaker kids in the past.

Ron gaped, and Hermione looked angry. "How could they have...? That's horrible... And Remus was part of this? And Sirius... Oh no!"

Harry blushed fiercely from embarrassment. "If you remember what Sirius told us... Snape was giving as good as he got. I don't think he was an innocent little angel..."

"Four against one, Harry. That's really low."

"Well, in the scene I saw, there were only two involved: my dad and Sirius. And now, I don't want to talk about it any more."

The next day, the preparations for the wedding feast began. The Burrow resembled a beehive. The guests arrived, among them several Aurors who went to work immediately, setting up anti-Apparition spells and other protective charms around the house. Harry and Ron made room for Charlie and the twins. Hermione and Ginny helped Mr. and Mrs. Weasley arrange tables and chairs in a large tent in the garden where the wedding reception would take place.

By lunchtime, they were greeted by Professor McGonagall, who had just arrived from the Ministry of Magic to assist with the preparations.

"Hogwarts will not be closed," she told them, after they all sat down for lunch together, "at least not entirely. It will remain open for fourth-years and up. The younger children will stay at home with their parents and learn in small study groups. The Ministry has agreed to assist parents who want to organize such groups."

Harry saw how Hermione listened attentively, but his own mind drifted off. He would not return to Hogwarts; his interest in the reopening of the school was polite at best.

"So, the fourth- to seventh-years will all return?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, many of them want to. We could convince the parents that Hogwarts will maintain its high level of security..." She paused and dabbed her eyes sadly. "Despite what happened in June..."

"Won't parents be afraid of another attack?" Ron asked.

"Of course they will be, Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall replied, "But, where are people safe from attacks these days? Even pureblood families can't count on being left alone, if there is something the Death Eaters want from them. The Ministry promised us Aurors for protection around the clock, and that is more than the young people will get at home, many parents realize that. I must tell you, however, that all Quidditch matches are cancelled, and there won't be any Hogsmeade weekends or a House Cup."

Ron shrugged. "It doesn't matter any more. We won't be coming back."

Professor McGonagall frowned. "What do you mean, you won't be coming back?"

"I have a task, something I have to do," Harry said. "Professor Dumbledore started it, and now I have to finish it. It is essential that I do this... but I cannot tell you what it is," he added quickly when he saw Professor McGonagall look at him questioningly.

"And we will go with Harry," Hermione said and Ron nodded. "We will not let him go alone."

Minerva McGonagall looked at them silently, a frown carving deep lines into her forehead. After a while she smiled gently.

"I see," she said and pursed her lips. "I think I understand... Oh, no, I don't know what you and Professor Dumbledore did when you went away together, Harry," she added quickly when she saw Harry's worried face. "But, Albus left me a letter, asking me to support you in anything you do. It was almost as if he were preparing for his own death." She dabbed at her eyes again. "I know that Albus worked tirelessly against Voldemort, and I imagine that is what drives you, too, Harry. Am I right?"

Harry cleared his throat, nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but Professor McGonagall silenced him with a shake of her head. "Let me finish, please. I understand that you need the freedom to do what you have to do, all three of you." She looked around and over her shoulder, smiled and lowered her voice.

"Aurors won't be the only protection in Hogwarts this year. You realize that the Order needs new headquarters?"

"Because you think it isn't safe?" Ron asked.

"Yes, Snape still has access. While he can't bring anyone else, he could still sneak in and kidnap or kill people, or he could just try to find out what we're up to. Besides, we couldn't bring new Order members to Grimmauld Place, with Albus as the Secret Keeper gone..."

Harry, Ron and Hermione nodded, understanding.

"Anyway, the new headquarters will be at Hogwarts. We feel that this offers additional protection for the school. The headquarters is under a Fidelius Charm with me as the Secret Keeper. You will want to join the Order soon, I surmise?"

"Perhaps," Harry said, "if the duties as an Order member don't interfere with my task..."

"Yes, I thought so," Professor McGonagall said. "Well... You will be allowed to join, you know, all three of you, despite still being students. That means you will always have a home at headquarters. And, living at Hogwarts will make you less conspicuous when you want to go and... do what you have to do."

"Won't people wonder what we're up to when we're leaving school from time to time?" Ron asked.

"No, Mr. Weasley, they won't. The school governors have agreed that students may return to their homes every night if they wish. We have set up a safe Floo connection from my office to the Ministry. Every student whose parents wish them to return home after classes will be picked up at the Ministry by a parent at a set time, when the connection will be opened. An Auror stationed at Hogwarts will first Floo there to check if all is safe, and that the parents aren't blackmailed or under *Imperio*. These

precautions may seem a bit extreme, but I feel that the effort is worth it if it means that we can reopen the school. Fortunately, there are only a few families who want to have their children at home in the evenings."

She smiled at them, eyes bright in excitement and continued, "The teachers will be away part of the time, too, in order to assist with the study groups, or to be with their own families. So, you and your friends will not appear conspicuous at all when you aren't at Hogwarts at all times, or when you miss some classes. Returning to Hogwarts would offer you protection, Harry. No one would wonder what you're up to, and I can arrange it so that no questions will be asked by the teachers. Besides..." she smiled again, "we will have an outstanding Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher this year."

Harry frowned and looked at Ron and Hermione. He could see from Hermione's expression that she would love to go back. Ron looked undecided.

Harry thought it over carefully.

"I am a target," he said. "Won't the other students be in danger if I come back?"

"We are all targets; there isn't a safe place anywhere. Our choice is between cowering in fear and hiding, or trying to lead as normal a life as possible, despite the threat. I am glad to say that most people have chosen to refuse to hide." Professor McGonagall looked persuasively at Harry. "Hogwarts can offer you a home and you can complete your education. I am not willing to jeopardize children's education because of this war. Your education is an investment in the future. I refuse to allow that future to be stolen from you by these murderers." She sat very straight, stern and determined.

Harry felt very tempted to accept the offer. Hogwarts had always felt like his real home. He looked at Ron and Hermione. Even if he considered his own survival as rather unlikely ... these two should have the chance to sit their NEWTs. He knew how much it meant to Hermione and Ron wanted to become an Auror; he needed his NEWTs for that.

"All right," Harry said. "I will return to Hogwarts for the time being."

Professor McGonagall nodded, and Hermione and Ron looked surprised, but happy.

"If it turns out to interfere with my task, I may leave, though," Harry warned.

"Of course. This is a very wise decision." Professor McGonagall smiled.

"This is brilliant, Harry," Hermione beamed. "Some people would wonder what you're up to, you know, if we wandered around and weren't at school. And, this way, we will have the library at our disposal... Just imagine, tens of thousands of books... Somewhere in there, there has to be the information we need." She looked dreamily at him.

Harry grinned. "We couldn't do without the library. And the food and all those house-elves..."

Hermione laughed. "Of course, and I couldn't abandon S.P.E.W. now, could I?"

They giggled together while finishing their meal and decided to move to Hogwarts after Harry's birthday. He would have enough time to visit Godric's Hollow after the wedding and enjoy a little more time with the Weasleys.

"What will become of Grimmauld Place?" Hermione asked Harry.

"I don't know," he said pensively. "As long as Snape lives, it won't be safe. Perhaps, I could use it to trap him..."

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "It won't work, as much as I'd like to help you catch him. He will know that the Order will move somewhere else and suspect a trap. Severus Snape may be many things, Harry, but he isn't a fool."

Harry shrugged. He would deal with Snape when he met him next time, and meet him he would, he was certain about that.

The afternoon saw them busy with more wedding arrangements. While not many of the guests would stay overnight, room had to be made for Fleur's family, who would be arriving in the evening and staying for a few days. Old Aunt Muriel was expected the next day, and she and a few other relatives, who either were too old or lived too far away for easy Apparition, had to be accommodated.

When Fleur's relatives arrived, most of the Weasleys went to welcome them and help them get settled. Bill Weasley, who had arrived with the group, left the Delacours to his family and sat down in a quiet corner where Harry, Ron and Hermione had found refuge from the crowd. Bill looked very tired.

"How do you feel?" Ron asked. "All nerves yet?"

"Oh, no — I'm looking forward to tomorrow, it will be wonderful." The formerly handsome, now terribly scarred face of the young man split into a dreamy smile.

"But today was a bit much," he conceded. "Before I went to France to pick up the Beauxbatons carriage and the Delacours, I went to Aunt Muriel and picked up the tiara." He took a parcel out of his pocket.

"Look at this. Isn't it beautiful?"

Carefully he unpacked the tiara and put it on the table before him.

Harry bent over it and looked closely; the tiara was a beautiful piece of jewellery. A fragile frame of white Goblin gold was adorned with narrow strips of bronze. Many small, dark blue sapphires were set in a straight line, and in the centre a large, pale blue diamond shone.

"Merlin, how lovely," Hermione breathed. "It will look beautiful with Fleur's blonde hair and blue eyes, and it almost looks like the Ravenclaw colours..." She stopped and looked at Harry who frowned. A thought had just started to form in his head.

"Remember how I told you about the rumour that the tiara was connected to one of the founders?" Ron mused, but Harry and Hermione shook their heads.

Bill smiled. "Family rumour has it that this actually once belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw. You know how the Prewetts always claimed to be her descendants?"

"No, I wasn't aware of that, I only knew the rumour about a founder. You don't mean..." Ron looked delighted. "You are saying that Rowena Ravenclaw was our ancestress? We are descendants of the Prewetts, after all."

"Could be," Bill said. "Though looking at you, Ron, I think it can't be more than a rumour." He laughed.

Hermione didn't laugh. She narrowed her eyes and looked at Harry. Harry nodded, swallowed and asked, "So, if you really wanted to know if this had belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw, what would you do to find out?"

"Oh — according to Aunt Muriel, this is genuine," Bill said. "Just let her tell you the legend surrounding it when she gets here. But, to find out if it is... That would be difficult. It's rather simple to find out if the age fits, you just cast an age-revealing charm on the item. But, an heirloom this old... Chances are that there are some other spells woven into the object. If you know what they are, you can look for them. But, some of these old objects are cursed, mind you. You'd want to be careful when using any detection spell."

"Well, for you that would be easy, I suppose?" Hermione smiled at him. "As a curse breaker that sort of thing would be routine for you, wouldn't it?"

"Somewhat," Bill said. "But, you can never allow yourself to fall into a routine in this job; that would be far too dangerous. Each and every artefact is different, and you have to tackle each one with an individual approach." Clearly he liked to talk about his work.

"And, how do you find out if there are any blessings or curses on an old treasure like this?" Harry asked.

Bill smiled. "There won't be curses on the tiara; it's been in the family for ages. Someone would have found out. There might be a love blessing, or a spell for fertility..." He winked.

"So, how do you detect it?" Harry repeated. "Are you looking for traces of magic? I saw Professor Dumbledore do that once and always wanted to know how he did it..."

"Did you, now?" Bill said, impressed. "That's not a very common thing to watch. It's a lot more complicated than the spells the Ministry uses to track underage magic or registered wands... You basically call out for it, you feel it. It's very advanced... Or very basic, depending on the way you look at it."

Harry, Ron and Hermione listened, captivated.

"Is it like the feeling you have when someone is watching you?" Hermione asked. "When all the hairs on your neck stand up?"

"Yes, very good!" Bill said. At their attentive faces, he smiled, a rather horrible sight with his many scars. However, his voice and demeanour had lost nothing of the charm that had always made him so well liked.

"Feeling watched is a very basic skill; all witches and wizards have it, and even some Muggles. It is the attraction of like for like, and when developed properly, a highly skilled sorcerer can use this to detect when another sorcerer is close, even when the other one wears an invisibility cloak..."

"So, that's how Professor Dumbledore always knew when we were there?" Ron wondered.

"And Snape, come to think of it," Harry said. "I always thought they did it with Legilimency..."

"Legilimency is developed from the same basic magic," Bill said. "But, it is so complex that only very talented wizards can use it efficiently. And, you need an aptitude for it. All these skills will sharpen a witch or wizard's senses, attuning him, or her," he smiled at Hermione, "to the many dangers surrounding them."

"So, how do you do it? Can you show us?" Ron asked.

"Hmm, yes, but if you want to use it, you will have to practice. As a matter of fact, that is part of the seventh-year curriculum in almost every subject, especially Defence... if you have a decent teacher, that is..."

"Oh..." Harry said, slightly disappointed, "I had hoped that it might be you..."

"Not me, I'm of more use where I am right now." Bill lowered his voice. "Had you forgotten that Professor Dumbledore was very interested in keeping good relations with the Goblins? But, I should be going..." He looked over to the group of Fleur's family, still happily chattering with their daughter and Molly Weasley.

"Looks like they don't need me, yet," he smiled. "So, I'll complete your little lesson in the detection of magic. Where were we? Ah, yes, how to do it... You empty your mind and focus on your senses. Just feel. A revealing spell will help in the beginning. This spell isn't very precise, but when you practice, it can help you find out which of your senses respond best... it will not tell you if the magic is dangerous or beneficial, but you will find out if there is something."

Hermione frowned. "I just tried it... I can't feel anything..."

Bill laughed. "These aren't good conditions for practice, far too crowded and too noisy. And, there won't be much on the tiara, if anything. Let me show you..."

He closed his eyes and lifted a hand towards the tiara. A coppery-green shimmer surrounded it like an aura. He scrutinized the aura thoroughly. "Nothing. No blessing, no charm, nothing. If there were anything, it would look like boils erupting, or a vortex... there would be something. But, there isn't." He looked slightly disappointed. "Don't tell Aunt Muriel when you meet her tomorrow. She is convinced that there is a love charm on it that gives the wearer a happy and long married life..."

"That's all?" Harry asked. "But... when I got my Firebolt, it took the teachers at Hogwarts weeks to find out if it was jinxed..."

Bill nodded and gently stowed the tiara away again. "Of course. What I showed you was a simple first step. But, a broomstick, and a Firebolt to boot, is so filled with charms and spells it is easy to hide curses and jinxes in there. You need to take every little piece apart to be certain that each component only does what it is supposed to do and it can be dangerous, too, if the object is jinxed."

"How so?" Hermione asked.

"Do you want to become a curse breaker?" Bill asked, smiling again. "The basic magic detection process is harmless, it won't cause a reaction, even if the object or room is cursed. It only tells you that something contains magic. But, as soon as you try to find out which kind of magic, you can trigger a powerful reaction. That's why we always use a variant of the Imperturbable Charm; the kind that is used at Hogwarts, too."

This was news to Harry, but Hermione nodded knowingly.

"Now, this is very difficult, because you want your spells to go into the containment field the charm created without letting any curses, or other potentially dangerous spells, get out and harm you. This is something that, again, requires a lot of practice and determination. So, pay attention in this year's DADA class, and you'll be able to do it when you sit your NEWTs. It shouldn't be a problem for any of you, even my useless brother here." He ruffled Ron's hair affectionately. Harry saw with surprise that Ron took it with a smile; there was no awkwardness or embarrassment. He clearly was fond of his oldest brother.

"Finally, the last step, after detecting the kind of magic that has been used, is to neutralize the spells," Bill continued. "At least, when you want to get at the booty hidden in a tomb, or treasure chest... Neutralizing can be as simple as destroying the object which isn't advisable if you don't want to destroy what's inside your object or, it can be as complicated as chanting a sequence of banishing spells and deactivating every little component of the spell or curse."

"And, that is your specialty, isn't it," Ron said.

"Yes, I have quite a bit of experience with that," Bill said wistfully. "And, to tell you the truth, that is something I have to thank Severus Snape for..."

"Snape?" Hermione briefly glanced at Harry. "What does he have to do with it?"

"Well, when I went to school, I had no way of knowing that he was a Death Eater and a murderer, did I? Snape taught Potions, but he assisted in Defence Against the Dark Arts. I don't know about your teachers, but ours never lasted longer than a year and some of them were... less than competent. But, Snape was always there, usually presented as an assistant. Rumour had it that he put up with it because he wanted to show Dumbledore that he would be the ideal man for the job..." He looked at them questioningly. "You know how he always applied for the Defence position?"

Harry nodded.

"Well, he was an assistant for study groups in Defence in my seventh year and, you know, as unpleasant as he is, Snape can be quite a teacher when he has students who are interested in the subject..."

"Are we talking about the same bloke?" Ron said, in disbelief. "Greasy hair, big nose, volatile temper?"

Bill chuckled. "Yes, the same. And, he taught me several of the enchantments that made me such a good curse breaker. He knows an awful lot about the Dark Arts, Snape does. He shook his head as if wanting to clear it. "And now we know why... It's such a loss to our side, if you think about it, because he is such a powerful wizard..."

"He's a murderer; that's no loss..." Harry snarled, but before Bill could answer, they heard a woman's voice call.

"Bill, where are you 'iding?" Fleur Delacour, Bill's fiancée was looking around, and when she spotted him, came over to their corner.

"Right here, sweetheart," Bill said. "Do you need me?"

"Always," she cooed. "We 'ave to go through some parts of the ceremony with our families. No more 'iding."

She winked at Ron, took Bill's hand, and dragged him away. The three friends noted with amusement that Bill showed no resistance whatsoever.

"So, the tiara isn't the 'Something of Ravenclaw or Gryffindor.'" Harry said, disappointment in his voice.

"Doesn't look like it," Hermione said, deep in thought. "Although... I still would like to hear this legend and meet your Aunt Muriel, Ron."

Ron rolled his eyes. "If you have to... but you won't need me for that, will you? She's a bit clingy, you know?"

Harry grinned, remembering what Ginny had told him. "She's quite a kisser, your aunt, isn't she?"

"Oh, shut it..." Ron flinched and stood up. "I don't want to talk about it."

Laughing, Harry and Hermione followed Ron back to the house, where they had one of the legendary Weasley dinners, only occasionally interrupted by exclamations by Fleur's French family: "Meat done a bit too long," or, "We don't cook our vegetables like dis." Then they fell into their beds, exhausted and full of anticipation for the next day.

Chapter 3 – A Little Bit More Love In The World

Chapter 4 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

A/N This chapter is dedicated to lunafish, who wrote the part between the asterisks (***) for me. It was part of a prize I won from her for a Snapeartcontest. Thank you, lunafish!

I also thank excessivelyperky for a roasted plot bunny, which is served in the last section of this chapter.

Finally, I have to apologize for being so late with the updates. I was foolish enough to sign up for the SS/HG exchange and learned that I am unable to write two stories at once. Since the exchange fic had a deadline, I spent my spare time with the exchange fic, especially since it turned out to be longer than I expected. But now I'm free; several chapters of AMIEIW are ready and in beta-reading, and I will hurry up to get this story progressing. I promise not to enter any other fic challenges until I'm finished with this WIP. Thank you for waiting and staying around. Here is the chapter.

Chapter 3 A Little Bit More Love In The World.

The next morning, everyone got up late and had a big breakfast in the kitchen. There wouldn't be lunch, and before the reception in the early afternoon, no other food would be served.

After breakfast, Hermione and Ginny helped each other to get ready because Ginny refused to be assisted by Fleur's relatives. Although she had finally agreed to be one of Fleur's bridesmaids, Ginny had confessed to Hermione that she would rather hex the whole lot than let them help her get dressed and made up.

Ginny's hair was easily twisted into an elegant bun, and Hermione sighed in frustration about her own bunch of unmanageable tangles. She decided to use liberal amounts of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion once again, and finally Ginny succeeded in wrestling and twisting Hermione's hair into an elegant hairdo as well.

They were both wearing new dress robes. Ginny's was a pale, creamy gold that set off her fair skin and red hair beautifully. While she disagreed with most of what her soon-to-be sister-in-law said, Ginny had to admit that Fleur had excellent taste in clothes.

Hermione, herself, felt very daring with her own low-cut, royal blue dress robes. She cast a reproachful look at Crookshanks, who was watching the scene from the top of the cupboard, safely out of reach. A flick of her wand over the blue fabric banished the pattern of red cat hairs that had slightly spoiled the beauty of her new robes.

"Ron's eyes will fall out," Ginny teased. "This is really beautiful."

Hermione blushed, looked Ginny over and retorted, "And you? Trying to make Harry rethink his decision, or on the hunt again?"

"No." Ginny had a hard look on her face. "You don't really think I'm giving up on Harry that easily, do you? He tries to be noble has that idea of not wanting to put me in danger ... As if I were a damsel in distress and not a witch who can look after herself ..." She huffed and put her shoes on.

"That's typical of Harry." Hermione smiled. "He is always trying to protect people, and maybe he is right, in a way ..." When she saw Ginny scowl, she quickly added, "He will be distracted and worried about you when everyone knows that you are important to him. You know that he isn't over his guilt about Sirius' death yet..."

"I know," Ginny said, looking stubborn. "It's what he told me. Hogwash, if you ask me. So you're saying that I should just let him go, too?"

"No! But perhaps you shouldn't be together openly for a while. He'd never stop worrying that Voldemort would want to harm you again because of him ..."

"Voldemort harmed me because Lucius Malfoy thought it was a good idea to give the diary to me, Hermione. Malfoy didn't need Harry to make him hate my father, our whole family ... even though Harry seems to think so." Ginny snorted. "But maybe you're right ... I'll think it over, but I won't give him up ..."

"Good girl." Hermione smiled. "And of course I'm right; I always am."

Laughing, they went down the stairs to meet the rest of the large family.

When Ron saw Hermione, he gave her an appreciative look, whistled under his breath and squeezed her hand. "You look absolutely stunning," he whispered.

Hermione smiled. "You're not bad yourself," she said. She thought he looked very handsome in the dress robes the twins had given him two years ago. Of course, he had grown another two inches in the meantime, but his mother and Ginny had managed to Charm the robes to fit.

Harry glanced longingly at Ginny but looked away when she smiled at him. Hermione had noticed how he had avoided Ginny ever since they had arrived at the Burrow. She wondered if he would try to avoid her again, today, and wished for him for both of them that Ginny would succeed with her plan and be able to change his mind.

When the time for the wedding came, Fred and George led the group of houseguests through the garden, past the pond, and up a small hill. They saw a podium there where Bill waited nervously with Charlie, who was his best man. Mrs. and Mr. Weasley stood at Bill's other side with Fleur's parents. A group of other guests had already gathered around the podium in a loose circle.

Ron shuddered suddenly.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

"There's Aunt Muriel over there. The one who's waving at us."

Hermione saw an elderly lady with perfectly coiffured red curls in a green dress wave at them enthusiastically. Hermione smiled. "Your aunt really seems to like you."

Ron grimaced and pulled her to the side, as far from Aunt Muriel as possible.

"Oh, grow up, Ron," Hermione said, giggling. "She can't be that bad."

"You have no idea," he muttered, but then was quiet because the ceremony was about to begin.

Hermione waited excitedly. She had never seen a wizard wedding before. A quick glimpse over to Harry told her that he was watching with just as much interest.

All the guests were quiet now, and suddenly an enchanted harp and flute started to play a soft and romantic melody.

Fleur came walking up the path, followed by her bridesmaids. They walked past the group of guests, who made room for her and couldn't help smiling when she passed them.

Fleur Delacour was a beautiful woman, but today that word didn't give her credit. She was simply breathtaking; Bill Weasley stared at her as if he were under a spell.

Her long, silvery blonde hair was falling down her back like a veil of silk. She wore a very elegant cream-coloured silk dress that looked deceptively simple, but was so perfectly cut that it followed each of her movements and set her figure off to its best advantage. The silk was embroidered with thousands of tiny white pearls.

She held a simple bouquet of bluebells and daisies, and Rowena Ravenclaw's tiara shimmered on her head. All the men looked at her with a slightly dazed expression; Fleur's charm was irresistible, and only partly due to the fact that her grandmother was a Veela.

Fleur, however, had only eyes for Bill, and when she joined him on the podium, he took her hands in his, and an official from the Ministry started to perform the ceremony.

Hermione was surprised to see how similar a wizard wedding was to a Muggle wedding. The Ministry official used almost the same words the Muggle official had used when one of her cousins had married last summer. And just as with a Muggle wedding, a wizard wedding was completed with the declaration by the official that the couple was now married. Bill and Fleur turned to the guests, smiled and waved, and then led the way to the reception.

When the family and guests returned to the house, a long table filled with beverages and snacks for the reception were waiting for them in the garden.

"Hermion-own-ninny," a well-known voice cried out.

"Viktor!" Hermione hugged the young man who had approached her. "When did you get here? I should have known that you would come." She saw that Ron eyed Viktor jealously. "You do remember Ron, Viktor, don't you?"

"Of course." He nodded and smiled at Ron. "Your best friend and more, right?"

Hermione blushed and nodded. Ron grinned and put his arm around her waist.

"How about you, Viktor?" she asked. "Are the Quidditch groupies still following you around?"

Viktor Krum rolled his eyes. "Yes. And my parents want me to marry and always introduce me to eligible witches. But I don't want to get married yet." He winked at Hermione. "There just is no other girl like you. No, no, don't worry." He grinned at Ron. "We are just good friends, now."

Ron scowled. "I hope so." But when Hermione squeezed his arm, he relaxed and smiled again. "Have you met my sister Ginny, Viktor?" he asked and waved at Ginny, who had just looked their way.

"Yes, I remember her from Hogwarts," Viktor said. He bowed politely when Ginny joined them, and they were soon laughing and talking about Quidditch together.

Hermione and Ron grabbed a few snacks and went looking for Harry. They had just found him and were heading for one of the small tables that stood grouped loosely under the fruit trees when Ron cringed as he saw Aunt Muriel approaching. "She wouldn't be half-bad if she didn't try to kiss me all the time," he murmured, and then shuddered. "Oh, god, did she just lick her lips?"

He cleared his throat. "Erm ... I've gotta go. Meet you guys later?"

"What is the matter with you?" Hermione whispered. "Don't you want to hear the legend?"

"Yeah, fine. I just thought you could tell me what you found out later on. It's not like you can't tell me yourself."

Ron groaned as the plump, red-haired woman in her old-fashioned green frilly dress swooped down on them, grabbing him for a hug and kiss.

"Ronny, dear! Why, look how you've grown! You're practically an adult! And, of course, your mother's so proud she told me all about your OWL's last summer. But look at you! You're practically skin and bones!" Harry and Hermione smiled sympathetically as Aunt Muriel pinched Ron's cheeks to demonstrate. "Oh, but do introduce me to your friends. Well, really there's no need, is there?" Barely drawing breath, Muriel plunged on, enthusiastically embracing both Harry and Hermione in turn. "My dears, I've heard so much about you! Molly thinks of you as her own children, you know. I'm just so glad to finally meet you both. But where are you running off to, Ronny?"

"Er ... I'm not ru "

"I thought we could all sit down for a nice chat. Oh, but I'm so excited to finally meet you two!"

Apparently overcome with delight at the sight of them, Aunt Muriel grabbed them all for another hug and kiss, and then waved at them to sit. "Well, well. I do chatter on. But I must introduce myself, at least. You can both call me Auntie Muriel. I'm Molly's aunt on her father's side."

"I'm "

"Of course you're Hermione, and," she said, turning to Harry, "well, there's no mistaking you for anyone else, is there now, Harry?"

Harry offered a smile, and Hermione wondered for the life of her how they'd ever be able to steer the conversation in the direction they needed it to go when they couldn't even get a word in edgewise.

Even as she opened her mouth to try, Aunt Muriel launched into yet another series of exclamations, exalting them for their bravery in facing You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters, ("Yes, yes, Molly's told me all about you and Ronny's adventures. And Ginny! I can't believe she joined in last year! I don't know how dear Molly sleeps at night what with all the family's been through."), lamenting the tragic loss of Albus Dumbledore, and then just going on about the general state of the world. Even Hermione seemed to have lost her ability to follow along before Muriel finally approached the topic uppermost in their thoughts.

"But doesn't Fleur look lovely? Her dress, her hair ... well, of course the tiara comes from our side of the family. It's only the third time I've parted with it since my grandmother gave it to me."

Looking rather desperate now, Harry finally managed to blurt out, "How long have you had it, then?"

"Well, nigh on fifty years, and my grandmother had it years before that. Had I ever had a child of my own ... well, dear Bill and Fleur surely will. They do look so happy together, don't they?"

As Aunt Muriel looked at the newlyweds and sighed, Hermione jumped in. "Ronny, er ..." She glanced apologetically at the boy in question. "That is to say, Ron mentioned that it's really old; that he thought he heard you say once that one of the Hogwarts' founders might have owned it "

"Oh, yes. Family tradition says it belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw herself!"

Needing little encouragement to talk in the face of the trio's obvious interest, Muriel continued. "The story goes that Rowena fell in love with Salazar Slytherin of all people, and she was mightily offended when he stormed off and failed to return after having words with the rest of the founders. Rowena, it seems, had about as much pride as Salazar himself, and it had been deeply wounded. They'd planned to get married, you see. The families had agreed and the contracts had been written up. Well, Godric feeling somewhat responsible for his friend's disappointment stepped up and offered himself in Salazar's place. I suppose you could say he had a saving-people sort of thing."

Ron and Hermione glanced at Harry, but Aunt Muriel gave them no time to tease him. "Rowena apparently considered Godric's offer his station, after all, was fairly equal to that of Slytherin's but her pride, and probably her heart as well, prevented her from accepting. Instead, asserting her independence from her family, she moved to the school she'd helped to found and devoted herself to study, eventually even taking on full responsibility for the school after Helga and Godric became too busy with their own families and properties to see to the day-to-day administration."

"But "

"I'm sorry! I've forgotten the tiara, haven't I? Well, some say that before the rift occurred between the four, Salazar gave it to Rowena as a symbol of her sovereignty over his heart; others claim that Godric gave it to her as an engagement gift, and then refused to take it back when Salazar abandoned her. In any case, she kept it until just before her death when she passed it to her only daughter. Apparently, the one who gave it to her put a protective charm on it a charm that Rowena wanted to share with her descendants."

"Did she finally get married to someone else, then?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, yes, but not until some twenty years after Slytherin jilted her. And, even then, she remained at Hogwarts, for she married the school's Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Some have speculated that the man was Salazar himself returned to her, but you know how people talk. His name was actually Geoffrey Lancaster. Rowena, they say, loved him no less than she had Salazar before him, and they had many children together all of them boys except the one I mentioned before. Just like Molly and Arthur, now that I think of it."

Muriel paused and turned suddenly serious. "But I must ask you children never to share the part about the tiara coming from Rowena. I don't mind Ronny telling you, of course, but it wouldn't do for others to know." Perhaps realizing how odd that sounded, she explained, "When I was a young woman, you see, there were rumours of such things things that belonged to, or that were thought to belong to, the founders coming up missing. I daresay we got off lucky since I know for certain of at least one family who lost both a goblet and a necklace, and never heard of them again."

The three glanced at each other before Harry asked, "So, there haven't been any attempts on your tiara? No one's even inquired after it?"

"Not since I've had it back. I gave it to my oldest nephew, Fabian, to safeguard it he was about to get married, but then ..." She dabbed at her eyes, and Harry, Ron and Hermione looked abashed. "Then I took it back, and no, no one has inquired after it."

"But, as I said, I had no daughter to pass it on to and, sadly, no wedding of my own at which to display it. This is its first public appearance since Molly and Arthur's wedding. Only family have seen it since, and even they have done so only very rarely."

"Well, you can trust Harry and Hermione, Aunt Muriel," said Ron.

"I know I can, dear. Your mother says you and Ginny wouldn't even be alive if it weren't for Harry. And she looks on Hermione as practically another daughter. Looking at the two of you together, I suspect that someday soon, she might actually end up as such."

Hermione and Ron both blushed scarlet in response to Aunt Muriel's teasing wink, but neither one of them denied her insinuation. Instead, Ron mumbled, "Er ... we should be going now. Mum will be wanting our help with getting dinner organized."

"Oh, I'll come, too!"

"Um, yeah, well, actually she'd probably rather have just you; the rest of us would be in the way."

"Okay, dear, I'll go and check. You all have fun with the rest of the children." Aunt Muriel smiled warmly and gave each of them yet another smooch before she hurried off to help Molly.

Harry looked grave. Hermione knew that he was feeling overwhelmed by the task ahead.

"It still would have been a relief to be one step closer ..."

"I know, Harry. I know."

They all stood silently for a moment until Hermione quietly cleared her throat. "That's that, then. Let's go and have some fun." Taking them each by the hand, she led them

back to the party.

The afternoon passed pleasantly. The three friends listened to the speeches, chatted with other friends and had a good time. When dinnertime approached, Hermione saw a queue forming where the long table stood that had previously held the food and drink for the reception. She nudged Ron and Harry, and together they walked over to stand in line.

When they approached the buffet area, Hermione was surprised to see Ginny walking away with Viktor Krum. Harry watched them too, with a scowl on his face. Was Ginny trying to make Harry jealous? Hermione doubted that this strategy would achieve anything with her stubborn friend. If anything, his evening would be ruined, and he would be angry. She shuddered at the thought of a bad-tempered Harry yelling at anyone who looked at him the wrong way. Better not dwell on that thought and call his attention to dinner instead.

Tables loaded with food for the evening buffet had already appeared, and Hermione wondered how all this could have happened so fast. The things from the reception had only just been cleared away. She was about to ask Ron when she saw a group of house-elves, Dobby among them, snapping their fingers and making tables appear. Another *snap*, and beverages appeared.

"Dobby," she called and walked over. "I had no idea you were here helping out."

"Miss Hermione!" Dobby beamed at her. "Professor McGonagall has asked Dobby to help with the wedding and welcome the French house-elves here."

"French house-elves? Oh, I thought they were Hogwarts' house-elves, too."

"No, Miss." Dobby signalled to one of the elves who Apparated at his side instantly. "This is Alouette, Miss. She is a Delacour elf, but she has been given to Mrs. Fleur and Mr. Bill as a wedding present."

"Alouette? What a lovely name!" Hermione smiled at the little elf, who looked at her critically with tennis-ball sized eyes. Alouette was an appropriate name, Hermione thought; the nose of the little creature was pointed and narrow, like the beak of a bird. Alouette was dressed in a striped toga that looked as if it were made out of a tablecloth.

"Welcome to England, Alouette," Hermione said. "I hope you will like it here and won't feel homesick. Have you been working long for the family?"

Alouette looked at Hermione as if she were dim-witted. "Alouette is working all 'er life for 'er family. Alouette was born there. These are my mother and father," she pointed towards the other elves. "And two sisters."

"Oh." Hermione frowned. "Won't it be hard to leave your family?"

Alouette looked indignant, but also sad. "It is Alouette's duty to go where Mistress and Master send me." She looked around in disdain. "Especially to a place that is in such desperate need of elf work ... And now Alouette 'as to go. There is work to do." She bowed to Hermione and Disapparated.

"Poor thing," Hermione murmured. "Torn from her family, sent to a foreign country all alone ..."

"Miss Hermione need not worry. Dobby shall look after Alouette," Dobby said. "Mr. Weasley has offered Dobby a job at the Burrow. Dobby has accepted." He came closer to Hermione and whispered, "Dobby knows what Mr. and Mrs. Weasley do. Dobby working for them will leave them more time for ... other things." He looked over his shoulders before continuing. "Dobby has joined the Order, too." He proudly puffed out his chest. "Dobby now will go back to his work." And with a snap of his fingers, he was gone.

Hermione stared at the empty spot where Dobby had been. An elf in the Order! She wondered who had come up with such a progressive idea. With a shrug, she went back to the buffet and looked for Harry and Ron.

She saw Harry standing at the buffet table, his plate loaded with food.

"This looks absolutely fabulous," he told Ron, who stood in line next to him. Talking about food seemed a safe topic. Hermione suspected that it allowed Harry to focus on something innocuous and to utter polite noises, instead of wondering what Ginny was up to with Viktor Krum.

Ginny was flirting. Brazenly and openly flirting with Krum. Hermione knew that Harry had watched them all afternoon, saw how they were talking, laughing and sitting together. This had made his mood plummet to an all-time low.

It didn't help much that Mrs. Weasley was staring daggers at her only daughter, who had dragged Viktor over to the table where the newlyweds and most of the Weasley family members sat, and was continuing to flirt without restraint. Apparently, Mrs. Weasley was just as angry about Ginny's behaviour as Harry was.

Harry noticed that Hermione was watching him worriedly and gave her a forced smile.

"Let's find a place to sit down."

They looked around. The Weasley family table was full already, which was rather a relief, because Hermione suspected that Harry didn't want to have to watch Ginny and Viktor all evening.

In a corner, they saw Hagrid and Olympe Maxime, together with Professors Flitwick and Sprout, Madams Pomfrey and Hooch, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye Moody. At another table, a bit removed from the crowd, sat Remus Lupin with Nymphadora Tonks.

"Hello, you three, there's room over here!" The young Auror waved them over.

Hermione saw with relief that Remus and Tonks seemed to be happy and in good spirits; they both smiled. Tonks' hair was shining a blinding pink.

"How are things?" Harry asked Remus; they all knew how dangerous their friend's mission was, especially after the involvement of Fenrir Greyback in the attack on Hogwarts a few weeks ago.

"There's little progress," Remus reported. "But I keep doing it. This is our chance perhaps our only chance to prove that there are werewolves who are worth something ..."

"You shouldn't have to prove that," Hermione huffed. "Everyone should know that by now ..."

Remus shrugged. Tonks took his hand and squeezed it, smiling at Hermione.

"Harry, Hermione, Ron!" The voice of Professor McGonagall interrupted them. "Here you are ..." She nodded a greeting to Tonks and Remus. "I wanted to introduce you to your new DADA teacher." She pulled the man who was standing behind her towards the table. "This is Peregrin Price, historian, globetrotter and master duellist. Perry, these are the three young people I told you about. And you've met Nymphadora and Remus already ..."

The man nodded and smiled at Harry and his friends. "Minerva told me a lot about you. She said that all three of you are quite advanced in Defence Against the Dark Arts,

and I'm looking forward to working with you this school year."

"Why don't you sit down and have your dinner with us?" Remus invited them. "You can get acquainted, and we can chat."

"I can't," Professor McGonagall said. "I have to sit with the Minister for a bit."

"Scrimgeour? What is he doing here?" Harry asked and frowned.

"He was invited," the Headmistress replied. "I think Bill worked with him for a while, back when Rufus was still head of the Auror department. It was part of Bill's training as a curse breaker, I think."

"Oh, I see," Harry said. "Well, as long as I don't have to talk to him ..."

Minerva McGonagall smiled, patted him on the shoulder and bent down to whisper to the three of them, "Perry here is an Order member, so you can talk freely with your friends while he's around." Then she nodded to the others and went to meet the Minister.

While they were talking, Peregrin Price sat down. Hermione used the opportunity to study their new teacher. Professor McGonagall had described him as very competent the previous evening, and she was curious to learn more about the 'master duellist'.

Price was of medium height and build. His movements were elegant and lithe; he looked fast on his feet. Brown eyes and hair, an open smile and an otherwise unremarkable face completed a rather pleasant first impression.

"You know, I always thought that Remus would perhaps come back to teach DADA with Snape gone now and everything," Ron said and blushed when Hermione nudged him with her elbow. "No offence, Professor Price, just curious."

Price smiled. "None taken. And call me 'Perry', please. There'll be time enough to get formal when we're at Hogwarts. I'm curious, too." He looked questioningly at Remus Lupin.

Remus looked embarrassed. He blushed and looked at his hands. Then he shook himself slightly and looked at Harry.

"Dumbledore would never have accepted me as a teacher again, after the disaster in your third year, Harry, and neither would Minerva. Dumbledore was so ... disappointed." He sighed. "I never saw him so angry. And he was right, you know."

Hermione, Ron and Harry protested, all trying to speak at the same time.

Remus glanced at them sadly and shook his head. "He was right. He did trust me when he let me teach. And I sorely disappointed him ... I endangered children under his care, under my care ... It took a lot of convincing until he let me go to the werewolves to work undercover ... I am too weak; I can't be trusted ..." He buried his face in his hands.

Tonks put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It took so much convincing because he cared about you, Remus, not because he didn't trust you. He knew how dangerous your mission would be."

While Hermione and Ron nodded, Harry shook his head mutinously.

"I always trusted you. You would never willingly harm us."

"I almost killed you, Harry," Remus Lupin continued. "I wasn't under control. I neglected my duties. I was careless. I let myself be carried away with worry and wonder when I saw Peter's name on that map ... That was my worst crime." He took another deep breath. "And I never told Dumbledore, or anyone, that your father and his friends became Animagi. I kept it a secret out of misunderstood friendship. Had Dumbledore known, had the Ministry known ... things would have happened differently."

"I don't know," Hermione said. "Perhaps it was wrong not to tell Dumbledore, but in hindsight ... If you had made it public, Sirius may not have managed to escape. Wormtail would still be living peacefully as Ron's pet." She smiled at Ron's groan. "He might have left by faking Scabber's death, and then he could have returned to Voldemort without anyone knowing the truth about him."

"I can't really say that that makes me feel better, Hermione. The fact remains that I withheld such crucial information from Dumbledore. Had Dumbledore known, he might have thought about the events of the night after James' and Lily's deaths differently. He might have investigated further ..."

"First of all, your friends didn't tell Dumbledore their secret, either. Besides, you knew that Wormtail was an Animagus, and you believed in his innocence, didn't you?" Ron said. "Why should anyone else be suspicious, if you, who knew him so well, didn't doubt him?"

"Maybe you're right," Remus sighed. "But there is still that little fact that I simply forgot to take the Wolfsbane Potion and ran to the Shrieking Shack without even considering that it was a full moon. You see, Severus was right about me all along. I can't be trusted."

"Oh, now there's the right person to judge others," Harry snarled. "Who's the one who can't be trusted? Certainly not you, Remus. What a hypocrite Snape was, pretending all the time to be loyal to our side! For all we know, he could have been in league with Wormtail all along."

"Oh, come now, Harry," Hermione threw in. "At that time, no one knew that Voldemort was about to return." Tonks and Price flinched. "Wasn't it in Snape's best interest to appear trustworthy, not to harm children? He did save your life ... and I'll never understand why he did that, now that we know that he was always faithful to Voldemort."

"Snape was your former Potions master, wasn't he? The one who killed Albus Dumbledore?" Peregrin Price asked.

"Yes, him," Harry muttered.

"Well, perhaps at that time, he was undecided in his loyalties. Perhaps he liked life as a teacher under Dumbledore's protection. Dumbledore vouched for him at the Ministry, didn't he? I doubt that Snape wanted to risk his position."

"I think that's the most likely explanation," Hermione agreed. "Yes, that would explain most of his actions."

"Speaking of Snape ..." Harry's face was red; he looked very angry. "I've learned a few things recently that I really don't want to believe. Maybe you know more about that, Remus ..."

"What is it, Harry?"

"Was Snape my mum's best friend at school?"

"What?" Lupin looked stricken.

"I found letters from him to my mum when they both were kids," Harry explained. "And my Aunt Petunia told Hermione a strange story ..." He told Lupin about Snape's visit to the Evans' home.

"My goodness ... I had no idea ..." Lupin looked thoughtful. "It would explain a few things, though."

Everyone looked at him questioningly. Harry frowned. "Please, Remus, if you know something, I want to know."

"Err ..." Lupin began. "Lily always defended Severus when Sirius and James ... no, let's be honest, when we all attacked him. We always thought that it was just her lovely, compassionate character. She always defended the weak; she never tolerated bullies." He sighed and shook his head when Harry tried to say something. "We were bullies, and you know it, Harry, as painful as it is. Anyway, she never tolerated bullying. And James loved her the more for it. He admired her ... her strength, her compassion, her courage and boldness ... Her beauty was an added benefit, but not necessary for James to love her. She was how we all wanted to be. She was bright, good, righteous, and she stood up for the weak, the downtrodden. Never afraid to speak up, even if that made her unpopular. In fact, someone sitting at this table reminds me of her." He winked at Hermione, who blushed a deep scarlet.

Ron kissed Hermione's cheek; Price and Tonks smiled indulgently, but Harry still scowled. Lupin smiled at him and continued.

"In hindsight it is not surprising. Lily was a bookworm, so was Severus. Lily was a genius in Potions, and so was Severus. They were even partners in Potions class. We always thought they had a serious competition going, about being the best, but apparently this went much further. Come to think of it ... yes, it could be true." Lupin blushed again and rubbed his eyes.

"One day, James and Lily had already been married a year, we were all visiting them. Lily told us that she was pregnant with you, Harry, and we were celebrating. We all drank a bit too much and were reminiscing about our past deeds. And at one point, Sirius was retelling the whole fiasco at the Shrieking Shack. He was actually boasting, laughing about Severus and berating James for stepping in and saving Snape."

"If he hadn't interfered, Dumbledore wouldn't be dead," Harry snarled. "Snape deserved it."

"Harry!" Hermione cried, outraged. Lupin merely shook his head and looked sad.

"No one deserves that, Harry. Severus was a child, a strange child, I admit, but a child nonetheless. You don't know what that prank did to him. We might just have pushed him over the edge with it. He didn't get much support from anyone after that. Even Dumbledore seemed more concerned with keeping my ... condition ... a secret than with what that prank did to Severus. He forbade all of us, especially Severus, to talk about it. I can't even begin to imagine how betrayed Severus must have felt. So don't say that he should have been killed. That would have made me a murderer. How do you think I would have felt about that?"

Harry looked abashed.

"Anyway, Sirius was boasting and laughing. James was quiet. Peter, as so often, was sucking up to Sirius and shrieking and squawking gleefully. I was embarrassed. And Lily's face went ashen. She got up in the middle of our reminiscing and excused herself for not feeling well. James followed her soon after, but we went on drinking. James came back and told us that she merely felt weak, likely caused by her pregnancy. We thought nothing of it then, but if it is true, if Severus was her friend ... she must have loathed us. Oh, heavens ..." Once again Remus buried his face in his hands.

"But they made Sirius Harry's godfather, Remus." Tonks comforted him. "She must have forgiven him, must have forgiven all of you."

"Perhaps, I don't know ... You know, we never were *her* friends; we were just James' friends, and I think we just took her for granted. I don't think any of us made an effort to really get to know her ..."

"What a horrible story," Hermione said. "If they were best friends, and Snape couldn't tell her, couldn't tell anyone ... and if he was already interested in the Dark Arts ... and she had to hear it like that, so much later, and couldn't help him ... Oh, how awful ..." Tears were shimmering in her eyes.

Ron looked at her doubtfully. "You're not sorry about old Snape, are you?"

"His life could have taken a different course," she whispered. "He might never have joined the Death Eaters in the first place ..."

"But he did, and that's that," Harry growled. "If it were for being bullied, Neville would have to be a Death Eater, too. Just think how much he was tormented by Malfoy and his cronies ... Snape just was bad from the start, bad blood ..." He stopped with a start when he saw the surprised faces around him. "What did I say?"

Hermione stared at him, not wanting to believe what she had just heard. Her confusion slowly turned to anger. "Bad blood, is it? So, what's next? Will you be calling me a Mudblood?"

"Hermione!" Harry was angry. "I never would ... I never did ... why would you say such a thing?"

Hermione tried to calm herself by slowly counting to ten. "Because even you, Harry, who should know better, have that stupid belief ingrained in you about blood determining one's actions, determining a person. It's the same as calling me a Mudblood."

"But ..."

"Oh, I know what you want to say, and you're right. Blood can be powerful; for protection, as a potions ingredient, for life itself ... the deepest, most ancient magic is based on blood. Rare magical talents run in families, in bloodlines. But it isn't our blood that makes our choices, Harry. *We* have to make those choices, and *we* are responsible for our choices. It's not something we have no control over ... something like our blood, our family ... or a prophecy, for that matter." She looked mutinous.

Ron and Harry gaped at her. Tonks and Remus smiled and nodded, and Peregrin Price looked at her thoughtfully, with narrowed eyes. "That was well said. Uncle Albus always said that it is our choices that determine who we are, not our inheritance ..."

"So he did ..." Harry said absentmindedly, while Hermione stared at Price wide-eyed.

"Uncle Albus?"

"Oh, you don't know? No, how could you?" Price smiled at her and bowed slightly. "Albus Dumbledore was my great-granduncle. His wife's younger sister was my great-grandmother. Mine and Emmeline's, too. We were first cousins, twice removed."

"Emmeline?" Ron asked.

"Emmeline Vance. She was murdered a year ago. I came here from Crete, where I normally live, to look after the estate. I'm the only one left from that family, you know." He looked at them and frowned. "Minerva thinks that I'll be a target for the Death Eaters, and I'm afraid she may be right. He-who-must-not-be-named tends to eliminate whole families. He's a strong believer in bloodlines, or so they say." He winked at Harry who blushed, embarrassed. "That's why Minerva offered me the position as Defence teacher. She thinks it will give me some protection. I will still have the freedom to come and go as I please outside class. That way I can look after my affairs, and still avoid a set pattern that would invite attacks."

"You're living in Crete?" Hermione asked, intrigued. "Professor McGonagall said that you're an historian ... Do you normally work at the magical archives of Phaistos?"

"Yes, exactly." He flashed her a pleased smile. "I'm working at the archives, but also in the field, at Knossos. You know about the labyrinth?"

Hermione nodded, Ron and Harry looked nonplussed, and Tonks and Remus listened with almost as much fascination as Hermione.

"There's a healthy herd of Minotaurs in there, which makes the research in the labyrinth ... err ... interesting." He grinned. "They keep a wizard on his toes and prevent those defensive spells from getting rusty and forgotten. That's probably why Minerva thinks that I'm qualified for the position ..."

"And what ..." But Hermione couldn't complete her question, because Ginny had come to their table and asked Harry to dance. Hermione thought that she had some nerve. Harry seemed to think so, too, because he merely scowled at Ginny and shook his head. But Ginny laughed, took him by the hand and said, "Oh come on, we're old friends. Surely you can dance with me once?" Reluctantly, Harry followed her to the dance floor.

Remus took that as an incentive, took Tonks' hand and led her off to dance, too.

"Good idea," Price said. "I'll see if I can find Minerva and waltz a few rounds with her. You young people go and dance, too." He saw Hermione's disappointed face. "We'll have enough time to talk about labyrinths and Minotaurs once school has started. You'll be bored by my stories soon enough; I like to talk endlessly about my work." He gave them a friendly wave and went off to find Minerva McGonagall.

"Interesting man, isn't he? I'm really looking forward to his lessons," Hermione said and dragged a very reluctant Ron off to the dance floor.

The Ministry's Mascot

Chapter 5 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

A/N: After DH, this story is now completely AU. It will be finished, although perhaps not as fast as I wanted. I need time and several re-reads to include some of the new magic in the future chapters. I made an effort to make this plausible with the Pro-Prologue to this story called 'Reality Check', which is posted separately on this archive. However, I will not include many new canon elements, especially not the characterisations. This will be the last time for me to write about a twinkling Dumbledore, a clever Minerva and a wizarding world that actually tries to fight against an enemy instead of letting itself be overpowered. I was horribly disappointed in DH, and this will show, I'm afraid. A few chapters ago, I promised not to let myself be distracted by challenges and exchanges until this story here is finished. I'm sorry, but I can't keep that promise, not after DH. Severus needs all the help he can get and all the stories we can write for and about him. So I will be distracted from time to time. But this story here is outlined to the end, more than half-written and will be finished, whether someone reads it or not. So there. I hope you stay with me. ;)

Chapter 4 The Ministry's Mascot

Harry didn't want to make a scene. That's why he let himself be dragged to the dance floor despite being angry and confused. But then Ginny started to explain.

"Harry, do you trust Viktor Krum?"

Harry scowled. "You're not asking for my blessing to go out with Viktor Krum, are you?"

Obviously she didn't take his mood seriously because she grinned. "In a way. You know, Harry, I just can't accept being dumped by you like that..."

He gaped. "What do you mean? Are you trying to get back at me with all this flirting?"

Her grin changed into a smile. "Of course not. I want to be with you, and I think you know that. I understand that you want to protect me, but I want to be with you nonetheless. I don't need protection. No more than Ron and Hermione, anyway. Everyone knows that they are your best friends."

Harry closed his eyes and sighed softly. This would be difficult. He'd never really wanted to break up, but he was certain that he had done the right thing. "It's different. I couldn't go on if something happened to you..."

"Oh, Harry..." She stared at him with a determined gleam in her eyes and moved a bit closer in his arms, but not too close. "You know, when I was talking to Viktor, I had an ideabut this will only work if you think he is trustworthy."

"Why? What is this idea?"

"Viktor is constantly being urged by his parents to find a wife, and he is annoyed with all the Quidditch groupies following him around. It would be advantageous for him if it looked like he had a girlfriend... I could be that girlfriend," Ginny said. "Only as a pretence," she added quickly when she saw Harry's eyes narrow. "If everyone thought that I was with Viktor, no one would connect me to you, no one would want to harm me because of you... And we still could be together. You see, it all depends on how much you trust Viktor."

Harry stared at her wide-eyed. "Err... I don't know what to say..." He sighed and squeezed her hand firmly, but still maintained the modest distance while they were dancing, trying to pull himself together. "I am certain that Viktor is on our side. Wouldn't Dumbledore or Minerva have warned Hermione, or her parents, if he weren't? Viktor is still her friend; he's not afraid to be seen with a Muggle-born witch... He was a Tri-Wizard champion... It wasn't his fault that KarkaroffNo, Viktor is decent. I think we can trust him. But what will you tell him?"

"If he agrees with the deception, he and I can meet in public from time to time. We can write letters and show them around... Talk about each other... And if Viktor finds a girl he really likes, we simply break up. The attention will have moved away from you and me by then."

"That could actually work," Harry said.

"Then I will talk to Viktor, Harry." Ginny's face lit up. "He's been teasing me about the flirting all afternoon; he thinks I want to make you jealous. But he did play along nicely, so I think it will be possible."

"Do that, Ginny, but try not to look so happy while you dance with me."

"Look who's talking." Ginny grinned. "You're not exactly unhappy-looking at the moment, either." And with those words, she went off to find Viktor Krum.

He watched how she approached Viktor, touched him on the arm and leaned in to him closely. They laughed, and Harry smiled to himself. He would meet Ginny in the Room of Requirement when they were back at school. It would be difficult, but still a lot better than not being with her at all. Much better. Harry smiled again and looked around to find Hermione and Ron. He felt a tap on his shoulder.

Rufus Scrimgeour, the current Minister of Magic, certainly was a shrewd man. Harry suspected that Scrimgeour had noticed Harry's happy and relaxed face and decided now was the perfect opportunity to approach him.

"A word, Harry, if you please."

"Minister." Harry's greeting was polite, but without enthusiasm.

"I wonder if you've thought about what we discussed the last time we met, Harry. You've had a little time to calm down after Albus' death and think about my offer. What do you say?"

"I can't remember that there was the option of re-negotiation," Harry grumbled. "Negotiation wasn't mentioned at all, as I recall the conversation."

"Things have changed, Harry. Dumbledore isn't around any more as sad as it is." He added the last part quickly when he saw Harry's angry glare. "You're on your own, the Chosen One or not, and if there is something the Ministry can do for you, I may be able to pull a few strings..."

"All right," Harry snarled. "How about Stan Shunpike? Is he still in prison?"

The Minister nodded.

"Release him. He isn't a Death Eater. You know it, and your Aurors know it. He's just a stupid kid who can't keep his mouth shut. He just wanted to feel important. He didn't do anything."

"I've told you already, I'm not so sure about his innocence. Youth isn't a deterrent for Death Eaters, just think about Barty Crouch... They recruit everyone who is willing... and some who are unwilling..."

"Not Stan, no way. He's just a silly kid. Release him, and we can talk. You just want a scapegoat. Why don't you go after the ones who are really guilty?"

Scrimgeour studied the dance floor as if he had never seen people dance before. "You're asking me to release a potential Death Eater, Harry. Quite frankly, I can't see how I could justify taking that risk..." He paused when Harry snorted. "Dumbledore was wrong about Snape; what makes you think he was right about Shunpike?"

"My goodness, Minister. Surely you have taken the Knight Bus at some time or other? You know Stan Shunpike everyone does, don't they? I don't know how anyone could take Stan for a Death Eater... or compare him to Snape, for that matter."

"But that's exactly the problem, Harry, isn't it? You can't tell from their behaviour or looks. People are always surprised when someone in their midst turns out to be a bad apple. Just ask Alastor Moody; he has seen it happen more than once."

"Have it your way, then." Harry sighed in frustration and turned to walk away.

"Wait," Scrimgeour put a hand on Harry's arm. Harry shuddered and shook it off. "There may be the option to release him on probation. He can prove what he's worth one way, or the other. If I can manage it, he will be freed."

"Okay," Harry pursed his lips and glanced at Scrimgeour from the side. "That seems fair enough. Now, on to the next part on the agenda..."

"My patience isn't endless, Harry," Scrimgeour said sternly.

"These things mean a lot to me," Harry replied with a wry smile. "If they aren't resolved, I cannot cooperate."

"I will not be coerced."

"I'm not trying to coerce you, Minister. I'm offering you a deal. I have something you want, and you have something I want. If we can agree on the price, we can do business, and you don't need to pretend that you're doing me a favour."

"Is that what they're teaching you at Hogwarts these days?"

"No, this is called common sense. And haggling out a deal... well, I hate to say it, but I learned that from my Uncle Vernon..."

"Get on with it, Harry. What else do you want?"

"I want to use some of the Ministry's resources when I'm there playing mascot. I want to talk to Aurors, visit the library or the archives... And this brings me directly to my third and final condition."

"Go on, I'm listening," Scrimgeour said angrily.

"I don't want to see Dolores Umbridge, either at Hogwarts or anywhere near me. She should be removed from any position of power, but knowing the Ministry...." He paused for a moment. "There's no hope of that. So keep her out of my sight or the deal is off. Get Percy Weasley out of my sight, too. I will not cooperate with the Ministry if I have to deal with that self-righteous, bumbling idiot. So, do we have a deal?"

"We haven't negotiated your contribution yet, Harry."

"What would that be, having my photograph taken in front of the Ministry building?"

"Yes, something like that. And that's not a bad idea. A public appearance every once in a while. Let's say once a month. But that's not enough, not with all those demands. I want a real cooperation, not just a pretence. You will talk to me and answer my questions."

"There are some questions that I will never answer, Minister. So if you're thinking of forcing me... think again."

"They will be general questions, Harry. I may even ask you for advice, sometimes. You know He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named on a personal level; you may know some things the Ministry does not, and we could use this to our advantage when helping people to protect themselves. You, on the other hand, can get some insight into how the Ministry is working. You may even come to understand that the only place where things can be moved is the place where the power is."

"I think I know enough of how the Ministry works not to be interested. But I can accept your conditions," Harry said. "There are a few things I think the Ministry should do, and if you actually want to hear it, so much the better."

"Things like what?" Scrimgeour asked, a hopeful gleam in his golden eyes.

"Things I will mention once I have proof of Stan's release." Harry grinned evilly.

"All right then, Harry, we will keep in contact by Owl Post for the time being." He spun on his heel and walked away.

Harry stared at the Minister's back, not quite certain if he hadn't just made a huge mistake. When Scrimgeour was trying to be reasonable, he was almost likeable. There was nothing of the demanding, would-be intimidation of last Christmas. The Minister must need him desperately for his propaganda campaign if he was willing to give in to the demands of a mere schoolboy. Now where were Hermione and Ron? He couldn't wait to tell them about all this. He looked around and saw them on the dance floor. He

waved to them, and when they joined him, he told them about Ginny and the Minister.

Seven days later, they stood at the road close to the Burrow and waited for the Knight Bus to take them to Hogwarts. All three of them were tired; they had celebrated Harry's birthday the previous evening. Harry was seventeen-years old now; he was an adult and independent in the wizarding world.

A few days earlier, they had paid a visit to Godric's Hollow, the village where he had lived as a baby and where his parents had been murdered. After finding their graves in the small graveyard and spending some time there, they had moved on to the house. Harry had expected to find a ruin, but was pleasantly surprised to see a small but inviting house waiting for him. While it showed signs of neglect with grimy, blind windows, weeds growing on the front porch, and vines and bushes threatening to strangle the small building, it still revealed a certain amount of care. Someone must have looked after it from time to time, and someone must have rebuilt it after it had been half-destroyed on the night of Voldemort's attack. The attack, and the subsequent destruction of the house, seemed to have lifted the Fidelius Charm since Hermione and Ron had no problems seeing Harry anywhere in the house. The furniture and every possible personal keepsake had been taken away, and Harry wondered where his parents' things, apart from his mother's trunk, were. They certainly weren't in his vault at Gringotts, and Dumbledore had never mentioned them. But then, Harry had never asked. Not for the first time, Harry berated himself for having been too self-centred to ask details about his parents' lives while he had the chance to talk to people who had known them well. Now two of those people were dead, and he couldn't think of many more who would remember such details about them. Maybe Hagrid would know, or even Professor McGonagall. Or perhaps Remus Lupin, although Hermione thought it unlikely. She argued that he had been suspected of being the traitor at that time and wouldn't have been cleared until Wormtail's faked death. But it wouldn't hurt to ask Remus, Harry thought; he was the last thing close to a fatherly friend he had left.

Harry was brought back to reality by a loud bang. The Knight Bus had arrived. All three of them grinned expectantly when they saw Stan Shunpike get out of the bus. They were waiting for his usual welcoming sermon, but it didn't come. Stan shuffled listlessly towards them, grabbed their luggage, and stowed it away. His question for their destination came as a barely audible whisper, and he looked around with a dazed expression. Hermione watched him worriedly, and after the bus had continued its journey with another loud bang, she gripped the handrails, trying not to fall down as she walked to the front to talk to Ernie Prang, the bus driver.

Harry and Ron tried to start a conversation with Stan, but he merely gaped at them and jerked his head, glancing fearfully over his shoulders.

When Hermione came back, she looked sad. "Ernie told me that his time in prison has affected Stan badly." She looked compassionately at the young man who stared at the ceiling. "He is confused and depressed."

"Couldn't he get help from a Healer?" Harry asked.

"At St. Mungo's they just gave him a big chunk of chocolate and sent him away," Hermione replied, looking angry and resolved. "We need to do something. We'll ask Madam Pomfrey to look after him. She'll be more compassionate than the Healers at St. Mungo's."

"Good idea," Harry agreed.

A few violent turns later, they arrived at Hogsmeade. Stan just sat there, not realising that he had work to do. Ernie left his seat behind the steering wheel and helped them get their luggage.

"There aren't many people taking the bus these days," he said. "Most wizards stay at home. I have time to help Stan a bit when he doesn't feel well." He put a hand on Stan's shoulder and squeezed it lightly.

"When school starts, I will talk to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione promised. "I'm quite certain that..." But she couldn't complete her sentence. Something scarlet-golden had appeared with a soft pop and a flash, and all four of them goggled at the sight before them.

Fawkes the phoenix, Albus Dumbledore's familiar, had Apparated and now sat on Stan Shunpike's chest, leaning his head towards Stan's heart. A few phoenix tears fell on Stan's shirt, and after a few moments, Stan took a deep breath and smiled. Fawkes blinked and Apparated to the next tree where he started to sing.

Once again, the beauty of the phoenix song worked its magic. It was like a constant stream of well being, entering through the ears and gliding along the nerves. It was rolling around in one's stomach, massaging tense muscles, and enveloping a frightened, worried heart with a comforting embrace. When the song ended, Fawkes came to Harry and settled on his shoulder, ruffling Harry's hair affectionately while Harry stood very still and gently stroked the phoenix's wings and tail feathers. After a while, Fawkes Disapparated again, and they all looked at each other and smiled. Words weren't necessary.

Suddenly, Stan found his voice again.

"Look who's 'ere, Ern. If it ain't 'arry Potter. And this red head, isn't that his friend, the Weasley boy? Oy, 'arry, wotcher up to?"

Ernie Prang smiled. "Well, that bird sure does a good job!"

Hermione smiled back at him, an awed expression still on her face. "I wonder how he found us. How wonderful that he is still around here somewhere..."

"Looks like Stan is cured," Ron said when Stan gave him a suspicious look and double-checked the luggage Ron wanted to pick up.

"Won't be necessary to see Madam Pomfrey, then," Ernie confirmed.

"But if he has a relapse, promise to come here, Ernie," Hermione said. "Madam Pomfrey will want to help him."

"Don't you worry, Missy. I'll look after old Stan. And if he gets bad again, we will come." They all shook hands, and then Harry, Ron and Hermione picked up their luggage and trotted off towards Hogwarts.

They slowly walked up the lane from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts, enjoying the sight, knowing that this would be the last time that they would return to school. The view of the lake and the castle filled their hearts with a fond sadness; they tried to take in as many details as possible, uncertain what the future would bring.

The Headmistress greeted them at the gates. "I am so glad that you chose to come here, all three of you." She smiled. "Come, Gryffindor Tower is open to you. You can set your own password with the Fat Lady until school starts. Some teachers are around already, given the special circumstances. I opened the school to anyone who wanted to come back early. Meals will be served in the Great Hall; we'll all sit at one table. Now go and get settled. After dinner, I would like to see all three of you in my office." She nodded at them and briskly walked away.

It didn't take Harry and Ron long to settle down in their empty dormitory. Harry was wondering briefly how many of their classmates would be coming back when Hermione interrupted by knocking at the door and asking if they were ready. She felt rather alone in her deserted dormitory and didn't want to spend more time there than was necessary for sleeping. Together, they went down to dinner.

The setting of the Great Hall resembled the seating arrangements at Christmas; only the decorations were missing. Hermione, Ron, and Harry were the only students at the table, but they saw with surprise that Horace Slughorn and Perry Price were already at school, likewise were Professor Flitwick and Madam Pomfrey. Madam Pince and Argus Filch never left the school, not even in summer; they, too, sat down at one end of the table and looked at the three friends critically.

The last person to enter the Great Hall was Sibyll Trelawney, who slunk into the room, adorned with shawls and bead necklaces that tinkled with every move. She stared at them through her huge glasses and gave them a friendly wave. Then she sat down besides Perry Price and talked to him animatedly.

"I wonder what that old fraud has to discuss with Professor Price," Hermione mused.

Ron watched the two teachers with a frown and then stated in amazement, "But, he's flirting with her!"

They stared. And Ron was right. Price was smiling, talking and pouring wine for Trelawney while whispering with her. At one point, he even took her hand and kissed it.

"That's disgusting!" Hermione whispered.

"Why?" Harry asked. "Why shouldn't they flirt with each other? Just because they're teachers doesn't mean that they can't have a little fun."

"But Trelawney?" Hermione shuddered. "What does he see in that old fraud?"

"Oh, come now. We know that you don't like her, but she's not that bad, really," Ron whispered. "She can't be much older than Price, and she's not all that bad looking for her age."

"Ron!" Hermione was completely bewildered. "You can't be serious."

Harry grinned. "Price is a bit of a flirt. McGonagall told me at the wedding," he whispered to Hermione and Ron. "Apparently, he flirts with every female that comes his way, except those off-limits, like students or married women. She says she's known him for a long time, and he's always been like that."

"And there's me thinking he was an intelligent man...." Hermione lifted her nose haughtily.

"Are you jealous because he doesn't flirt with you?" Ron teased. "Do you have a crush on him, like you had on Lockhart? Do tell..." He winked.

"Don't be silly," she said angrily. "I merely find him interesting... but Trelawney?"

"I don't see what difference it should make," Harry said reasonably. "This is their private affair, and as long as Price is teaching us what we need, I have no problem with it."

Hermione sighed and looked pained. But she didn't say anything.

When they had reached dessert, Peregrin Price leaned over the table, winked at them and said, "I didn't think we'd meet so soon again. Perhaps we can spend some of the remaining time together; Minerva told me she would like me to give you some extra lessons in strategic warfare."

"Strategic warfare?" Hermione was surprised. "Things that go beyond what you will teach us in DADA classes, you mean?"

"Correct," Price said. He glanced around and lowered his voice. "We're in a war, and people are ill prepared to fight. They aren't necessarily lacking defensive skills, but they often don't know how to use the skills they have. We're a bunch of individualists. What we need is a skilled leader. Someone who has a plan, a strategy."

Harry frowned. He wondered if Price knew about Voldemort's curse on the DADA teacher position. It suddenly dawned on him that the curse had been more than just revenge. With year after year of incompetent Defence teachers and Harry's year alone had encountered several at Hogwarts it was no wonder that most witches and wizards in Britain didn't know how to defend themselves and needed help from Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes even for basic spells. He asked himself if the twins and their imaginative use of magic would be a factor in Price's strategy.

"So, do you have a plan?" Harry leaned over interestedly. "Will you share it...?" He turned his head and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Will you tell the Order about it?"

"I'm not the leader type, but Uncle Albus was one. One of the best. However, I do have a few ideas, some suggestions, but the Order won't accept anything coming from me easily," Price said pensively. "I'm a stranger to most. They will have a hard time getting used to me, so they won't be inclined to listen to what I have to say...." He paused and stared at them critically. "In fact, I don't think anyone listened to anybody else at that last Order meeting. But I will teach you what I know, if you like," he offered and smiled at the three eager faces staring at him. "Most of my knowledge is based on what Uncle Albus taught me, anyway."

They agreed excitedly, and Hermione was just asking him about his work in Crete again when it happened.

Sibyll Trelawney had been watching the exchange with barely concealed displeasure. It wasn't often that she had the undivided attention of an attractive man, and she wasn't inclined to share this attention. On the other hand, Ron and Harry were her former students, and she was rather fond of them, especially of Harry with his tragic destiny. A young man whose premature death she had foreseen so often couldn't be denied. So she ground her teeth, sipped at her wine and waited. Most of the other teachers had finished their meal and left the Great Hall, but Perry was still talking to the students. However, she noted with satisfaction that his attention was still on her since he chivalrously refilled her goblet whenever it was empty. She had taken another sip when sleep overcame her.

Ron nudged Hermione in the ribs when he heard the rasping sound coming from Trelawney's mouth. Hermione stared at her wide-eyed, Harry with rapt attention. And then Sibyll began to speak.

"When the shadow man and the dead woman unite,

And move from hatred to love, from darkness to light,

Then mind and heart have the same goal:

They will vanquish the Dark Lord, body and soul.

The powers of water and fire, of shadow and light,

Will conquer the Chosen One's endless night,

When the shadow man and the dead woman unite."

When she came to again, she looked around confusedly and found the remaining staff and students staring at her.

"What?"

"You've just made another prophecy, or something, Sibyll," Professor McGonagall said, a hint of contempt in her voice.

Peregrin Price gave Trelawney his full attention again, his eyes thoughtful, his index finger absentmindedly stroking his lower lip and then tapping it reflectively.

"What was that all about?" Ron whispered.

"The shadow man and the dead woman are alchemical symbols, if I remember correctly. I think I read something about them a long time ago... something about purification, the hero's journey... the esoteric doctrine of the elements..."

Harry saw that Perry Price glanced in their direction, staring thoughtfully at Hermione for a while until he blinked a few times and focussed on Trelawney again.

"Shall I escort you to your room, Sibyll?" he offered and led the Divination teacher out of the Great Hall.

Harry and his friends discussed Sibyll Trelawney's latest vision in full detail when they were back in the Gryffindor common room. "If we only knew who this shadow man and dead woman are," Ron said.

"They're symbols, Ron. I've told you that already," Hermione said impatiently. "I think they stand for fire and water, which would be two of the four elements."

"You don't say," Ron mumbled, and Hermione giggled and stuck her tongue out.

"So, fire and water," Harry interrupted their banter. "What does that mean? Do we have to form an alliance with Slytherin, then?"

"That would tie in with the song of the Sorting Hat from, when was it, two years ago?" Ron slowly warmed to the theme.

"Only in part," Hermione corrected. "The Sorting Hat wanted the houses to unite and fight together. Which they did, in a way, if you look at the DA."

"There wasn't a single Slytherin in the DA. That can't have been it."

"And if the prophecy is to be taken literally? A man and a woman have to unite, fall in love?" Ron blushed slightly, but went on with his speculation. "It does say from hatred to love, doesn't it? A Gryffindor and a Slytherin falling in love with each other, perhaps?"

"Like your mother and Snape..." Hermione looked shocked.

"They weren't in love," Harry snarled.

"They must have liked each other as we do, Harry. They were best friends."

Harry had to smile at this. "But what would that tell us? So they were friends. She's dead, all right. He's a shadow man; that fits as well..."

"Perhaps she was the heart, and he was the mind?" Ron asked.

"Or the other way round," Hermione huffed.

"Oh, come now," Ron said, grinning, "surely you're not suggesting that Snape was the heart ..."

"Err, right," Hermione conceded with a sheepish grin. "Anyway, they didn't vanquish the Dark Lord, 'body and soul', so maybe it's not only about them. And 'the Chosen One's endless night'? You're the Chosen One, Harry. Perhaps the endless night means that you are in the dark about something?" She looked over her shoulder and lowered her voice, although no one was around. "The Horcruxes, perhaps?"

"Yeah, perhaps." He looked sullen. Harry couldn't stand the thought of a connection between his mother and Snape. And now this connection might be meaningful and necessary? He didn't like this one bit.

"Perhaps it merely means that we should look twice at Slytherins and maybe make friends with some of them?" Ron mused. "You said yourself that Malfoy wasn't all that bad, after all, Harry. And now he's dead. Maybe some of them don't want to go to He ... err ... Voldemort?"

"That's as good a guess as any other, I think," Hermione said. But I don't think we should waste too much time with a prophecy. And from Trelawney... All she does is give cryptic warnings. No one can decipher them, so they don't help anyone, and in Harry's case they're an added danger. Haven't we more important things to do?"

"Yes, like going to McGonagall's office," Harry suddenly remembered, and they shot to their feet and ran to the portrait hole.

"It's good to have you here, all three of you." Minerva McGonagall beamed when they came to her office. The gargoyle had been expecting them and revealed the hidden staircase as soon as they approached the alcove.

"Do you want tea, or some elf-made wine perhaps? I also have some mead, or Butterbeer... But I do draw the line at offering Firewhisky to students." She smiled mischievously and poured a glass for herself.

Harry found it strange to be treated like an adult by a teacher, especially Professor McGonagall, who had known them since they were eleven years old.

"I'd like some wine, thank you," Hermione said, and Ron asked for the same.

"Tea, if you don't mind, Professor," Harry said. "What did you want to talk to us about?"

Minerva McGonagall smiled gently. "I wanted to show you where the Order resides and how to get there. We will have an Order meeting in three days, and I want to give you full membership then."

"Are you the new head of the Order then, Professor?" Hermione asked.

"Only Interim Head, if you can call it that. We aren't certain if and how the Order can continue... And please, do call me Minerva, all of you, when we're in private." She looked at each of them in turn.

"Err... So will the Order accept us?" Harry asked doubtfully. He still remembered the fuss Molly Weasley had made when Sirius had told them too many details about Order meetings.

"Yes, it will. You can count on that," Minerva McGonagall said grimly. "I know what you're thinking, Harry, and yes, Molly is still against it." She glanced apologetically at Ron, who looked embarrassed. "Molly is a very kind woman, and she cares deeply about you, all of you." Harry and Hermione nodded and Ron blushed, although he did look a bit happier now. "She feels like she has to protect you, but she needs to accept that you are grown-ups now, as sad as it is. Albus tried to give you something resembling a normal childhood, Harry, but maybe that was a mistake. Maybe he should have told you about your difficult burden earlier. I really don't know...."

Harry swallowed, his throat suddenly felt tight. "He taught me to love, Minerva." The first name of his professor and former Head of House rolled surprisingly smoothly from his tongue. "If he had made me a weapon early on, trained me for my destiny without giving me the opportunity to make friends, to learn to love the wizarding world...."

Harry paused. All of a sudden, he felt an odd understanding for Voldemort. He had seen the boy Tom Riddle, who hadn't known any love in his life until he forced himself on other people. A boy who was ambitious and never learned about his limits. A boy who abused the powers he found himself with. Not for the first time, Harry thought that he might have developed like that if he had found out about his powers earlier. But the Dursleys had kept him so subdued... He shuddered. Should he be thankful that they had taught him modesty? He did learn some kind of discipline while living with them after all... but that was certainly giving them too much credit. They hadn't done all that to do him, Harry, a favour. Their reasons for treating him as they did were purely selfish ones, and he owed them very little thanks.

"I know what I have to do, and I am grateful for the time I had at Hogwarts. Hogwarts always felt like a true home to me, no little thanks to you, Minerva." He smiled at her and saw that her eyes widened briefly and then misted over.

"Oh, Harry, it is heart-warming to see you so grown up. I am so proud of you." She searched for a handkerchief and blew her nose noisily. "Anyway, it's late, and perhaps we should wait until tomorrow for our visit to the new headquarters. But let me just tell you, it's in the Chamber of Secrets." She winked at them.

"How did you get there?" Hermione blurted out.

"After Harry's ordeal with Tom and the basilisk, Albus closed the door to the girl's bathroom and created a few new doors that lead to the dungeons and to the lake. You don't need to speak Parseltongue these days to access the chamber. But that fact isn't generally known, and no one will suspect anything. You can float in and out with an enchanted boat. The Anti-Apparition spells end somewhat around the middle of the lake. Order members can just float out secretly and then Disapparate. The boats will return to their place on their own."

"Won't people notice boats floating on the lake?" Hermione asked sceptically.

"Not when they're under a Disillusionment Charm, Hermione." McGonagall smiled mildly.

"Oh...." Hermione still didn't seem convinced. "And Snape, doesn't he know about the new doors?"

"The chamber is under a Fidelius Charm. You will see for yourself, but now you should go to bed... Oh, one more thing... I talked to Madame Pince. The library is open all summer, as always, so you all can use it. You, Hermione, may access the Restricted Section, but only you. You must have quite a reputation with Madame Pince."

"Well... We both love books, I'd say." Hermione looked delighted. "The Restricted Section? Thank you, err... Minerva."

"Before we go, may I ask you for a favour?" Harry interrupted.

"Anything I can give you, Harry. What is it?"

"Could I talk to Professor Dumbledore's portrait, please?" Harry's face was tense with anticipation.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," McGonagall said sadly. When she saw the stormy expression on Harry's face, she quickly added, "He hasn't spoken to anyone. He just sleeps. He hasn't opened his mouth once in the miniature portrait I have here." She showed them a locket, not unlike the one they were searching for.

"Perhaps he'll want to talk to me?" Harry blushed, realising how conceited that sounded, but he had to try; he needed to talk to Dumbledore, or what remained of him in this world.

Minerva McGonagall blinked in surprise. "You can try, Harry. His portrait is over there, last in the line of former Headmasters." She sighed when he stood up to go there and poured herself another glass of Firewhisky. Ron and Hermione remained where they were, staring at their hands in embarrassed silence.

Harry stood in front of the portrait and studied the painting of his former mentor and friend. Like all the portraits at Hogwarts, it was so detailed that it could have been a photograph. Dumbledore looked peaceful. He sat in an armchair, his head against the backrest, eyes closed; deep breaths were dilating his nostrils and blowing a wisp of white hair in the air in a steady rhythm.

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry whispered, not daring to speak loudly. There was no response. Harry cleared his throat and tried again, a bit louder. "Professor Dumbledore? It's Harry..." The old man didn't move, not even the rhythm of his breathing changed. Nothing indicated that he had heard him. "Why won't you talk to me?" Harry whispered again. "I need you so desperately..." He stared at the painting, willing Dumbledore to react, but in vain. Finally, he gave up and dejectedly slunk back to the others.

Professor McGonagall smiled sadly. "He will talk when the time is right, Harry. We all need him; we all miss him. And don't forget, talking to his portrait doesn't bring him back. It is only a shadow of him, an imprint he left behind. We have to continue without him. Without his advice...."

Harry swallowed and nodded. "Thank you for the tea, Minerva. I think I'd better go to bed now." Hermione and Ron had emptied their glasses, thanked the Headmistress, and together they went back to Gryffindor Tower.

"That was a bit disappointing," Hermione said.

"A bit?" Harry glared at her. "I don't know where to start! I had relied on getting advice from Dumbledore. This is a major setback." His voice was rough, and he made an effort not to shout.

"We have other means of continuing with the search, Harry. And you will have to rely on yourself in the end, anyway. You always did, even as a child." She shook her head in wonder. "When we went past Fluffy, down that trapdoor... Don't you remember? Ron and I helped you, but in the end it was you and Voldemort. Dumbledore wasn't there; we weren't there. It was just you, your mother's protection, and him. And you came out of it alive, and Voldemort was defeated. Harry, you faced him as an eleven-year-old boy. Just think how much you've learned in the meantime. You are on your own, but you are prepared. And we are here to help you as long as we can..."

Her eyes shone, her face was flushed, and Harry thought she looked beautiful. In that moment, he loved her deeply for the person and friend she was already, and the woman she was slowly becoming. She was more trusted than a sister and almost as beloved as a lover, though that love was pure, unique and completely free of any sexual undercurrent. For a moment Harry marvelled about his own thoughts, and then he shook himself. Of course he cared for Hermione, just as he cared for Ron. They were his best friends, weren't they? This was different from his feelings for Ginny, but he had known that all along anyway, hadn't he? He took a deep breath and tried to concentrate his thoughts on the problem at hand again.

"You have a lot of faith in me, Hermione. I wish you'd remember that next time you boss me around for not doing my homework on time."

Hermione laughed. "You've been so serious tonight, Harry, so... err... grown-up." She winced. "I can't believe I said that..." All three of them laughed.

"Anyway," Ron finally said when they had caught their breath again, "what everyone is trying to tell you, you dunce, is that you're a power to be reckoned with. I bet that, err... Voldemort has realised this as well, so there's no reason to let your head swell, really."

That had them laughing again, and they were still chuckling when they finally went to bed.

His Talented Friends

Chapter 6 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognise belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 5 His Talented Friends

The next day after lunch, Hermione met Harry and Ron in the common room. They had to start searching for the remaining Horcruxes; as yet, they didn't have anything even remotely resembling a lead.

"Let's go over what we know already one more time, shall we?" Hermione suggested. "Let's try to do it systematically this time; maybe we'll find something we overlooked in the past."

"You mean, in order of Horcrux creation? Good idea," Ron said.

"*Flagrate!*" Hermione criss-crossed a fiery table on the wall with her wand. The headers were 'Horcrux', 'how', 'when', 'where', and 'why'.

"All right," Harry agreed. "So the first one was the ring. Voldemort killed his father and his paternal grandparents after he stole it. He was a teenager, so it was around 1942 or 43. He stole the ring from his uncle, but at that time, he didn't seem to know yet how to create a Horcrux. In the Pensieve memory, he was wearing the ring. Later, he hid the ring in the Gaunt house, probably after he made it into a Horcrux. Dumbledore destroyed the ring, but there was a curse on it because he was injured when he destroyed it. Remember his blackened hand?"

"Yes," Ron said. "But how do we know that it was a curse, and not just a side-effect of the destruction of the thing?"

"Dumbledore said that there was a curse on it," Hermione replied, "and when Harry destroyed the diary, there wasn't a backlash or anything of that sort."

"Right. Either there wasn't a spell protecting the diary, or the way I destroyed it didn't release the spell."

"You stabbed it with the basilisk's tooth, didn't you?" Hermione asked. When Harry nodded, she continued, "The basilisk was connected to the diary. Maybe the protection didn't recognize the tooth as coming from a stranger...."

"Maybe," Harry said. "And maybe not. We don't really know what happens when you destroy a Horcrux. So what's second?"

"Second would be the diary, I suppose." Ron counted the arguments off on his fingers. "Voldemort wrote into the diary while he was at school. He murdered his father while at school. He released the basilisk while at school. The diary was proof that he is the heir of Slytherin. So who did he kill, and when did he create it?"

"No idea," Hermione said. "All we know is that he made it a Horcrux. And the diary was meant to be read, meant to be used to release the basilisk. As long as there was a basilisk..."

"So he hid it with the Malfoys. Dumbledore said that Voldemort was furious when he learned that Malfoy had given the diary to Ginny and that the diary was destroyed."

"How did he know? Dumbledore, I mean....," Ron threw in.

"Snape?" Hermione suggested. "While he was pretending to be loyal? But would that information be valid, then? Perhaps Voldemort wasn't displeased at all, and Snape only wanted Dumbledore to believe it?"

"If Snape was the only spy for Dumbledore, then yes, it would be doubtful information." Harry rubbed his scar thoughtfully. "But if Dumbledore had more than one spy, chances are that the information is correct."

"All right," Hermione said. "Fact is that the Horcrux is destroyed, and Voldemort knows it. What's stopping him from creating a new one?"

"Nothing," Harry whispered. They looked at each other miserably. "I don't know how to deal with that on my own... How can we ever be certain?" Harry hung his head.

"We have to do what we can," Hermione said. "Look, there is always the risk that we won't get all the Horcruxes before you have to confront him. But you still can kill him, or at least drive him out of his body for a while. Even if he isn't truly dead, we'd gain time to search for the remaining Horcruxes if he were out of the way for a while. And what happens to a bodiless soul anyway when the last Horcrux that binds it to this world is destroyed? Do we know that?"

"No, we don't," Ron said pessimistically. "We just don't know enough about those blasted things. We have to learn more about them. Do you think that perhaps at Durmstrang...?" He looked hopefully at Hermione.

"I really don't think I could owl Viktor and ask if the library in his old school contains some reference books on Horcruxes, now, could I?" Hermione replied dryly. "We may have a better chance with Slughorn. He gave Voldemort the necessary information, after all."

"You mean I should talk to him again? He won't tell me anything, you know," Harry said. "He was rather difficult last time. Without the Felix Felicis, I really don't know."

"Worth a try. And maybe we can ask Price. He does research in an ancient magical archive, so he should know a lot about ancient magic. Dark magic included." Hermione frowned. "But how to ask him, if we want to keep the Horcruxes a secret?"

"I have no idea," Harry said sadly. "I thought I could just continue what Dumbledore started. Look, he is..." He flinched. "He was so much wiser than all of us combined. If he thought that those six items are Horcruxes, then I'm inclined to rely on that."

"It's a start. And while we search for the ones we know about, we might find information about some that may have been created later, even more recently. Let's continue with our list, shall we?" Hermione smiled, trying to lighten the mood of her friends who were looking rather depressed.

"What else can we do?" Ron asked. "So let's proceed to number three: the cup. It once belonged to Helga Hufflepuff. It was kept by Hepzibah Smith, a descendant of Helga Hufflepuff. Ms. Smith was killed by Tom Riddle, but he framed the house-elf for the murder. He stole the cup and made it a Horcrux. It is rather likely that he used that killing to create the Horcrux. We don't know where the cup is hidden."

"No, but the cup was important to him because it was a relic of the founders of Hogwarts. It always comes down to Hogwarts," Harry mused.

"Yes, and Dumbledore thought that he still felt a special connection to Hogwarts. For him, it was his only real home... Just like it used to be for you, Harry." Hermione frowned at him.

"Yet another thing we have in common. How spiffing," Harry snarled. "I'm a half-blood, like him. I'm an orphan, like him. I consider Hogwarts my home; I speak Parseltongue, and I even have the corresponding wand... Maybe I should have gone into Slytherin and become the next Dark Lord."

"Oh, rubbish," Hermione said angrily. "Did you forget what Dumbledore told you? Voldemort made you that way, Harry. Voldemort made you an orphan; he gave you that scar; he gave you Parseltongue, and because of him, your childhood was so miserable that you consider Hogwarts your home. He's the one who's responsible for that. And that's why you can defeat him because you seem to have so many things in common." She looked at him enthusiastically, but only got a blank stare back. "Don't you see? Voldemort made you a weapon; the only weapon to defeat him. You have part of his powers; you have powerful protection; you can comprehend how he thinks, even how he feels."

Harry nodded. "Yes. Dumbledore said something similar, but I fail to see how this could help me."

"Voldemort still doesn't know that you're not like him at all. He doesn't realize that a similar background doesn't have to create a similar character. He will never understand

your deeply ingrained decency and loyalty, Harry. Your bravery and unselfishness, your love. He has nothing that could tempt you, and that must frighten him."

"Oh, yeah, he was shivering last time we met," Harry said sarcastically.

"He wants to kill you himself, Harry. He considers you his worst enemy. Dumbledore is out of the way; he can't protect you any longer. Voldemort may think that it's easier to get to you now. He seems to see murdering you as something symbolic, almost. He seems so intent on doing it himself from what you told us, Harry. Didn't he tell his Death Eaters to stay out and not interfere the night Cedric died?"

"Yes, and at the Ministry, Malfoy prevented the other Death Eaters from killing me. He yelled that I belonged to his master. Just like Snape did when that huge Death Eater was torturing me, incidentally," Harry said, rubbing his face tiredly.

"You know... Maybe he wants to kill you to create his final Horcrux," Ron said slowly. The one to replace the diary. He'd want to complete what he set out to do that night your parents died. Wouldn't that be typical for him, all that symbolic, mystical stuff?"

Harry and Hermione gaped at him.

"I think you have something there, Ron," Hermione said.

"And that would mean that there are only five Horcruxes," Harry added. "But how can we be certain?"

"We can't, but we can keep that in mind when we come across possible Horcrux items."

"The cup!" Harry exclaimed. "The TriWizard Cup!" Maybe he wanted to make it into a Horcrux after killing me. I brought it to him; it's a meaningful trophy; it's old... Everything fits." Harry looked hopeful, almost optimistic.

"And since he didn't get the cup, he'd have to look for something different," Ron said. "We could investigate which old items have been purchased recently, or reported stolen for that matter."

"That's where your new Ministry contacts come in handy, don't you think?" Hermione grinned. "They'd have records of stolen artefacts or ancient items changing owners."

"That's as good a point to start as any," Ron said. "And now we should get on with the list."

"Right." Hermione smiled. "Number four is the locket. It's from a founder; it belonged to Salazar Slytherin, but was handed down in direct line to Merope Gaunt. Merope sold it to Borgin and Burkes, who sold it to Hepzibah Smith; Voldemort stole it from her."

"The locket was hidden in a sea cave, protected by a lake full of Inferi and a deadly, or almost deadly, potion. The sea cave was meaningful to Voldemort because he had one of his first triumphs there when he hurt other children from the orphanage. We don't know who was killed for that Horcrux to be created, but we know that the locket Dumbledore and Harry retrieved from the sea cave wasn't Slytherin's. So R.A.B., whoever it is, destroyed the Horcrux. Merely hiding it wouldn't really make a difference, would it?"

"Perhaps, if R.A.B. lived long enough to destroy it, but that doesn't really matter. To be certain that it's destroyed, we have to find the locket. Let's get on with it," Ron urged them on.

Harry sighed. "Number five. The snake, Nagini. Dumbledore thinks that it doesn't behave like a normal snake would. If the snake is a Horcrux, it would have been created the night Frank Bryce was murdered, or soon thereafter. The snake is always with Voldemort; it sustained him before he regained his body, and Voldemort's body seems to be part snake, if you look at his nose and mouth. The snake is poisonous; it can protect itself."

"It will have to be the last to be destroyed because when you're close to Nagini, Voldemort is around, too." Hermione said.

"Yes," Harry agreed. "And then there's the speculative number six which Dumbledore thought was something from Ravenclaw or Gryffindor."

"Right," Hermione said. "And the only Ravenclaw item we know about would be your Aunt Muriel's tiara, Ron, and we've already ruled that one out."

"Yeah." Ron rubbed his nose. "But he could still plan to use it, if my theory is right. Maybe we should warn the Order, and get some extra protection for Aunt Muriel?"

Hermione went pale, and Harry looked concerned. "If that is true, then she'd be in extreme danger. Couldn't she store the tiara in a Gringotts vault? I know..." He grinned at Hermione, who was about to interrupt him. "I know that he's broken into Gringotts successfully once before, but it would be less dangerous than keeping it with her. At least she would be safe if we made it known that the tiara is in Gringotts. Besides, we'd know right away when someone stole it."

"She won't like it," Ron said, "but I will talk to my Dad. The family can try to convince her. Maybe she'll listen."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Are we absolutely certain that the tiara is genuine?"

"Bill said that the age fits, didn't he?"

"Did he? He only said that it can be found out easily if the age fits... And then he continued checking to see if there were any spells on the tiara. And there weren't. With an item so old that supposedly belonged to such a powerful witch... Shouldn't there be something there? At least some protection?"

"What are you getting at?" Harry asked. "Do you think this is a replica and that the original was stolen?"

"Perhaps, I don't know." Hermione let out a deep breath and buried her face in her hands. "If, just if, the tiara was stolen when your uncle was murdered, Ron, then it might already be a Horcrux. And we can look at the jewellery Fleur wore as much as we want and will never find anything. Damn...." She bit her lip.

"If it is a Horcrux, when would it have been created? Wouldn't that one be the one he wanted to create with my death? He wouldn't have had the time to make one out of my mother and father's deaths... He would have brought it to Godric's Hollow, surely?"

"Maybe," Hermione agreed. "But we don't know if you have to have the vessel for the soul fragment close by when you split your soul, or if you can attach it later. Maybe it works like a Pensieve? A Pensieve for the soul?"

"I don't think so," Ron pondered. "I think that the killing and the creation of the Horcrux need to happen close together in time. Didn't Dumbledore say that no other wizard had ripped his soul into more than two parts?"

"I see where you're going," Hermione threw in, eyes shining with excitement. "Killing splits your soul, and the split part can be used for the Horcrux. But a normal split soul must mend somewhat, mustn't it? There are many wizards who have killed more than one person. If the soul didn't mend, they'd have their soul ripped into more than two parts."

"Exactly," Ron continued. "But maybe all it means is that a soul is only ripped apart when it actually leaves the body? Perhaps a mass murderer could have one soul, ripped into many pieces, but still all in one place?"

"Perhaps," Harry said aggressively. "But we're moving in circles here; this doesn't lead anywhere. We have to start somewhere. How and where?"

"To find places where Voldemort could have hidden his Horcruxes, we'd need to know more about the person Tom Riddle himself. We could ask people who went to school

with him. I'll ask Minerva if I can take a look at the Hogwarts entry-registry for those thirteen years. Some of those people will still be alive and may remember things about him."

Harry frowned. "All right, we have a start. We ask people who went to school with him. Older Order members might also remember a thing or two from when they were fighting him. Patterns of how he killed, when he killed, who he killed... Dumbledore told me that he killed the strongest and most powerful wizards and witches himself. Like Madame Bones..."

"Yes, he seems to see them as some kind of trophy, doesn't he? He would have used some of their deaths for the Horcruxes," Hermione said. "I think that's a good idea, Harry. One of us should interview the older Order members who were around when Voldemort was strong the first time around. And I could counter-check those reports with old *Daily Prophet* articles about burglaries and disappearing items."

"Hm," Harry mumbled. "It's tedious work, but it needs to be done. So that leaves information about the Horcruxes themselves. I really doubt that Slughorn knows more than he told us in that memory fragment. I will have to ask him, though..." He grimaced.

"You're probably right. If he didn't tell Dumbledore, maybe there isn't anything else to tell," Ron said thoughtfully. "We'd need other sources of information. Hogwarts doesn't have books about the Dark Arts since Dumbledore forbade it. Hermione refuses to ask Viktor Krum..." He ducked quickly when Hermione threw a pillow at him. "Too bad we can't ask Malfoy..."

Harry stretched and rubbed his neck. "Maybe there's some information in Malfoy Manor. They have all those secret chambers... Didn't Lucius Malfoy boast once that the Ministry only finds stuff that he, Malfoy, wants them to find? There have to be hidden doors, cabinets or something. Maybe there are books... I can't imagine that someone like Lucius Malfoy wouldn't investigate deeper into something that makes you live for a very long time..."

"Very possible," Hermione agreed. "But wouldn't the Aurors have taken everything away that could have been used as evidence against Malfoy?"

"If they searched thoroughly, perhaps," Harry said. "But knowing the, ah, connections between Malfoy and the Ministry, I rather doubt that they took everything away."

"You're probably right. When do you have your first meeting with the Minister, Harry? Maybe you can convince him to let us look through Malfoy Manor."

"The day after tomorrow," Harry said. "And tomorrow night is an Order meeting, so we can start to ask questions then."

"Good," Hermione said. "I can go and check the registry right away. After dinner, I'll go and ask Minerva. Let's get to work."

"Yes, let's get on with it." Both boys looked relieved, and together they went down to the Great Hall for dinner.

The registry of Hogwarts' students provided them with a remarkably long list of people who went to school with Tom Riddle and who were still alive. To their surprise, Minerva McGonagall was one of those people; she was only two years younger than Tom Riddle. Harry and Ron volunteered to seek out Riddle's old schoolmates and also ask Professor McGonagall about her impression of the Dark wizard as a schoolboy. Hermione would check every library and archive for information, or at least for hints about where to find that information. There were several ancient manors and castles in Scotland and England where such magical archives or extensive private libraries were kept. They planned to check these out as soon as they had looked at Malfoy Manor.

The Order meeting had been both chaotic and interesting. Molly Weasley had swept down on the three friends and immediately berated them for joining before they had completed school. Fred and George were leading her away, trying to calm her down. Arthur Weasley was talking to Minerva McGonagall and Alastor Moody. The first part of the evening was spent with people trying to talk at the same time, each presenting a plan to defeat Voldemort. No one listened to anyone else.

Hermione's question as to what exactly the task of the Order had been while Dumbledore was still alive led to a confused silence. "Fighting Death Eaters," was Mad-eye Moody's explanation. "Protecting innocents," came from Molly Weasley. "Preventing attacks... keeping watch on secret things... learning what He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is after... protecting Muggle-borns... preventing You-Know-Who from taking over," were the things that were mentioned most frequently. Hermione was disappointed about the lack of structure, the lack of purpose or plan. She saw how Remus talked silently with Tonks when everybody else was trying to out-shout the others; Peregrin Price was watching the proceedings with an unreadable expression on his face. In the end, Hermione thought, the Order really had been Dumbledore's army. And with the general gone, the army behaved like a headless chicken, fluttering around reflexively without real life or sense behind it. What they needed was a purpose, Hermione thought, a plan, a new leader.

The interesting parts were Remus Lupin's report about having found a few other werewolves who were less than content under Fenrir Greyback's reign and could probably be prevented from joining Voldemort's forces if they could be provided with the Wolfsbane potion regularly. Hermione wondered who made the potion for Remus; she knew that it was too complicated for him to brew it himself. Only a few wizards in Europe could brew it, and Snape had been one of the few.

"What a loss for our side," she thought, not for the first time. Of course she couldn't voice that thought, Ron and Harry would have been all over her, but she actually thought that losing Severus Snape to the other side was a severe setback.

When Remus had finished his report, Kingsley Shacklebolt told them about the goings-on in the office of the Muggle Prime Minister. The Muggles were now providing new identities for the families of Muggle-born wizards and witches. Those families seemed to be a prime target of Death Eater raids, and several had been murdered in the last few weeks. Hermione was glad that her own parents had been so reasonable in listening to her warning and now were cruising somewhere in the Caribbean. After their world trip, the Grangers planned to do an exchange program at an Australian dentistry school. They had tried to convince Hermione to come with them but accepted her decision to fight alongside Harry. Her parents had always supported her choices as much as they could, even if that now meant that they had to move out of Voldemort's immediate reach and leave their daughter behind.

Harry's visit to the Ministry the next day had been exhausting and rather unpleasant. Not only did he have to endure a seemingly endless photo session with a smiling Minister, but he also had to listen to the Minister's excuses for not having any lead on Voldemort and Snape. Worse, he constantly had to evade the Minister's questions about what exactly he was looking for. He non-committally explained that he wished to learn as much about Voldemort's history and personality as possible, but the Minister, not being stupid, didn't believe him.

Harry did get permission, however, to go to Malfoy Manor, provided an Auror went with them. Harry asked for Tonks, and Tonks seemed more than glad to accompany them.

When they Apparated to a safe spot a small distance from Malfoy Manor a day later, they just stood there, gaping.

"No wonder Malfoy was such an arrogant prick," Harry said, while Ron stared with awe, and not a little envy, at the majestic old building that was set off beautifully by a large, well-tended park.

Tonks laughed. "Remember, looks aren't everything." And to their horror, she changed her face into a pointy, narrow likeness of Narcissa Malfoy, her short purple hair transforming into the long, pale blonde mane of the late Mrs. Malfoy.

"That's not funny, Tonks!" Hermione cried, torn between laughter and horror. "What's happening to the manor now, with Draco's father in Azkaban?"

"Nothing. It's being tended by the house-elves and will remain empty. If Malfoy ever gets released, he'll likely take up residence here again. Malfoy has no other relatives. My dear aunt Bellatrix and her loving husband can't move in; every Auror in the country is looking for them. And Mum my own mother was disowned by the clan long ago. So there's no hope of me ever playing Lady of the Manor." She winked at them after transforming back into her colourful self.

"Damn," Harry said, "I forgot how closely related you all are. Were your aunts still in contact with your mum after she married your father?"

"Oh, no," Tonks said, "and I'm proud to say that my mum wasn't too sad about that. She always was a bit of a rebel, taking the side of Muggles, Muggle-borns, and other wretched life forms." She grinned at them. "And you don't really think that my aunts would visit the lowly abode of a Muggle-born wizard like my dad."

"Too bad," Harry sighed. "Nevertheless, talking to your mum would be interesting. Do you think she'd tell us a bit about her sisters?"

"I think she would, albeit reluctantly, Harry. Why are you interested in my aunts, anyway?"

"Same reason we're visiting the Manor, really. I want to learn what I can about how Death Eaters think, what drove them to Voldemort, how he lured them in. Was it fashionable among purebloods; was it only a certain type who joined? Why was your mother different? How did her sisters react to her, and things like that."

"I see. Yes, those are important questions, Harry, and I understand why they are especially important for you. He-Who-Must..." Tonks flinched and shook herself. "No, Voldemort will seek you out, won't he? You've escaped him so many times. It's a matter of prestige, I suppose."

"We think so, too," Harry said. "Ron reckons that he wants to finish what he started sixteen years ago at Godric's Hollow."

"Does he now?" Tonks considered Ron with newfound respect. Ron blushed furiously. "Could be, at that. And so the three of you are out investigating, trying to outsmart the bad guys, aren't you?"

"Well, we don't think it's a good idea to simply wait until Voldemort decides that now he wants to kill Harry, and do nothing in the meantime." Hermione said. "And this knowledge will be useful for the Order, too, won't it? We'd like to talk to Order members who fought in the last war, too."

"All right," Tonks said. "But I'd wait a bit, if I were you. They'll need some time to get used to you 'young whippersnappers' being there. The Order is a bit confused at the moment, anyway. We were all relying on Dumbledore so much... but here we are."

They had arrived at the Manor's entrance, and Tonks started to deactivate the protective spells at the door. When they entered the house, a house-elf came hurrying towards them and regarded them distrustfully. Tonks told the house-elf that Harry, Ron and Hermione would look around the Manor, and the house-elf disappeared with a sneer.

"They still feel bound to Lucius Malfoy," Tonks said, "so don't expect to get any help from them. They won't hinder you either, though; they are a bit scared of the Ministry. Now, you three go looking; I'll patrol outside." She grinned and left them.

Hermione looked around. She was just as awed by the house as Harry and Ron were. A large entrance area, panelled walls and ceilings, worn, but well cared-for antique furniture... the whole house emanated wealth, and a slightly rugged, understated elegance.

"Who'd have known that the pretentious prick had such a cosy home," Ron said.

"Well," Harry said reluctantly, "in the end there was more to him than we thought, wasn't there?"

"Yes," Hermione said and consulted the dynamic floor plan Tonks had given them. "Now, let's see... there is the secret chamber under the library..." She opened the second door to the right and let out a low whistle. "Look at all these books!"

Bookshelves were covering three of the room's walls from floor to ceiling; the fourth wall consisted almost entirely of a huge fireplace.

"These would be the more presentable books," Hermione murmured. "Tonks said that they kept their, err... more selective library in the hidden chamber. Now, where's that portrait of Cecil the Clandestine?"

"Must be this one." Ron pointed to a small painting that showed a surly looking old wizard half-hidden behind a tree.

"We'll have to turn it upside-down." Hermione pulled her wand out and flipped the portrait on its head. Cecil the Clandestine was tumbling around wildly, cursing and yelling loudly. At the same time, the fireplace turned and revealed a staircase, much like the staircase that led to the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts. This one, however, led down, not up.

Carefully, wands drawn, the three friends walked down the stairs and found themselves in a small, dark chamber. As soon as they left the stairs, candles lit up and filled the room with just enough light to read. Here, too, the walls were covered with shelves. The staircase took up the remaining wall.

"Why didn't the Aurors take the books away if they're Dark Arts books?" Ron asked.

"No idea," Harry said. "We'll have to ask Tonks."

"There doesn't seem to be anything really Dark here." Hermione blushed. "There are a few books about psychedelic potions, from what I can see, but most books contain... err... erotica."

The boys stared at her, eyes threatening to fall out. She shrugged and blushed even more. "Sorry, but that's what it looks like. Or what else do you think a book with the title, *The 33 Magical Positions to Make your Witch Content and Maintain Control*, could mean?"

Harry laughed, embarrassed. "You'd think that the Aurors would have confiscated these books, or, err... studied them thoroughly, wouldn't you? I wonder why they are still here... The Malfoys probably still have friends at the Ministry. Malfoy's pockets were jingling, last time I saw him there."

"The books aren't dusty or anything. Looks like they have been checked thoroughly," Ron confirmed. "But *Scented candles and Magical Illuminations* didn't cause that much interest." He pointed towards a small book closest to the wall, half covered with cobwebs.

"Why would that one be down here, anyway?" Hermione said, and took the small book off the shelf. She thumbed through it; there were recipes for making scented wax, and suggestions for different shapes of candles.

"I wonder..." she took her wand and tapped out several sequences on the book, muttering under her breath. Eventually, the book shone in a pale green glow, and letters and numbers appeared on the surface: 5 up 3 down.

"Wow..." Harry said. "How did you do that?"

"Ever wonder how Fred and George found out how the Marauder's map works?" Hermione said, clearly pleased. "I asked them... They are quite inventive; they have great magic in their shop..."

"Brilliant, Hermione." Harry grinned. "But what does this code mean?" He looked at the place in the shelf where the book had stood. "Five up and three down that would just be two up, wouldn't it? Let's see: *The Kama Sutra*?"

"Err... perhaps that's a kind of erotic message?" Ron suggested, and blushed when his friends stared at him. "Just an idea... or maybe it's the door opener to a secret love nest..."

"There is no door." Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Hmmm," Harry said and went to the stairs. He walked five steps up and three down and disappeared.

"Harry!" Ron and Hermione yelled simultaneously and ran to the steps, counting out the same sequence.

When they stepped off the stairs, they walked into a large room without windows. Candles had lit themselves as soon as Harry had appeared. The room looked like a bedroom; a quilt-covered bed stood in one corner, and a bed-side table, a wardrobe, a large cabinet, and a bookshelf completed the furnishings of the room.

"It looks inhabited," Hermione murmured, taking an open book from the bed-side table and flipping through it. "Someone with similar tastes as Sirius' relatives. Look!" The book she held up was similar to one they had seen at the Black residence. Harry and Ron looked over her shoulder to read the title. *Nature's Nobility* a treatise about the superiority of pure bloods.

"Just what I said, a secret love nest..." Ron looked amazed.

"I rather think it's a hideout for Death Eaters one or more of the escaped Azkaban prisoners... I wonder if the Aurors know about this room..."

"They don't..." a gleeful voice came from the large cabinet, and when they spun around, a leering Bellatrix Lestrange cast a "*Stupefy!*" their way.

Harry and Hermione yelled, "*Protego*," but Ron was a moment too late and was knocked out cold.

Bellatrix laughed shrilly. "Ooh, ickle Harry brought his talented friends. Looky, looky how much talent. Sweet dreams little Weasley." While she was taunting them in her singsong voice, she had raised her wand, and a red flash shot out of it.

Harry almost lost his footing, despite casting his "*Protego*" quickly; only Hermione's competent protective charm prevented him from being struck full force.

"Oooh, this one seems to have a bit more talent. So maybe old Snape was right after all... ickle Harrykins, what do you say? Have to rely on your talented friends, do you?" And she cast another spell, again blocked by Hermione.

Harry tried to go on the offensive. His *Impedimenta* made Bellatrix jump up and to the side, but caused no harm.

"We've played enough, children. Now we'll talk business...*Expelliarmus!*"

Harry couldn't prevent it; his wand flew out of his hand, but before Bellatrix could cast another spell, Hermione jumped in front of Harry, protecting him.

'Oooo, isn't this sweet? Young love... our Harrypoo has found himself a little girlfriend. A little talented girlfriend..." She started to circle the room. "Won't the Dark Lord be pleased to hear this?" She jumped up a few times, mock-threatening them with her wand. "And our little Harry is indeed barely mediocre... dumb luck and talented friends, indeed." She raised her wand with a swift movement. "*Cruci...*"

But her spell was never completed. Bellatrix opened and closed her mouth a few times like a fish on dry land, croaking but not able to vocalize a spell. And before she could react to what had happened, she floated upside down, a screech escaping her, her wand slipping out of her fingers. Silvery ropes shot out of Hermione's wand and bound the Dark witch; a Summoning Charm brought her wand into Hermione's hands.

"Damn," Harry said, "I don't know what's the matter with me... Thanks, Hermione."

Hermione had cast a "*Rennervate!*" on Ron and looked up. "She came from that cabinet. We'd better make sure that there's no one else hiding in there..."

Together they opened the door, Harry looking inside, Ron and Hermione standing beside him, wands drawn. But it was empty. The dust on the floor revealed a few footprints. Tracks from women's shoes, like those of Bellatrix, and tracks made by a rat.

"Wormtail was here!" Harry said. "But where is he now?"

"This must be a vanishing cabinet, Harry," Hermione said, looking worried. "That's how they must have come and gone in secret without being noticed. And if the Aurors didn't find this room... Let's get out of here before Wormtail comes back with help."

They followed her advice, levitating Bellatrix' squirming form as they walked up the staircase which led them back to the hidden library chamber.

Back at Hogwarts, they sat together in the common room and tried to come to terms with what had happened at the Manor.

"Why on earth didn't the Aurors find that room when they were searching the Manor?" Harry yelled. He was furious about the carelessness of the Ministry. "After Draco and his mother were murdered, they should have turned over every stone in that house. But no, not in Malfoy Manor. Do they think that Malfoy senior will express his gratitude in jingling coins?"

"Apparently they did," Hermione said disgustedly. "But at least now they have conducted a thorough search... I hope. That's a whole suite of Death Eater quarters down there. Unbelievable." She shook her head.

"If every home of Death Eater families was searched thoroughly, they might have some clues where Voldemort is hiding," Ron said, still angry about being knocked out so easily by Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Or Snape," Harry snarled.

"Yeah, well, Snape..." Hermione mused. "Do you know what Bellatrix Lestrange meant, when she said that piece about Old Snape and your talented friends, Harry?"

"No, and I don't know why I should care," Harry spat. "He's hated me from the beginning, and I him. Why should I care what he says about me?"

"She said something about dumb luck and being mediocre, Harry. But he knows... Snape knows all too well that you're anything but a mediocre wizard. Damn, Harry, you've almost knocked him off his feet more than once."

"I hurt his pride, didn't I? Why should he tell his cronies that I am more than mediocre? He doesn't want to believe that himself. And down there ~~was~~as mediocre. So maybe I am... I can't change it. I don't care, I know what I have to do, and some stupid things that bloody murderer says about me won't stop me."

"That's the spirit, Harry!" Hermione beamed. "But still... Snape is a bit of a mystery, isn't he No-no, let me continue." (For Harry had made a scathing noise and tried to interrupt her.) "Look, when Bellatrix Lestrange attacked, I was so confused and scared... and I used Snape's spells from your Potions book. They were the first that came to my mind, and they worked. Lestrange must have never experienced *Langlock*, or else she would have countered with a nonverbal spell, surely?" Hermione looked pleadingly at Harry, willing him to hear her out. "And then I used *Levicorpus*. And she was so surprised that she lost her wand... Harry, these can't be spells she's too familiar with. And I wonder why. They're Snape's spells; they're useful and efficient, surely he would have shared them with his fellow Death Eaters?"

Ron shook his head. "What are you getting at, Hermione? Do you think that Snape has some hidden motives, some secrets he keeps from his master? Frankly, after what he did to Dumbledore, I doubt that very much. He's a traitor, and I don't know why you even waste a thought on him. Besides, we've seen Death Eaters use *Levicorpus*. at the Quidditch World Cup, have you forgotten that?"

"Yes, you're almost certainly right, Ron," Hermione replied. "But nevertheless, I would love to take another, closer look at that old Potions book, Harry. Please, can't you give it to me? There's so much information in there... Now that we all know to be careful with that book. And I'd really like to know just why Dumbledore trusted Snape so much... Maybe we might find a clue in the book."

"Dumbledore was human, and humans make mistakes," Harry said sadly. "And I'd be thankful if we could stop talking about that traitor now. But I will get the book for you tomorrow, Hermione. Just don't expect me to read it again."

"That's fine with me, Harry. I won't bother you with it. And now we'd better get some sleep. There'll be questions from Professor McGonagall and the Order tomorrow..."

"Right," Harry and Ron said, and they all went to their dormitories.

Expecto Patronum

Chapter 7 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 6 Expecto Patronum

Three days later, Harry went into the Room of Requirement to retrieve Snape's old Potions book for Hermione. After they had come back from Malfoy Manor, almost all of their time had been spent with Professor McGonagall and other Order members. Everyone had been surprised and disgusted by the careless attitude with which the Ministry had treated the search of Malfoy Manor. The Aurors among the Order had promised to keep a closer eye on such operations in the future, but Harry hadn't been convinced. Order members were powerless when dealing with the wishes and demands of those who frequently made financial 'contributions' to the Ministry. Putting a stop to that preferential treatment of certain individuals would mean that the Minister would have to admit that things like bought favours were rather common. Harry thought that it was more likely that Snape would be spotted tap-dancing on a table in the Three Broomsticks than the Minister admitting that corruption in the Ministry existed.

Harry, this time accompanied by Ron and Hermione, had spent almost a full day at the Ministry again, explaining how they had found the secret room. They learned that the Vanishing Cabinet in Malfoy Manor led to another Death Eater hideout in the Lestrage family residence. But overall, the time at the Ministry was mostly wasted time, and Harry had already started to regret his decision to play the Ministry's mascot. Being able to spend the rest of the day at the Ministry archives to search for information about ancient artefacts was only a small compensation for the posing and the empty talk with which the Ministry tried to conceal its own failures.

They hadn't found anything of importance in the archives; the only slightly interesting report was the one about Mundungus Fletcher's arrest for impersonating an Inferius during an attempted burglary. But they had known that already. As far as Harry knew, Mundungus was still sitting in Azkaban, and Harry wasn't feeling sorry for him at all. He was still furious that Mundungus had stolen Sirius Black's possessions from Grimmauld Place.

Back at Hogwarts, Hermione had reminded Harry of his promise to get the Potions book for her. He had secretly hoped that she'd forget about it, but when had Hermione ever forgotten something?

Harry was still grumbling about Hermione's insistence while he walked past mountains of junk and forbidden items that were stacked away in that special version of the Room of Requirement. He cast a suspicious glance at the deactivated Vanishing Cabinet that had let the Death Eaters in on the night of the attack. However, Minerva McGonagall had assured them that Vanishing Cabinets and other known means of teleportation were now included in the spells that protected Hogwarts from intruders. Harry wondered briefly why the Aurors hadn't cleared out the room, but suspected that the Room of Requirement had its own ways of protecting its contents.

He was distracted from his ruminations when he spotted what he had been looking for: the marker he had left when he hid the book. Standing on top of the cupboard where the book was hidden was a statue of an old warlock with a dusty wig and an old, tarnished tiara on his head. Harry stopped short and stared. The tiara looked very familiar. It was old and battered and was missing a gemstone here and there, but it was undeniably an identical copy of the tiara Fleur had worn at her wedding a duplicate of the beautiful goblin-made tiara that belonged to Ron's Aunt Muriel. Harry thought that this could only mean one thing: this one here had to be the genuine heirloom of Rowena Ravenclaw, probably stolen when it was with her nephew, Fabian Prewett. The one in Aunt Muriel's possession had to be a copy.

Harry retrieved the Potions book from the cabinet where it was hidden and wondered whether he should take the tiara with him but decided against it. He would want to discuss this with Ron and Hermione first, and then they'd have to find a safe place where they could investigate. He shuddered to think that what he was looking at right now in all likelihood contained a piece of Voldemort's soul.

Hermione and Ron were very excited when he told them about the tiara. Hermione immediately agreed with his assessment. She had found it fishy that Aunt Muriel's tiara didn't contain any magic. They were eager to find out the age of the piece and if there was any magic contained within it. Mindful of what Bill had taught them, they decided to take the tiara to a place where they could destroy it safely, if necessary.

"We could take it to the Shrieking Shack," Ron suggested.

"I don't know..." Hermione rubbed her nose. "I don't like experimenting with something that dangerous in a building. I'd prefer a lot of space surrounding it. None of us have much experience with containment charms and the like."

"But when we were practicing, you could always create one," Harry objected.

"I can," she said defiantly. "But I don't know how strong it will be when we're facing Dark magic worse than an Imperius Curse. I didn't have a real opportunity to test it; you know that I only learned it from a book, Harry." She flinched. "Just what Snape was always criticising..."

"If he was criticising it, it must be good," Ron said and grinned. "You know, Hermione, you almost seem obsessed with Snape...."

"Don't be silly," she snapped at him. "Of course I think about him a lot. He's a key player. He betrayed the Order, and he murdered Dumbledore; his crimes are clear for everyone to see. And yet..."

"Stop it," Harry snarled. "We'll learn nothing from speculating about Snape. The only time I'm going to think about him is when I'm imagining how I'll kill him."

Hermione shook her head. "I try to understand what happened and can't... And that's why I can't let it go. How could a boy who had a Muggle parent join the Death Eaters? I don't get it..."

Ron scowled at her. "What's the point, Hermione? He was the Head of Slytherin; that should tell you enough."

"We have a task here; may I remind you of that?" Harry hissed. "I can go and do it alone, if you have more important things to discuss, but I thought you might be interested."

"Don't be mean, Harry," Hermione chided. "You know that we'll do everything to help you. I think it's important to know how the enemy thinks.... We may be able to anticipate their actions. Isn't that what Dumbledore did, too?"

"Yes. But he was Dumbledore. We're three students who haven't even learned all Hogwarts has to teach yet. How can we possibly guess Voldemort's plans?"

"We may not have Dumbledore's wisdom and knowledge, Harry, but we're not stupid. Do you really think he would have given you the task if he hadn't thought you were capable of fulfilling it? And Dumbledore was fine with your telling us, and our helping you," Hermione said heatedly. "So where do you think we should take the Horcrux?"

"We don't know if it is one, do we?" Harry said. "I suggest the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid is still in France, so nobody will know that we're there, and no one will disturb us."

"And no one will help us when things turn out worse than we hope they do." Hermione shook her head. "We'll have to tell someone where we're going."

"I don't know," Ron said. "How do we explain why we're going into the Forbidden Forest?"

"We don't," Hermione said. "We just tell them we're going north. You take your brooms and pretend to exercise. I'll merely plod along with a school broom."

"All right, let's get going then," Harry agreed and went to get the tiara while Ron and Hermione fetched the broomsticks.

When he came back from the Room of Requirement and was walking towards the entrance hall, Harry met Peregrin Price, who had just come in through the main entrance.

"What are you up to, Harry? I saw your friends outside. Are they waiting for you? We need to arrange the first of those lessons you wanted me to give you. If you're still interested, that is?"

"Oh, absolutely," Harry said enthusiastically. "But right now, we want to get some exercise. We've been teasing Hermione mercilessly because she is such a bad flyer, and now we're going to teach her a few things and help her practice a bit. A witch should be able to fly on a broomstick."

"Indeed. Oh, that's a good idea, indeed. Maybe I should come with you; I could do with a bit of flying practice, too. But Minerva's expecting me... Where are you going? You shouldn't go too far without letting anyone know...." Price frowned.

"Just flying north for a bit not very far. There's too much fog today to go very far, anyway," Harry said, relieved that he didn't have to find an excuse for not inviting Perry Price along.

"The fog is very dense; there could be Dementors out there, breeding, or whatever it is they do to multiply. They seem to be everywhere these days. Better be extra careful!"

"We'll watch our backs."

"Good. Why don't you come to my office when you're back? We can have our first lesson then...."

"That's great. Thank you, Professor."

"Call me, 'Perry'....," Price said, but Harry had already left.

"You know, having Price with us wouldn't be such a bad thing. I'm sure his containment field would be perfect....," Hermione mumbled and pushed a wet strand of hair out of her face before she tried to cast the age-determining spell Bill had told them about. The fog had thickened and covered everything in a coat of sticky moisture. She shuddered; standing in that thick fog felt uncomfortable and scary.

"*How old are you?*" Hermione whispered while she executed a difficult sequence of flicks, swishes, and stabbings with her wand. The tiara glowed blue, then green, then a dark ruby red, and finally emitted a golden mist that formed numbers in the air above it: Two nines and a five.

"Nine hundred and ninety-five years," Hermione said, awed. "At least one component of the tiara is as old as Hogwarts. Almost a thousand years...."

"So, if just one of the stones is that old, and the rest is new, it could still be counterfeit, couldn't it?" Ron looked confused.

"Yes," Hermione admitted. "To be certain, we'd have to take it apart and test each of its components independent from the other. But, maybe we should proceed to look for spells on it? Curses, blessings, or the like. If there *is* something, we'll have to take it apart, anyway."

"All right," Harry said. "Ron, you do it. You know that I don't really excel at emptying my mind...."

Hermione laughed. "Ron doesn't seem to have a problem with emptying his mind. Maybe because there's so little there...." She giggled when Ron swatted her on the arm.

All three of them were silent when Ron stretched out a hand towards the tiara and focused on it, trying to empty his mind of stray and distracting thoughts. Ron's hand soon emitted a faint ray of coppery green light thin, like gossamer, which wound its way over and around the tiara like a cocoon.

The gossamer threads of green light that now covered the tiara intensified until it shone in a steady green light for a moment, looking just like the shine on the tiara Bill had tested on the evening before his wedding. But the similarity only lasted for a moment. Before Ron could lose his concentration, the steady green shine grew turbulent, red streaks mingling with the green, and vortex-like funnels spinning clockwise and anti-clockwise at nauseating speed. Finally, parts of the funnels rose up like small, glowing volcanoes and started to spit out yellow-white sparks. Harry, who had tentatively stretched a hand out towards those sparks, yanked it back with a yelp.

"Ouch! That's like a minor electric shock."

"You mean I caused eckeltricity?" Ron asked in a breathless voice. His concentration had finally faltered, and the glow on the tiara had faded.

"You certainly did." Hermione was fascinated. "Did you see the little volcanoes? There has to be strong magic on that tiara many spells, maybe even that rumoured love blessing."

"So what do we do with it?" Harry asked, fidgeting nervously and casting uneasy glances around. The silence around them was eerie; the thick fog quenched every sound. It felt as if they were isolated in a bubble.

"We'll have to take it apart and then check each part for curses and hexes, just as we did with the items we practiced with," Hermione said. They had practiced curse-breaking by hexing and cursing small items for each other and trying to neutralize the magic on those items. It helped that curse-breaking was part of their seventh-year

Defence Against the Dark Arts curriculum, and that Hermione, as always, had already read through all her textbooks before the start of school.

"You could check for benevolence or malice first," Ron suggested. "You were always good at it when we practised. You always recognised the Flobberworms under our Imperius Curse."

While the three friends had found it easy to identify objects that contained hexes and jinxes, experimenting with Dark magic turned out to be tricky. Apart from the Unforgivables, they didn't know any spells, and just as for the Horcruxes, the library failed to provide answers. Reluctantly, they had decided to use *Imperio* on a creature that wouldn't suffer under it. They had cursed Flobberworms, ordering them to refuse the lettuce they were fed. Surprisingly, that had worked well.

"Okay," Harry said and concentrated, muttering "*Benefiz, Malefiz, one, two, three ...*"

"Wow." Hermione was enthralled. The glow around the tiara had returned, but this time it was an even, silvery sparkle, untainted by any other colour, shape, or form.

"It's purely beneficial, then. No curses to protect it, or anything." Harry frowned. "If this is indeed a Horcrux, then he must be very sure of himself to leave such an item without protection..."

"Doesn't that fit, Harry? He is very arrogant, after all, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is." Harry nodded. "But if there is a fragment of his soul in there, shouldn't that show as something malicious?"

"Perhaps a soul fragment is neutral as long as it isn't connected to its owner or his memories?" Hermione suggested. "The spell only shows what qualifies as Dark Magic. Minor hexes and curses wouldn't show as malicious. We still have to take it apart ..."

"Should we really waste time with minor hexes and curses? To make certain that this isn't a Horcrux, we'll have to destroy the tiara anyway," Harry said, "but how?"

"We'd need to break it, or rip it apart, I suppose," Ron said. "The diary had a hole, didn't it? And the ring; the stone in the ring was split a lightning-like rip in the stone, almost like your scar...."

"Uh-huh....," Harry rubbed his scar, looking thoughtful. "Maybe a Slicing Hex would cut the frame of the tiara open?"

"Let me do the containment charm first," Hermione interjected.

"There's nothing malicious there. Let's just get on with it, and then let's get out of here," Harry said impatiently and raised his wand, but Hermione stilled his arm with her hand. "Please, Harry, just in case..."

"Hurry up, then. The sooner the darn thing is destroyed, the better."

"*Alveus magnus*," Hermione yelled and pointed her wand at the tiara. A silvery substance left her wand and formed a big, glowing, iridescent bubble around the tiara.

"All right, Harry. Do it."

"*Diffindo*." The Severing Charm bounced back from the containment bubble, and Harry had to jump out of the way to avoid being hit by it himself.

"Looks like your spell doesn't let other spells enter the bubble," Ron remarked.

"I would never have guessed," Hermione groused, clearly displeased that her spell wasn't as perfect as she intended. "Try something stronger, Harry."

"What, and get the rebounding spell in my chest? No, put that bubble down, Hermione."

"Let me try to make a few changes first," Hermione said and murmured another spell, changing the iridescent bubble into a less solid, foggy-looking sphere.

"*Diffindo*." The spell seemed to penetrate the bubble. The tiara released a few sparks where it was hit, but nothing else happened.

"I told you; it isn't strong enough. Don't we know a spell that blows things into tiny pieces?" Hermione asked shrilly.

"Calm down, we've just started. We still have a few spells we can try..."

"Try it with a Blasting Curse."

"Okay." Harry muttered the incantation, and a crimson jet streamed out of his wand, penetrated the bubble and hit the tiara full force. The fragile crown began to shake and to wobble, a golden glow changing quickly to a fiery red and then to the painfully bright yellowish-white of molten metal. One by one, the gemstones shot out of their settings, but before the silver frame could burst, the tiara was covered in a new layer of colourful translucent mist, a mist that seemed to repel the effect of the Blasting Curse so strongly that Hermione's protective bubble was forced to bulge and expand, glowing in a threatening, angry red.

Finally, sparks shot out from the bubble at the three students, who watched the procedure in horrified fascination. When the first spark almost hit one of them, all three grabbed their wands and yelled, "*Protego*." Only a moment later, Hermione's protective bubble burst, and a stream of hot, sparkling gas shot towards them. Hermione and Ron each cast another efficient *Protego*, but Harry's defensive charm was surprisingly weak, and he was blasted off his feet, thoroughly shaken, although he wasn't hurt otherwise. Before they could understand what had happened, or had time to panic, seemingly out of nowhere, a dark figure appeared at their side, wand raised, and the remainder of the exploding bubble hit an invisible shield with a very loud, booming sound. Harry knew that sound; Voldemort had used a shielding spell like that when he had fought Dumbledore at the Ministry of Magic over a year ago.

Harry blinked, pushed his glasses back up from the tip of his nose and stared at the dark figure that had just helped them, maybe even saved them. It was Severus Snape.

"Snape!" Harry yelled and jumped to his feet, but before he could do anything, he felt an icy chill penetrate his body, right to his bones. Together with the cold, a desperate fear gripped his heart, a fear that almost immobilized him. He braced himself, gripping his wand tightly. To his amazement, he saw that Snape was trying to fight a violent shiver while Ron and Hermione huddled together, wide-eyed and fearful. They stared at something moving just beyond the edge of their vision, about a hundred and fifty feet away, where the fog became so dense that even solid shapes blended completely with the mist. The moving shapes came closer, and Harry's fears turned into reality when he saw that the shapes were Dementors.

"*Expecto Patronum*," he yelled, summoning every happy thought he could think of, remembering how wonderful it had been kissing and holding Ginny, and how happy he was that she wouldn't give up on him. But the only thing that came out of his wand was some weak, silvery mist. Heart beating wildly, he heard his mother scream in the distance, a sound he only heard when the Dementors frightened him so much that he fainted, but before he lost consciousness, Hermione and Ron also yelled, "*Expecto Patronum*," and the silvery, shining shapes of an otter and a Jack-Russell terrier emerged from their wands to charge at the Dementors, but they weren't strong enough. A few Dementors retreated, but as soon as the Patronuses faded, more Dementors emerged from the mist.

"Is that the best you can do?" Snape asked in a scathing voice. He shook himself and stood straight, suddenly appearing a foot taller than he actually was. Then he began to chant a sequence of words at the Dementors, who swayed to the rhythm of the chant and finally bowed before him. Snape ended his chant with an authoritative, "Be gone," and the Dementors turned and disappeared into the mist.

With a dramatic swirl of his black robes, Snape spun around, pointing his wand at Hermione and Ron, who were too shocked and frightened to react and found themselves

petrified. Harry gripped his wand firmly and hurled a Stunning Spell towards Snape, but the murderer of Albus Dumbledore deftly evaded it and sent ropes flying towards Harry. Once again, Harry's "*Protego!*" failed, and he found himself back on the ground, bound and unable to move. Hatred and fear twisted his face into an ugly grimace as he waited for the Killing Curse that surely would come next.

Snape summoned Harry's wand, looked at it disdainfully and then threw it to the ground. "And this is why Banishing is a better method for dealing with Dementors than a Patronus, Potter," Snape said, looking at Harry and his friends scornfully. "But Potter knows better. Famous Potter doesn't have to pay attention to his lessons, oh no. Famous Potter needs to be taught hands-on."

Harry gaped at him open-mouthed. He'd expected death and got a lecture. Snape smirked and circled the students, stroking his lower lip with a long, pale finger. "What do you think, Potter? Why is Banishing better than the Patronus? Go on, you once challenged me on this. Perhaps now, even you can see that you were wrong."

"I wasn't wrong," Harry snarled. "My Patronus always worked well."

"Ah did it now? How extraordinary." Snape narrowed his eyes. "And what about today, Potter? You and your brilliant little friends here would be soulless hulls, now, if you'd had to rely on your mighty, strong Patronus."

"Stop lecturing and get it over with, you bastard!" Harry yelled.

"Tut, tut, your education was clearly wasted on you, Potter. I will tell you why Banishing is more efficient. We wouldn't want you to face the Dark Lord all foolish and ignorant, would we? It's because a Banishing Spell isn't based on emotion, but on raw power and control, that's why. Even an attentive child could do it; it's that simple once you know it." He walked to the remains of the tiara and bent over it, but stepped back quickly because it still emitted a blindingly bright shine.

"Messing around again with powers you don't understand, are you? What do you have there, Potter? This, whatever it is, is full of protective spells."

"That's none of your business. What do you want, Snape? Kill me if you must, but let them go...." He nodded his head towards his friends.

Snape shook his head, a malicious glint in his eyes, then walked over to Harry and looked down at him.

"There will be no killing today. You are for the Dark Lord, and your little friends there... They are of no consequence." Snape sneered when Harry glared at him but couldn't suppress a relieved sigh. "But when you face the Dark Lord as fate has ordained, you should be in prime condition. The Dark Lord appreciates, ah, challenging opponents. It makes the game more interesting. For him." Snape's smirk had broadened into a horrible smile. His eyes glittered, and he clearly enjoyed needling Harry.

"We'll see how much he'll enjoy the game," Harry snarled. "He didn't look so amused last time. When he was setting up that fake duel."

Snape's face turned stony. "That was dumb luck, Potter, and had nothing to do with your skills. But admitting that wouldn't provide you with all that admiration, and attention, would it now? It was your mother's protection that once saved your life, and it was your mother's protection that saved your life when you faced Voldemort the second time, not your own skills. The third time you faced Voldemort, you were protected by your wand; that was dumb luck. But you're the one who's been celebrated instead of your mother. And now, since her protection has ended, you haven't even noticed how your own magic has been affected, diminished by that loss. You neither noticed, nor will you be able to remedy it, because you lack the insight and the discipline."

Snape's greasy hair almost touched Harry's face, and his huge nose was so close that Harry could see the hairs in his nostrils. The bottomless black eyes stared piercingly into Harry's own eyes. Harry tried to empty his mind, but failed once again.

"What an emotional fool you are, Potter. Your hatred is so obvious. You have no self-control. You are incapable of reflection. How pleased the Dark Lord will be to hear of this. When you face him, your friends won't be around to save you. And it will be just him, and you, in all your glory."

Harry stared at him wide-eyed. Snape had just explained to him why his spells didn't work properly, and this was rather alarming. "Why are you telling me all this?" he asked.

"Because it won't make a difference. And it is entertaining to see you squirm, trapped in your own little bubble of self-importance..."

"Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, where are you?" The distant voice of Professor Flitwick made Snape's head snap up. With a mock bow towards the three friends, he released them from his spells, pulled his robes around himself and Disapparated.

"Damn, damn, damn!" Harry yelled. "He's playing with me like a cat with a mouse."

"What was that all about?" asked Ron, puzzlement plainly written on his face. "He was giving you a lecture on how to get rid of Dementors..."

"We don't have time for this," Hermione hissed and grabbed her broomstick. "You go and hide the tiara, and I'll cause a distraction. Professor Flitwick will find us any minute." She mounted her broom, clenched her jaws and shot straight up in the air. At about twenty feet, she directed the broom back to the ground, and halfway down, jumped off it. With a soft scream of pain, she crashed to the ground.

"What did you do that for?" Ron yelled, as both he and Harry ran to where she was lying, her face twisted in pain.

"Here you are. What are you doing in the forest? Is someone injured?" Professor Flitwick had found them and jumped off his broom, running over to Hermione, where he collapsed beside her. "Miss Granger, what happened?"

"I lost control of my broom. It just kept flying off with me. Harry and Ron followed me, but I couldn't stop. And then I fell off. I think my leg's broken." Hermione looked at her Charms teacher wide-eyed and innocent. "I think I need to see Madam Pomfrey."

Harry suppressed a grin. Hermione had successfully quashed any enquiry Professor Flitwick could have made about their being here. He had wrapped the still glowing remains of the tiara in his jumper and had the bundle tucked under his arm. "Here. Want a pillow, Hermione?"

"No, I'll be fine," she replied, but flinched when Professor Flitwick conjured a brace for her leg and attached it with soft ropes.

"You careless children," Professor Flitwick chided. "I would have thought that two Quidditch players could get hold of someone on a bucking broomstick." He looked sternly at Ron and Harry.

"She was so fast," Ron whinged. "She went off on that broom like a mad Bludger. I had no idea that school brooms could fly that fast..."

"Be that as it may," Professor Flitwick said, "you two will now carry her to the hospital wing." He conjured a stretcher, levitated Hermione onto it and attached the stretcher between Harry and Ron's brooms. Then he summoned the spare broomstick, and they left the forest.

"Damn it, Hermione! You could have broken your neck." Ron was furious. Hermione was lying in her bed in the hospital ward. Madam Pomfrey had assured her that she would be as good as new the next morning, but she had to stay in the hospital wing overnight. Harry and Ron had gone to see Professor Price and postponed their first lesson until the next day.

When they came to the hospital wing to visit, Hermione had grinned at them, but Ron wasn't amused.

"I think you were brilliant, Hermione," Harry said. "You saved us from a lot of awkward questions."

"But she could have seriously harmed herself!" Ron yelled, his face pale and worried.

Hermione took his hand and squeezed it. "Nonsense, Ron. I knew what I was doing. It was a controlled jump, and from that height, I could have hardly injured myself seriously."

"You're nuts," Ron said, but a grin spread over his face. "Completely nuts, but in a brilliant way." He bent over her and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

Harry tactfully averted his eyes; then he took something out of the folds of his robes and gave it to Hermione. "Look at this...."

"She unwrapped the item carefully and found the tiara, untarnished, sparkling, looking like new.

"Is that...? How did you do this?"

"I didn't," Harry said. "I didn't need to do anything. When that glow finally ended, the tiara was like that. Some kind of self-repair, obviously."

"There must be some very, very strong protective charms on it something that prevents its destruction. Or we haven't tried hard enough, yet. Harry, as long as it is this way, how can we be sure that this isn't still a Horcrux?"

"I don't know, Hermione. It's just a feeling. There's nothing Dark with this tiara, only very strong magic. I think a Horcrux should emit something Dark. Even if the soul isn't Dark per se... Just remember how malicious that diary was, what it did to Ginny. And the spell to create a Horcrux has to be one of the Darkest spells there is... No, Hermione, I very much doubt that this is a Horcrux."

Ron took the tiara and looked at it from all sides. "It is so beautiful. Wouldn't it be horrible to destroy something beautiful like this without needing to?"

"Yes," Hermione said and took his hand again. "But wouldn't that be exactly what Voldemort would want everyone to think? Everyone who found it, that is? And what about the Dementors? Couldn't they have been part of the protection for the Horcrux?"

"I don't know," Harry replied. "They could have been. Or they could have been there by coincidence.... Price warned me earlier that there might be some. You know how they are out breeding in this weather?"

Hermione nodded. "They show up everywhere, as of late."

"That's what he said, too. You know how Dementors always seem to seek me out? Well, I just had a scare when my Shield Charm failed. My fear always seems the strongest; I'm always the one who nearly faints...." Harry's words were bitter. "So it could have been a coincidence."

"Hm." Hermione still looked unconvinced. "But how can we be certain?"

"We can't be; it's just a feeling. Look, none of the protective magic showed up as Dark. If there had been a spell to summon Dementors... And why Dementors? When that tiara must have been hidden, all the Dementors were in Azkaban and loyal to the Ministry. The tiara looked so old and tarnished... I just can't imagine that Voldemort would treat one of the Horcruxes so carelessly, especially as the one in Ron's Aunt Muriel's possession is sparkling and well kept," Harry said. "Besides, why would he hide it in the Room of Requirement if this really were a Horcrux? How did it get there anyway? Who could have hidden it for him there?"

"Snape, of course," Ron said. "Or any of the Slytherins."

"Not all of the Slytherins are Death Eaters, Ron," Hermione reminded him. "Perhaps Draco could have hidden it there, or someone older... Maybe his father. He used to come to Hogwarts from time to time, but why would he hide it here?"

"If it is a Horcrux, then hiding it at Hogwarts makes sense. We've already established that Hogwarts holds a special meaning for Voldemort, haven't we?" Harry reminded them.

"Yes, and Snape hiding it here is as good a guess as any. But didn't you just say that you don't think that it is a Horcrux?" Hermione whispered because there was a noise outside the hospital ward. "Perhaps it's an item he hasn't used yet and is saving for his final Horcrux?"

"Perhaps," Ron said thoughtfully. "And perhaps he wanted to use it and was prevented from doing so. Maybe he wanted to use it that night at Godric's Hollow, but he couldn't kill you, Harry. And when you reflected the Killing Curse, the tiara was damaged; that would explain why it looked so battered and tarnished. It only seems to self-repair when someone wants to destroy it."

"Brilliant, Ron," Hermione said excitedly. "And Snape found it there; he must have been at Godric's Hollow that night, too, the traitor, and he took it and hid it here for his master...."

"Actually," Ron said, "actually, I don't think it was Snape." He sighed when he saw the astonished expressions on Harry and Hermione's faces. "It must have been Wormtail. Don't you see? He had Voldemort's wand. Do you think he got it from Snape? I don't think so. I don't think Snape knew that Wormtail was alive, or that they communicated while Wormtail was in hiding. If they were... Well, wouldn't it have been much more convenient for Wormtail to hide with Snape instead of with my family?"

Harry and Hermione nodded.

"I think Wormtail didn't trust Snape. Voldemort didn't know if he'd turned traitor on him at that time, and nor did Wormtail. So I think that Wormtail went to Godric's Hollow, retrieved the wand, found the tiara and took both items with him. He was Percy's rat, so he would have had access to Hogwarts as soon as Percy went to school. That was in 1987..."

"I see where you're going, Ron," Hermione stepped in. "When Pettigrew was at Hogwarts, he would have needed a hiding place for Voldemort's wand, and maybe the tiara. What better place than the Room of Requirement? The room is Unplottable, but surely Wormtail would have known about the room since he was involved with the Marauders Map; I don't think something like the Room of Requirement would have stayed a secret to the Marauders.... That's brilliant, Ron! And if the tiara was hidden there all the time, without protection, then the likelihood that this is a Horcrux is low, indeed!"

Ron frowned. "I'm not certain. Wouldn't Pettigrew have told his master that he'd hidden the tiara there?"

"He might have," Harry said, "but could he have retrieved it for him?"

"Maybe he couldn't, but perhaps Snape, or Draco, or any of the other Voldemort supporters at the school could have." Hermione grimaced. "That brings us full circle; we still can't be certain."

"I still don't see why he would hide it in the Room of Requirement at least three people found out about that room without help. Wouldn't it be a bit risky to hide it there again?"

"Maybe you're right, Harry... Maybe we can leave the tiara until we find other Horcruxes. Maybe we don't need to destroy..."

"What is this? Is this the Ravenclaw tiara?" While the three friends were immersed in their speculations, Professor Flitwick had entered the hospital wing and approached Hermione's bed. He stared down at the tiara in her hands in wonderment and surprise.

"Eh, er... Professor Flitwick, can we help you with something?" Hermione stammered.

"I wanted to see how you were faring, Miss Granger." Professor Flitwick smiled gently at her. "But tell me, where did you get this? Did Muriel Prewett give it to you? Why would she part with it?"

Harry almost panicked. He really didn't want to lie to Professor Flitwick, but he couldn't possibly tell him about the Horcruxes. Flitwick wasn't even an Order member... Harry frowned. He wondered why he wasn't an Order member, and why wasn't Professor Sprout, too, for that matter? They were both Heads of House. He'd have thought that Dumbledore would have trusted each of them at least as much as he'd trusted Snape... But neither was in the Order.

A glance from the corner of his eye showed him that Ron looked embarrassed and Hermione had that innocent look of full concentration on her face that usually indicated that she was coming up with a wild, but believable, lie.

"This isn't the tiara belonging to Muriel Prewett," Hermione said, to his amazement. "This is a duplicate. We actually found it in the Room of Requirement, by accident. We haven't been able to access the room where we found it since. We were just wondering why anyone would make a duplicate and hide it there.... It's so beautiful. Fleur looked so lovely with it on, didn't you think?" She beamed at Flitwick.

"She did, she did, lovely woman....," Flitwick said absentmindedly, still staring at the tiara, spellbound. "This is an amazing story. May I look at it?"

Reluctantly, Hermione handed the tiara over to him, and he took it reverently. He touched it with his index finger, tracing the fragile frame and the pattern of sapphires and diamonds. He murmured a few words, and tiny bronze-coloured runes appeared on the silver part of the frame."

"This is genuine," Flitwick said. "By rights, this should belong to me, and Ravenclaw House, for I am the heir of Ravenclaw."

"Huh?" Ron, Harry and Hermione were equally baffled. "Shouldn't that be my Aunt Muriel? The Prewetts are the descendants of Rowena Ravenclaw." Ron added.

"Not in direct line," Flitwick said, "they aren't. But I am."

"You?" Again the three friends had spoken as one.

"Yes, me." The professor looked at them with an annoyed expression on his face. "I, the part-Goblin, am the heir of Ravenclaw. And it's not even a secret; everyone could know it, if anyone were interested...."

Hermione smiled. "That's fascinating, Professor. Why isn't that general knowledge? Ron's Aunt Muriel told us a legend about Rowena Ravenclaw and Geoffrey Lancaster's children. Was one of them your ancestor or ancestress?"

"That legend is, as most legends, only half-true. The person known as Geoffrey Lancaster wasn't human; he was a goblin with the name of Godefric the Liberal. Yes, yes, a founder married a goblin, how scandalous," he said ironically, for Harry, Ron and Hermione gaped and uttered small noises of disbelief, and maybe disgust.

"So there was a lot of marrying between goblins and humans?" Hermione said, trying to be supportive. "I wasn't aware of that...."

"Don't pretend not to be shocked, Miss Granger," Flitwick said kindly, though he was still mildly annoyed. "I'm used to this. It's part of the difficulties goblins and humans have with each other, and part of the reason for the Goblin Rebellions.... Believe it or not, goblins and humans do have a lot in common, and marriages aren't as rare as it appears. As I told you, my direct line can be traced back to Rowena Ravenclaw, but there was another goblin in my family, only a few generations back. Her name was Freya the Fruitful, and she was a woman of exceptional charms. Maybe that's why I became a Charms teacher." He winked at them, his earlier annoyance seemingly forgotten."

Hermione giggled. "Not only a Charms teacher, but head of Ravenclaw. It seems like you had your profession cut out for you."

Flitwick smiled. "Indeed, Miss Granger. And that's why this artefact here should have belonged to my house. It would have been kept as a treasure, just as the Gryffindor artefacts are kept as treasures by the Headmistress...."

"Erm... And you are certain that this is the genuine thing? Why didn't you go after the one Ron's Aunt Muriel has?" Hermione asked, clearly puzzled.

"I couldn't possibly take it away from them, could I? The Prewetts are descendants, albeit not in direct line. They always claimed that the tiara was genuine, and I wasn't in a position to challenge them. It's not as if I had been acknowledged as a relation, now, is it?" He smiled at Ron who stared at him.

"You mean we are related?" Ron gasped.

"Yes, remotely. We're probably cousins of some kind, several times removed. The tiara should have been passed down my line all along, but back in Rowena's time wizards were just as bigoted as they are today. The pureblood Salazar Slytherin left her, and the goblin she fell in love with wasn't good enough for her surroundings. This didn't impress her, though. She was an intelligent and enlightened woman and loved Godefric very much, and he her. They were the subject of many a goblin legend and love ballad... And those are ballads of great beauty, but among wizards, the story was smoothed over and soon forgotten."

"I don't understand..." Hermione shook her head. "Ron's dad is one of the most tolerant people I know... And Ron's aunt didn't strike me as bigoted either. Shouldn't they be aware of this?"

Flitwick smiled gently. "They may be more tolerant than most, but they are very traditional at the same time."

Ron blushed and nodded.

"And it's just as well now, anyway. I don't have any children; my wife died long ago, and I am too old and weak to protect the tiara as a treasure like that should be protected. Please, children, take good care of it and see to it that it is kept at Gringotts or some other safe place."

"Why do you call yourself weak, sir?" Hermione asked. "You're powerful in Charms; you're a renowned duellist...."

Flitwick laughed. "You haven't forgotten that little piece of information from Gilderoy Lockhart, have you, Miss Granger? I was strong once; I was a decent duellist and could hold my own against the best, but those times are over. I am old and weak, and the slightest excitement tires me out. In my prime, students like Mr. Longbottom could not have sent me flying across a room, and a stack of flying exam parchments wouldn't have knocked me off my feet like they have in recent years. Mind you, when I ran to the dungeons that night of the Death Eater attack, I'm ashamed to say that I just fainted dead away in Snape's office. I just can't stand too much agitation any more."

"You really fainted in Snape's office, then?" Hermione asked with a frown. "After what happened, I thought that Snape might have Stunned you and pretended to Luna and me that you'd fainted.... Are you sure that he didn't hex you?"

"Yes, I am. I may be old and weak, but I'm not blind or demented yet, Miss Granger. Snape looked at me, horrified and somewhat... resigned... when I told him what was happening, and then I felt how my knees went weak, and my vision faded.... I've fainted before, you know. I know how it feels."

"Oh, well, it doesn't really make much of a difference, does it?" Harry said. "So what should we do with the tiara then?"

"Let's get it back to the Burrow and talk to your parents, Ron; they may know how to best protect it, and if it's wise to tell your Aunt Muriel that her tiara isn't the genuine article after all," Hermione suggested.

"They're not back from their visit to Fleur's relatives, yet," Ron said. "They return in a few weeks, though, and Fleur and Bill will be back from their honeymoon by then, too. Let's talk to them then."

Both Harry and Hermione as well as Professor Flitwick agreed with this, and they left the hospital wing to give Hermione some time to rest and recover.

How Fools Who Love Act

Chapter 8 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big thank you goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 7 How Fools Who Love Act

When Hermione was released by Madam Pomfrey the next day, Harry and Ron were already waiting impatiently for her.

"Hermione, do you know where the Marauder's Map is?" Harry threw at her as soon as the door to the hospital wing had closed behind her.

"What? No! Why? What happened?" Hermione looked from Harry to Ron and back. They both looked wretched as if their last hope had just been shattered.

"It's gone. It's not in my trunk or anywhere in the dormitory. I couldn't think... I had hoped... You were my last hope, Hermione. If you don't have it, it's lost," Harry said desperately.

"How... Why?" Hermione swallowed and tried to collect her thoughts. "Perhaps you left it at the Burrow or at the Dursleys? When was the last time you saw it?"

"I had it at the Burrow when I packed my stuff. I'm absolutely certain about that. But I haven't looked at it since. Today I wanted to check to see if, perhaps, Snape was hanging around in the area again. Not that I had much hope, but I wanted to check, and then I couldn't find the map."

"You don't think that someone stole it, do you?" Hermione's stared at him, a concerned frown wrinkling her forehead. "The tiara! Is it still there?"

"Yes, it's there. Nothing else is missing. Nothing was out of place. I lost it." Harry's voice had faded to a dismayed whisper. "I lost the Marauder's Map!"

"Maybe it fell out of your trunk...!"

"I always keep it at the bottom of the trunk; if the map had fallen out, then a lot of other stuff would have, too. Don't you think I would have noticed that?" Harry snarled.

"Calm down, Harry. I'm just trying to think about all the possibilities." Hermione rubbed her forehead tiredly until she suddenly looked up, chewing her lips. "Did you ask Kreacher?"

"No, I didn't. That's a possibility!" Harry's eyes lit up and he took a deep breath. "Kreacher!" he commanded.

The old house-elf Apparated with a loud crack. "Kreacher is here. What does Master want?" he asked before muttering, "Half-blood filth. Who'd be interested in what he wants?" under his breath.

"Kreacher, did you take a piece of parchment out of my trunk?"

"What would Kreacher want with a piece of parchment from Master's trunk?"

"You've been taking Sirius' stuff. Perhaps now you're taking mine, too?"

"Kreacher has collected a few Black family keepsakes, yes. Kreacher has not taken, and would never take, anything from Harry Potter," he said defiantly and continued in an undertone, "Who would want a keepsake from him? As if he were on the same level as Kreacher's old family."

Harry scowled. "If you have it, give it back. I'll give you something else in exchange...."

"Kreacher does not have it. Perhaps Master has temporarily lost his hearing? No wonder, having to listen to the nattering of that Mudblood all the time." Kreacher shot a nasty look at Hermione and Disapparated.

"He doesn't love you any more than he did last year, does he?" Ron stared at the spot where the house-elf had stood just a moment ago.

"I wish I could release him." Harry sighed. "Looks like we'll have to continue without the map, then."

"You know Hogwarts better than anyone else, Harry. We can get around without the map; we know all the secret passages, anyway. And when we're looking for the... Things... We'll be away from Hogwarts anyway, won't we?"

"I suppose you're right," Harry said, worried and disappointed. Together, they walked on in silence.

A few turns and staircases later, they arrived at Professor Price's office in the dungeons. They were keen to discuss what they should tell Price about Snape's attack... or was it Snape's defence? Hermione eventually reminded them that Price was a trusted friend of Professor McGonagall and that he was an Order member. They had to learn from someone, and she thought that Price was just the right teacher for them.

They walked down to the dungeons. Price had taken Snape's old office since Professor Slughorn still occupied the office that had belonged to the earlier Defence against the Dark Arts teachers. To Hermione's surprise, there were still jars with Potions ingredients and unrecognizable slimy-looking... things... that may, or may not, have been alive once. Hermione had only seen this office once or twice when she had gone to ask Snape about exam results or had a question about Potions essays and in her second year, to steal Potions ingredients from his private store. Each time, her visits had been brief and unpleasant. She had never quite understood why Snape seemed to dislike her so much, but by now she thought that that was rather a good thing. It was creepy to imagine Snape liking her as much as her other teachers did.

"Professor Slughorn will sort through all the Potions ingredients and take what he needs," Price said when she inquired. "I don't mind those things standing here. I'm not

staying for more than a year, anyway.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at each other and wondered if Price knew about Voldemort's jinx, but decided not to mention it in case he didn't.

"So what would you like to discuss?" Price asked agreeably after they all had sat down in the comfortable chairs that hadn't been there during Snape's time.

"Uhm," Harry said, "err, perhaps you could tell us a bit about ancient protective magic since you are an expert.... I don't know if you know, but my mother..."

"Protected you...and saved your life...with an ancient spell that's based on love and sacrifice. Yes, I know. She must have been a remarkable woman, your mother; that kind of magic has almost been forgotten, and it's a fascinating subject.... So what do you want to know?"

Hermione saw how Harry bit his lip; he still didn't seem to want to tell Price what had happened. She decided to take matters into her own hands. "We saw Snape in the Forbidden Forest yesterday. Just after I fell off my broom, Professor. A group of Dementors was trying to get at us, and our Patronuses were too weak." She shrugged at the angry expression Harry shot her way and continued. "Harry's Patronus failed almost altogether, and his always used to be so strong that it could chase off large groups of Dementors. Snape banished them with a banishing ritual he taught us in sixth year..."

She swallowed but continued after an encouraging nod from Price. "And then he taunted Harry... told him that his magic is weak now that the protection of his mother has ended.... That can't be true, Professor, can it?"

Price looked at all three of them in turn for a long time, frowning slightly. "I cannot answer this directly. Since your mother's protective spell is so obscure and ancient, Harry, I can't know in detail what it entails. However, it is commonly known that the magical ability even of strong wizards can be affected by emotional uproar, and the loss of love or of a loved one is one of the strongest forces to diminish and alter magical ability, even more so than extreme humiliation and suppression... And a mother's love is strong. That protective spell was based on your mother's love as much as on her sacrifice; the two factors are inseparable from each other."

"But only the protection ended on Harry's seventeenth birthday, not his mother's love. I mean... She's dead, but doesn't love linger, even after death?" Ron had blushed crimson; he clearly felt uncomfortable talking about love so openly.

Hermione thought that he had matured quite a bit to be able to ask such a question now and nodded. "I'm wondering the same thing, Professor," she said supportively.

"That is a very good question, Ron, and I cannot answer it decisively, I'm afraid. I can only guess," Price said with a wry smile. "Even though his mother's love will last forever, and Harry knows it, he may not really feel it." He swept his fingers through his hair and frowned. "I know that this sounds horribly confusing. Most likely I'll confuse myself while trying to explain ..." He winked at them. "Love and emotions are directly tied to the soul, and through her sacrifice, Harry's mother has freely given a part of her soul for her son. At least, that's what our ancestors believed happens when a witch or wizard makes a sacrifice for a loved one."

Price had jumped up and was pacing the room, constantly monitoring their reaction while he explained. Their attentive faces seemed to encourage him, and he continued, "Those freely given soul fragments have to bind to something if they aren't to be wasted, supposedly to the soul of the beloved person for whom the sacrifice is made. The survivor, in this case Harry, would carry a part of that soul, of his mother's soul. Normally, that soul fragment is welcomed by the survivor, and it becomes a part of him or her, a treasured and cherished part. But Harry didn't know about this. From what Minerva told me, he didn't know about the sacrifice; he didn't even know for a long time that he was a wizard." Price sighed and smiled encouragingly at Harry. "So it may be that, while his own soul is aware that his mother's love is still with him, his subconscious mind may not be aware of this. Even though he knows better, subconsciously he may fear that he lost her love when he lost the protection of the spell... And that may affect his magic."

Harry wrinkled his nose. "I don't know, Professor. This all sounds very obscure to me. I mean, I don't really think that meditation about my mum's soul or something will help... Err... I'm not good at that kind of thing."

Price laughed. Hermione thought that he had a pleasant laugh. He was a good teacher, she thought. He was pleasant and knowledgeable, approachable but not ingratiating.

"I don't think that meditating will be the right thing for you to do, either, Harry!" He smiled. "Remember, this is only a guess and doesn't have to be the case, or maybe only part of it." His expression became serious again. "When did you first notice that your magic was affected?"

"I'm not sure... I think it was when we fought Bellatrix Lestrange.... My *Protego* failed, and Hermione's protected me. I thought it was just a case of bad luck or perhaps nerves.... But then, yesterday, none of the protective spells worked. I did other spells--during the day--, he added hastily, "and they worked like they always have...."

"Could be two things, then," Price mused. "Either this, whatever it is, only affects your protective magic, or it affects your magic where you are strongest.... Defence is your strongest subject, isn't it?"

Harry nodded.

"But to affect the strongest magic... That doesn't make all that much sense. Maybe we should use the working hypothesis that only your protective magic is affected. We'll try to verify that and to counteract it." He stood up from his chair and moved the tables and chairs in the office to the side with a wave of his wand. "Come, Harry, duel me."

Ron and Hermione got out of the way when Harry stood up to face his new teacher, wand raised in greeting. Price bowed quickly and almost imperceptibly and then immediately attacked with a Tickling Charm.

"*Protego*." Harry's reaction was fast, but the spell hit him full-force and he was hurled backwards, falling to the ground. "Damn," Harry cursed between maniacal laughter, "looks like I can't do the *Protego* any longer."

"So it seems," Price said and released Harry from the hex. "Attack me now."

Quickly, Harry raised his wand and shot a nonverbal leg-locker jinx at his professor, but Price saw the flash coming out of Harry's wand and evaded the spell swiftly. Price fired a succession of spells at Harry, some of which he evaded, but the majority hit their target, and a bouncing, dancing and snickering Harry with leeks growing out of his ears had to be released from the various jinxes and curses. Price stepped back, and Harry charged quickly, and before anyone knew what had happened, Price was hanging upside down in the air.

Ron and Hermione cheered and laughed, but Price seemed less amused. "Let me down this instant," he snarled, and anger flashed over his face. He quickly seemed to check it, and after Harry had let him down and stooped to help him to his feet, he smirked and retaliated with a quick *Petrificus Totalus*.

Harry was hit full-force; the surprised look on his face froze into place, and he slowly fell forward.

Price stopped his fall, took the wand out of Harry's stiff fingers and released him from the jinx. "Enough. I've seen what I wanted, Harry. No need to go on with this." He handed the wand back. "Your reflexes are good, and your magic is strong. What is lacking are the defensive spells, and you could be a bit more cunning. Using the *Levicorpus* on me was fast and efficient, though. I hate that spell; it's so undignified to hang upside down," he said with a twisted smile.

"Constant vigilance," barked Ron, and Harry and Hermione let out a startled laugh while Price was studying Ron with a nod of approval. "That's right, Mr. Weasley. That's exactly what Mr. Potter is still lacking, and I suppose, from what we learned from your encounter with Bellatrix Lestrange, that you are lacking it, too."

"And I," admitted Hermione, who had been torn between admiration and amusement while she watched the two men duel. "When I disarmed Lestrange, I was lucky with those spells; it was mere instinct to use them. I didn't really think about them. But when Snape attacked us so soon after the Dementors' attack, I was surprised, affected by my lingering respect for a former teacher, and at the same time quite scared. All of that prevented me from reacting in time."

"Very good," Price said. "You seem to see what is lacking. Why don't you try to explain it to us, Miss Granger?"

His changing form of address puzzled Hermione, but she thought he might be switching between teacher and mentor mode, automatically using the names appropriate to each role. She collected her thoughts and began. "You need happy thoughts for a Patronus. Ron and I have happy enough thoughts to cast our Patronuses when faced with Dementors, but Harry must have felt unhappy, subconsciously, maybe because he mourned the loss of his mother's love and maybe because he still mourns for Professor Dumbledore, as we all do."

Price nodded, and she continued. "When we fight, all three of us cast our spells more or less instinctively out of reflex and without much thinking. There is a lot of emotion involved. We react to the situation around us. Maybe what we need, and Harry most of all, is more control over the way we use our magic. We would have to be removed enough from the situation to have better judgement over which spells are to be used when and to infuse just enough emotion of the right kind to make them work."

"You sound like Snape in the Occlumency lessons," Harry accused her.

"Well, I was thinking about what he told you there, you know. I don't understand his motives, but what he taught us usually didn't harm us, did it?"

Before Harry could hurl another protest at Hermione, Price stepped in.

"Hermione, you hit the nail on the head. As Harry will undoubtedly have heard before, the mind is a multilayered, complex thing, not easily understood. It can be our greatest weakness, but it is also our greatest strength. When we let our mind be tied to our emotions, and allow ourselves to be ruled by them, then we are in danger of being overruled. However, when we remove ourselves completely from all emotion, we isolate and hurt ourselves and our souls. Neither way is apt to bring our magic to its best use, to its most efficient use. We need to find a balance between heart and mind. Between emotions and rationale. Only then can we control and not be controlled."

"Now that doesn't sound like Snape," Harry said with a relieved smile. "So how can we learn this, Professor? What do we have to do?"

"The traditional fighter training is based on three steps. You learn to control your body and your mind and to work out strategies. We will work out a routine for practice. I will duel all three of you individually and watch you duel each other, and then we can see which weaknesses and strengths each of you have." He paused for a moment. "I surmise you, Harry, and Ron there still do some leisurely Quidditch practice?" Both young men nodded. "And you, Hermione, I take it flying isn't one of your strengths, so you wouldn't be a Quidditch player. Did Rolanda Hooch teach you Wizards' Yoga in the basic flying lessons?"

"Yes, she did," Hermione said, "and I quite liked it. I haven't been practicing a lot, though. Why is that important?"

"The three of you are in the middle of things. You will have to fight. All of you. And I want you to stay alive. What do you do when your *protego* fails? You run and dodge the spells, right?"

The three students nodded, understanding dawning on their faces.

"How undignified a death it would be to die faced with your opponents' wands but completely out of breath, too tired to fight back. A good fighter needs to be fit. All three of you should make exercise your daily routine, stamina and flexibility alike. If you don't like to fly, Miss Granger, then run. Run around the lake twice or three times a week. And take up Wizards' Yoga again. All three of you. Hmm..." He considered them for a moment. "Do you dance?"

While Harry and Ron replied without enthusiasm, Hermione admitted that she loved to dance.

"You should dance, all of you, often. Dancing improves a person's balance, movements, and confidence, and it is a pleasant way to combine exercises for stamina with those for flexibility. I shall talk to Minerva; we can initiate a dance club for the older students. That way you can make it part of your school timetable and won't appear strange when you pursue the dancing in earnest. You know, Irish dancing is especially efficient; it strengthens the leg muscles, and that's good for jumping and kicking. However, the arms are a bit neglected." He winked at them, and Hermione grinned back. The boys looked sullen.

"You're trying to tell me that I should dance to get my magic back?" Harry sounded less than convinced.

"No, I am telling you to dance to develop your full potential as a witch and wizards." Price smiled. "Your particular problem is a minor one, Harry, and I expect that we will get rid of it quickly. All you need is awareness, a slight adjustment to the way you use your spells, and practice."

"All right, we work out. Makes sense," Ron said. "We need to be fit when we fight. But what else? How do we... What did you call it, combine the heart with the mind?"

"By developing discipline," Price said. "A well-functioning body will make the mind free for other things. When your body is quick and flexible enough to do the jumps, leaps, and dodges necessary to evade hexes and curses by reflex, then your mind is free to assess the situation and choose your actions accordingly. You will neither let anger cloud your vision, nor detachment make you uncaring about the outcome of your fight. Depending on the situation, you will be able to show your wrath, rally the morale of your friends, or taunt and mock your enemy. And while you do all that, you are still capable of checking your strategy, predicting an outcome and changing tactics when necessary."

"Come on, all three of you, let's go to the Defence classroom. Ron, Harry, you two will fight me since you're fit already because of your Quidditch practice. I will give my wand to Hermione. You two try to stun or petrify me, and I will demonstrate that I can dodge anything you throw my way without using any magic."

When they reached the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, Hermione took Price's wand and stepped to the side of the room, ready to watch. Harry and Ron walked towards Price from opposite sides and hurled random curses and hexes at him. He jumped, leaped, and in one case even somersaulted. Hermione was amazed how fit and flexible he was, and she very much doubted that Harry and Ron could do those acrobatics. After 15 minutes, Ron and Harry were exhausted from hurling spell after spell while Price stood in the middle of the room, grinning and only breathing slightly faster than normal. Finally, he uttered a battle cry that made Harry start violently and made Ron lose his wand. Price dived for Ron's wand, and before Harry knew what had hit him, Price had petrified him once again. Hermione gasped and then applauded enthusiastically.

"Do you really think we can learn to fight like this?" she asked.

"In time." Price nodded, released Harry from the jinx and handed Ron his wand. "But don't forget that I've had years of experience, so don't expect to be able to do all this in only two or three months." He smiled when he saw their disappointed faces. "Most wizards don't know how to fight like this, including most of the Death Eaters. What I just showed you, and will teach you if you wish to learn, is a very old way of studying fighting. It stems from a time when the magical and the Muggle world weren't as strictly separated as they are today, and many of the methods were used by both types of people...." He looked at them seriously. "Miss Granger, what is the biggest difference between the Voldemort conflict and Muggle warfare?"

Hermione was dumbstruck. She had never really thought about that particular question, let alone read about it. "Err... I'm not certain... I think... Muggles fight their wars with armies. Those armies are very structured, subject to a well-defined hierarchy of command.... But from what we learned about the Goblin wars, the structure was quite similar. And the Grindelwald War... Grindelwald used that insane Muggle leader in Germany to get to power, him and his Muggle armies. And we learned that in the first Voldemort war, Voldemort gathered an army of wizards and other disgruntled magical beings around him. They all fought for him. So I don't really see that much of a difference, except for the use of magic when fighting. And, we don't have a defensive army like most Muggle nations have."

"That's correct," Price nodded. "And when a would-be evil overlord tries to come to power, usually the normal wizarding society is rather helpless. As you said, the Ministry of Magic doesn't have a defensive army, except for the Aurors. When times get worse, witches and wizards are willing to join the fight, but if there isn't a good military leader, this often results in many unnecessary deaths. Wizard conflicts rarely are fought out army against army; most of the time it is a guerrilla war to undermine the enemies' morale, and then leaders and other groups duel individually. These duels are as much about showing off as they are for debilitating or destroying the enemy. That is one of the great weaknesses of wizardkind...."

"And you know how to do it better?" Harry asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. This all sounded too good to be true.

Price merely smirked at him. "Yes. In theory. As does everyone who reads up on our history and the great battles that were fought. You can start with Merlin and Arthur, but you can also go further back and look at the ancient Chinese dynasties and their power games. All of those armies contained wizards and witches. They had strong leaders with good heads for strategy and wise advisors. Dumbledore was such a leader, too, and you would do well to study his battle against Grindelwald and the strategies he used against Voldemort. Unfortunately, we are lacking such a leader right now. The Ministry is corrupt, and Minerva, while a capable leader, lacks the experience of a true fighter. She will be wise enough to listen to good advice, so that is what needs to be given to her."

"And what does that have to do with us?" Ron asked. "We will hardly be the ones to give advice. We will be among the fighters and maybe have to face a few battles of our own...."

"It may have more to do with you than you think right now." Price frowned and looked at Ron critically. "It won't hurt you to be prepared and learn as much as you can in the meantime. Which brings us back to your training schedule, lady and gentlemen." He bowed slightly.

"Now, you will be disciplined enough to go through with your exercises. This will strengthen your bodies. To strengthen your minds, we need another kind of exercise. You have learned Occlumency, Harry?"

"Not really. Snape was told to teach me, and he really didn't make an effort to teach me anything. He was going on and on about emotions and how I should empty my mind and hide my emotions... Just because he doesn't have any...."

"I see." Price looked at Harry critically. "And you made every effort you could to learn Occlumency, did you?"

Harry blushed. "Maybe I could have worked harder... But he never explained to me how that emptying of the mind works...."

"But you are a Seeker, correct? Haven't you played Quidditch since your first year?" Price looked genuinely puzzled. "Clearing your mind and learning to focus used to be essential parts of Quidditch training, at least when I was young. Has that changed so much?"

"What?" Harry looked sheepish. "I never thought that that was the same thing... Yes, we did do that before each training session. I even showed it to other players when I was the captain.... You're telling me that this was what Snape meant when he told me to empty my mind?"

"I would think so," Perry said. "It's the same thing, learning to focus. It needs discipline, naturally, but that's a prerequisite for a good Quidditch player, is it not?"

Harry and Ron nodded.

"So I suggest you go on with your Occlumency lessons, and I would strongly advise that Ron and Hermione learn this skill as well. It will be of advantage in more than one kind of situation.

"Will you teach us, Professor Price?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"I can't. I'm not a Legilimens," he replied apologetically. "Minerva can ask Horace Slughorn. He is a fair Legilimens and a reasonably strong Occlumens; he can teach you.

"Professor Slughorn?" Hermione was flabbergasted, and Ron gaped. Harry merely nodded. "Of course. I completely forgot about that. Dumbledore mentioned it to me when I was trying... Err... To get Slughorn to tell me something about my mother." He didn't look at Price.

"Yes. He's a good teacher, or so I'm told. Minerva told me that he regularly taught those skills to everyone in his house who wanted to learn."

"That makes a lot of sense," Hermione said. "That must be how Bellatrix Lestrange learned Occlumency, then. And Snape."

"And possibly Tom Riddle himself," Harry added. "He was in Slytherin with Slughorn as Head of House, and Slughorn was thoroughly charmed by him... He would have taught him anything."

"There you go. You learn Occlumency exactly the way Tom Riddle learned it. That could be an advantage. Knowing your enemy well is one of the basic requirements of warfare."

"Where did you learn Occlumency, Professor Price? Were you in Slytherin House, too?" Hermione asked curiously.

"I didn't go to Hogwarts. My parents were both scholars, and we constantly moved to different places where they could study ancient manuscripts. I was tutored privately and learned the basics in Occlumency from Uncle Albus, just as I learned my basic duelling and fighting skills from him. He had already beaten Grindelwald when I was a youth, and he was quite famous. He liked to spend his summers with us. He was an excellent fighter and general." Price's voice had become thick with grief, and he looked down at his hands. "He's left us at such a critical time..."

"He hasn't left; he was murdered," Harry snarled. "And we will just have to go on without him. And didn't you speak about a plan that night Sybill Trelawney made that strange prophecy? Something about Muggles and fighting?"

"Not a plan, per se, Harry, but a strategy. This is something we can learn from Muggle generals; there were quite a few good ones around. In the end, they more or less all used the same tactics. Some simple and general rules on how to win a war were written down more than two thousand years ago by a Chinese Muggle general named Sun Tzu. His treatise is called *The Art of War*, and it contains so many universal truths that it is never out of date."

"*The Art of War*?" Hermione interrupted excitedly. "My father has that book... It is quite the in-thing among managers, he told me. Apparently, they can use what's in there just as military leaders can."

"Yes, that's true. The statements in that book are very universal and easy to understand. However, if you don't have the intelligence to adapt those rules to your individual circumstances, all theoretical knowledge won't help you. You need to take every little part into careful consideration and then adapt it. If you can do this, the book can be a treasure. Uncle Albus introduced me to it; he read and reread it all the time, and I'd say that he met many of the criteria for a good general that are stated there. And that brings me directly to the third part of your training: the knowledge about strategy. I will give each of you a copy of *The Art of War*. Read it, think about it, and then we can discuss it when we meet next time. We need a place to meet, too. School starts in a few weeks, and we won't be able to practice in my office."

"We could meet in the Room of Requirement," Ron said and looked at the book in his hands with great interest. He had been all attention when Price was talking about strategy. Hermione thought that he would likely be the one out of the three of them who would get most out of the book. While his train of thought was rather fuzzy in most areas, when it came to analyzing a situation, his insights often were surprisingly clear and accurate.

"We can meet again tomorrow for some duelling, if you want," Price offered. "In the meantime, you can start your exercises. I plan to introduce a duelling club when school starts; if you join that, our private lesson can focus on the strategic part, and you'll get the exercise together with other students. But first we need to get Harry's magic back up to its usual standards. I shall see you tomorrow, then." And with a friendly nod, he dismissed them.

"There are five dangerous faults which may affect a general:

(1) recklessness, which leads to destruction;

(2) cowardice, which leads to capture;

(3) a hasty temper, which can be provoked by insults;

(4) a delicacy of honour, which is sensitive to shame;

(5) over-solicitude for his men, which exposes him to worry and trouble."

Hermione stopped reading aloud and looked at her friends questioningly. "Do you think that this is what made Dumbledore such a good general, as Price said? He certainly didn't have any of these faults, did he?"

Hermione was floating three feet in the air, in a wizard yoga posture called, 'The Fanged Geranium'. The book from Price floated at her eye level; the pages turned on command.

"Perhaps Dumbledore was a bit too concerned for his people, which... What did you say, exposed him to worry and trouble?" Harry suggested.

"Yes, perhaps. But he told you that he couldn't continue doing so, didn't he? Didn't he say that he wanted to protect people and not send them into mortal danger, but had to?" She untangled her limbs and smoothly stretched arms and legs out into the position, 'The Manticore', still floating and rocking softly.

"Blimey, Hermione, you've become really good at this," Harry marvelled. The past three weeks had brought a noticeable improvement in fitness and magical control for all three of them. But while they had managed to improve posture and balance, neither of the boys had managed to focus enough to trigger the mild levitation effect of properly executed Wizard Yoga asana.

"But back to the point, yes, that's what Dumbledore said. He said that he tried to protect me, and all of us, but that he had learned the hard way that he couldn't keep all the people he loved out of danger. That he had to send them on dangerous missions because there were things that only they could do. It was when he apologized for keeping so much information from me. 'That's how fools who love act,' he said." Harry's eyes glistened while he remembered his kind teacher and mentor. "He needn't have apologized, you know. I should have apologized to him for not listening, for not thinking, for running headlong into danger. But I never did... I always took him for granted...." His voice faded.

Hermione moved out of the posture she was in and descended to the ground. She put a hand on Harry's arm and squeezed it lightly. "Nonsense, Harry. He didn't expect it from you; he knew that you were a child. He loved children; he was child-like himself when he could afford the luxury. Do you remember 'Nitwit, blubber, oddment, tweak'? And the school song?" Now she, too, had tears in her eyes, but they both smiled at the memory.

"Dumbledore was brilliant!" Ron mumbled from the depths of a huge armchair where he had buried himself, his nose in *The Art of War*. Harry and Hermione looked around in surprise. They had almost forgotten that he was there; he was always so immersed in that book.

"Listen to this," he said. "This is so true on so many levels. And Dumbledore used it; that's quite clear.... It's the seven considerations." He started to quote.

"Therefore, in your deliberations, when seeking to determine the military conditions, let them be made

the basis of a comparison, in this wise:

(1) Which of the two sovereigns is imbued with the Moral law? That can only be Dumbledore. Voldemort knows neither moral nor law.

(2) Which of the two generals has most ability? Dumbledore was the only one Voldemort was afraid of. Dumbledore beat him in the battle of the Ministry. It was only through poison and treason that he was killed. Snape, that... That... Piece of filth." Ron ground his teeth in helpless anger and continued.

(3) With whom lie the advantages derived from Heaven and Earth? Heaven in this context means the seasons: the weather and everything that has to do with it. Earth means the layout of the land, the conditions of the road, the surroundings, distances and such. Well, having Hogwarts would be one huge advantage here. If Voldemort wants it, he'll have to besiege it, and a siege, according to the book, is always difficult for the one who lays the siege. A well-equipped fortress can withstand a siege for a very long time....

(4) On which side is discipline most rigorously enforced? Hm. That's a tough one. Maybe Voldemort has a point there. Torturing his servants and forcing them to swear Unbreakable Vows and get ugly tattoos does sound rather rigorous to me.

(5) Which army is stronger? That's another unknown. If Voldemort succeeds in rallying the giants and manages to gather enough Death Eaters... I don't think that the Order and the Aurors combined will be able to beat this by physical strength and numbers alone.

(6) On which side are officers and men more highly trained? That'd be undecided, I think. The majority aren't trained all that well while some individuals have outstanding ability. In this case, I'd rather think that the way skills are used is important. And the nature of the skills. An unskilled fighter who is hateful enough to cast the Killing Curse will outweigh several highly skilled fighters who don't want to or who can't kill.

And finally (7) In which army is there the greater constancy both in reward and punishment? Can you imagine Dumbledore punishing anyone? He didn't need to punish; a disappointed look was all the punishment that was needed. At least with me." Ron shrugged and smiled sheepishly at Harry and Hermione, who both smirked and nodded back at him.

"From what you told us about that Death Eater meeting, Harry, Voldemort is overly dramatic in both punishment and reward and maybe not consistent or constant. So there may be a point on our side. Hm. The conclusion of this passage is: *By means of these seven considerations, I can forecast victory or defeat.*"

"And can you?" Harry grinned.

"Not yet." Ron said pensively. "There are few questions I have for Price. But I see one thing. If we try to meet as many of these considerations as we can, we'll be a force to be reckoned with. You know, you should get the Minister to have the Auror department offer basic defence refreshers for everyone. Maybe you can suggest something to him, Harry?"

Harry looked doubtful and shrugged. "I can try, but they always know everything better. You know that."

Ron closed his eyes and shook his head. "This is so frustrating. How can you defeat someone like Voldemort, if you have those self-righteous idiots in charge?"

"Not all the Aurors are idiots, Ron." Hermione reminded him. "And more and more of the skilled and smart ones are joining the Order, even if they aren't in the inner circle. They know what's coming and want to be prepared. I think you can count them among your skilled fighters." She smiled.

"It's not funny, Hermione. If Voldemort does what Sirius thought he would, he'll have an army of Death Eaters soon enough. And he can use this army as he wishes, as a loyal, obedient unit, more or less skilled. Our side, on the other hand, is still divided. There is so little common ground, so many differing interests." Ron sighed. "I can't see how we can beat them...."

"We will have to avoid facing them as an opposing army; we'll have to resort to guerrilla tactics. Did you forget what Price taught us?" Harry asked. "He said that the book could only be a guideline. We have to adapt it to our circumstances."

"All warfare is based on deception," Hermione, who had been listening intently, threw in. "And that's what we'll have to do, I think."

"Right," Ron said with a nod. "And the spy who was trusted so much just turned traitor and murdered the general."

"I didn't mean it that way. Dammit, Ron, don't be so morose." She scowled. "We'll have to work with what we have. And just because we weren't aware of much organization and structure in the Order doesn't mean that it wasn't there. We'll have to use deception, especially the three of us. Even though she doesn't know what we're after, Minerva has promised to avoid a direct confrontation until we have succeeded, if at all possible. And we have to go about it. We haven't found clues for one single Horcrux yet."

"I'm running out of ideas," Harry said. "We've interviewed the older Order members. We asked Minerva; we even went to interview some of the surviving schoolmates of Voldemort, and we still don't have a clue where we could look. Where could he have hidden the cup or the locket? And if he didn't use the Ravenclaw artefact, what could he have used instead?" He took a deep breath. "At this pace, it will take us forever to do away with Voldemort for good."

"And if it takes years, it takes years," Hermione said firmly. "Dumbledore didn't find the items overnight, either. Didn't he first suspect Horcruxes in our second year? After he learned how the diary lured Ginny in, he started to make investigations. That's been more than four years, and in that time he's found one Horcrux and the original hiding place of a second one. And you think we can find them all in a few weeks?"

Harry sighed. "Right. But that doesn't change the fact that I don't know where we could look any more."

"We could start revisiting your memories of the memories Dumbledore showed you. Do you know if Minerva has his Pensieve? We have to get as many details about Voldemort's life as possible. We should go about this like a murder investigation."

"You watched too much telly at home, Hermione." Harry smiled, despite his obvious frustration. "We're no Sherlock Holmes, not even you."

"Sherlock who?" Ron asked, and Harry and Hermione laughed.

"Let's go and look at your memories in the Pensieve, Harry. And I have some more ideas, but I'd like to think them over a bit more before I want to discuss them with you."

"So maybe you are a Sherlock Holmes in training." Harry smiled. "I should have known that you'd still have something up your sleeve. All right, let's go and ask Minerva about the Pensieve."

"Yes, let's go," Ron said, looking a bit more optimistic, too.

"Later, we should do some of our homework; we have loads." Hermione reminded them. "And you are so behind already. How do you expect to be able to do your N.E.W.T.s. revisions if you're having trouble keeping up already?"

"Bossy as ever," Ron said, sticking his tongue out at her. All three of them laughed and went to get their schoolbooks.

It's Not Much, But It Is Home

Chapter 9 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 8 It's Not Much, But It Is Home

"Oooh, it's another letter from Viktor," Ginny gushed when the owls delivered the morning mail in the Great Hall. Harry continued laughing and joking with Ron and tried to ignore the inquisitive stare from Luna Lovegood. A group of sixth-year Gryffindor girls were grouped around Ginny, oohing and aahing about the frequent mails Ginny received from the Quidditch hero.

Harry could afford to be very relaxed; he was meeting Ginny in the Room of Requirement every day, and no one suspected anything. To the rest of the school, it seemed clear that both he and Ginny had moved on after their break-up.

"Anyone we know?" Ron asked Hermione, who had just paid the owl that delivered the *Daily Prophet*. She started scanning the front page like almost everybody else did who stayed overnight at Hogwarts and was now sitting at the breakfast table. About half of the fourth to seventh year students had returned, many of them only for classes. Teachers were coming and going, assisting the parents of younger children with the Ministry-sponsored private study groups. Several of the teachers had chosen to stay with their families this year and only appeared for their lessons. Thus, the Great Hall was rather empty, and only a few teachers were bent over their breakfast and newspapers.

After a while, the Great Hall became oddly quiet, so quiet that even Harry and Ron, who were still chatting, started to notice.

"Oh, my goodness!" Hermione choked out, tears in her eyes. "The whole Abbott family has been killed: Hannah, her father, and her siblings." She swallowed and looked at Harry, who stared at her, stunned. "It was a Death Eater attack; the Dark Mark was seen over the house," she whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. "The bodies were hardly recognizable. They were burned in their house... And a very thin Death Eater, who is believed to be Severus Snape, was seen on the scene before the Aurors arrived."

Harry's eyes flashed in anger, and he saw that anger reflected in Hermione's eyes. Ron looked crestfallen like most of the other students and teachers in the Great Hall. No one felt like eating any more, and the Great Hall emptied silently, though there was still quite some time before classes began.

"Poor Hannah," Ron said while they walked back to their common room, "and poor Ernie. Did you see how pale he was?"

"How would you look if your girlfriend had just been killed?" Hermione snarled at him and stormed away.

Harry looked at Ron and shrugged. "I didn't even know that they were going out," he said.

"Me neither. I only knew that they were close friends," Ron admitted, and they went back to their dormitory to get their books.

Half an hour later, they met in Professor Price's office. Each of them had a free period, including their teacher. That allowed them to meet and discuss strategy during the week without having to use up too much of Price's time. He was busy making arrangements for the Vance property when he wasn't teaching at Hogwarts.

"Professor, have you seen the news?" Ron asked when they arrived. Hermione was already there, looking cross and brooding.

"You mean the Abbott murders?"

Ron nodded.

"Yes, I've seen it, as has every other teacher who was present today. The Abbotts were a well-known and popular family."

"They were purebloods. Why would they kill a whole family of purebloods? Even the children?" Harry was baffled. "How can they hope to gain followers when they kill whole families?"

"That's what they always do: kill the whole family. That's why I'm a target, too, and so is every single member of your family, Ron. Just as your parents are, Hermione. The Death Eaters always go after the whole family when one family member opposes them. It's a method for intimidation. You punish the family of the perpetrator, and other families who are concerned or scared will keep their own people in line. That way, any resistance is suppressed quickly and quite efficiently."

"This isn't the Mafia or some abstract strategy game," Hermione hissed. "This is real. Hannah was our friend." She clenched her teeth. "And it was Snape again. Snape, Snape, always Snape who is around when someone is killed," she yelled suddenly. "We've been trusting a mass murderer."

Harry and Ron started and looked at her wide-eyed. "I never trusted him. You know that, Hermione," Harry said.

"Yes, and now it turns out that you were right, after all, with everything you said about him. I hate, hate, hate him," she screeched.

"Get your wand out, Miss Granger. You will now duel all three of us simultaneously," Price said, then stood up and waved the furniture to the side. "And I don't want to see too much gentlemanly reserve from you, boys."

Hermione took a few deep breaths; her eyes seemed to emit sparks when she glared at Price.

Harry didn't wait for formalities; he shot a Leg-Locker Curse at her, which she dodged deftly. Price and Ron had teamed up and each aimed an Expelliarmus at her from two sides, but her deflecting charms held steady. She jumped and twisted, turned and ducked and evaded every hex and jinx that was sent her way almost elegantly. Only when Harry, Ron, and Price sent clusters of nonverbal spells, one after the other without pause from different sides without a set pattern, did she start to breathe heavily and rely more and more on her protective charms. The charms held, and her anger started to flare again. While Harry was still busy hurling hexes at her, sometimes alternating with the other attackers, sometimes at the same time as they, she changed her fighting pattern from defence to attack and attacked with such fury that Harry and Ron were kept very busy trying to deflect or neutralize her spells. Price, who wasn't the target of her wrath very often, watched her attentively and continued with his steady attack.

Harry watched in amazement at how Hermione seemed to gain strength while attacking them. He understood that she used the method of controlled emotion with great skill. Her fury, while strong, seemed remote, and her concentration was unwavering. In fact, she reminded him of Dumbledore when he had fought Voldemort at the Ministry of Magic.

Harry tried to adapt to her ever-changing pattern of attack, but he still couldn't manage to solely focus on the fight and not at the same time admire, worry for, and be slightly scared by Hermione. She used his weakness mercilessly and drove him backwards. Loud booming sounds from her shield spells filled the room and further deteriorated Harry's concentration. Who would have thought that Hermione would develop into such a formidable dueller in such a short time? And then he slipped on a patch of ice that had come out of Hermione's wand, let out a surprised yelp and was bound in ropes with a satisfied *"Incarcerous"*. With a grim smile, Hermione turned to face Ron, who had been attacking her relentlessly. Almost as an afterthought, she was deflecting Price's attacks with her booming shield spell.

Harry saw that Ron didn't seem to be worried or concerned; he used all his concentration for the attack. Price slowly moved towards Hermione's back, apparently planning to perform a manoeuvre that he had taught them called 'The Pincers'. But Hermione seemed to have grown eyes in the back of her head. She moved away from both men and cast another strong shield spell in front of her. While both men recoiled from the loud boom that reflected their spells, Hermione conjured her trusted flock of canaries out of thin air and sent them to attack Ron. This was something Ron hadn't expected, and he was furiously waving at the attacking birds instead of banishing them. Hermione narrowed her eyes, tsked, and Petrified him.

"Two down, one to go. What should it be, Professor Price? Will you keep holding back, or will you finally give me your full attention?" she asked coldly.

Price smiled and continued with his steady but predictable attacks. "Keep going, Miss Granger. You're doing quite well."

"Am I? Now, isn't that nice?" she snarled, trying to gather her anger around her once again but failing. Her eyes shone from excitement, and by now she was clearly enjoying the fight. "And what then? Endless skirmishing, or will you show me who the duelling master is?" They danced around each other.

Harry was reminded of the fight between Sirius Black and Bellatrix Lestrange, only their fight had been deadly serious and had ended in his godfather's death while all three of them knew that their training fights never involved harmful spells like Stunning, slicing, or worse.

"We can go on with this if you want, or we can agree to end it. The lesson was more than successful."

Hermione seemed to think for a little while and then sank her wand. "All right, let's stop it here."

"Good."

Price turned around to relieve Harry and Ron from their constraints when Hermione yelled, *"Expelliarmus!"*

But Price seemed to have been expecting this since he whirled around almost simultaneously and Petrified her. "This is getting a bit old, Miss Granger. All of you have been using this fake-capitulation a bit too much for it to remain a surprise. Remember, when you duel an opponent for the first time, you can use the full range of your little surprises. But when you meet the same opponent again, or when you duel someone who had the same teacher as you, those tricks won't help much; they're too predictable." He finished the spells on all three of them and smirked. "But that was an excellent fight. You all need to be commended, especially you, Miss Granger."

The three friends grinned at him in delight. Price's praise was rare.

"That was brilliant, Hermione," Harry said. "You beat us formidably today."

"If you had been Death Eaters, I wouldn't have won, not likely. They wouldn't have been concerned for me, or held back from using really harmful spells. And who knows what kind of tricks they have up their sleeves? If I can distract Ron with my canaries, Merlin only knows what they can shock and distract us with."

"Very true," Price said. "But all three of you are getting to the point where those tricks won't affect you any longer. That was excellent use and control of your anger today, Hermione. Harry, and maybe Ron, still have to work on that control."

"I knew what you were trying to do when you challenged me to the duel," Hermione said. "I didn't know if I could manage it, but while we were fighting, I pictured my anger like a tool, like a club I could wield at you, and that helped a lot."

"Yes, that's exactly it! Use your emotions and don't let them use you. So did your anger go away, or are you still angry now?"

"I am still angry, but maybe I can control it better now. My hatred for Snape is still there. If I had been duelling him, I don't know if I could have stayed that remote."

Price looked at her pensively. "What exactly is it that makes you so hateful, Miss Granger? You've known for a while that Snape is a murderer. Why this anger now?"

"Because I trusted him. Because Dumbledore trusted him, and I refuse to think of Professor Dumbledore as an overly trusting old fool. And I admired Snape."

"I knew it! You had a crush on him. How could you the slimy, greasy git?" Ron interrupted, accusation and hurt in his voice.

"Oh, shut up, Ron," she snapped back. "Are you really so simple-minded that it always has to be a crush when someone is simply interested in someone else?"

Ron flinched. "So you were interested in him. Isn't that the same? Care to enlighten simple-minded old me?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and took a deep breath. "I am sorry, Ron; I didn't mean it like that. I don't really think that you are simple-minded, and you know it." She gave him a tentative smile. "But the way you constantly accuse me of having a crush on someone is grating on my nerves."

"So why were you interested in Snape?" Harry asked sharply. "Simple-minded me would like to know that as well."

"Oh, don't get in a huff, you two." She glared at them.

"Why, Hermione?" Harry asked coldly.

"All right. Calm down." She smiled again, more apologetic this time. "Remember our third year? When all three of us attacked Snape in the Shrieking Shack? At the time, it was the right thing to do, but afterwards I felt bad for him. You know, when we learned that the Marauders had played that trick on him? I first thought that it was just a stupid prank, but later I had my doubts. I mean, when Remus is transformed, he is a werewolf: a mad, violent beast. It was a horrible thing to do to Snape, I thought. He could have been killed or infected. And the events in the Shrieking Shack didn't make things better. I wanted to apologize and, maybe, make peace with him. But he didn't let me. You know how he always loathed me?"

Harry and Ron nodded; Price watched all three of them curiously.

"I did follow him around a bit at the beginning of our fourth year. I still wanted to talk to him, but he snarled at me that I should stop harassing him and became even nastier. Then that incident with the Densaugeo Curse happened."

She looked at Price, shrugged, and explained to him about the fight between Harry and Draco Malfoy and the stray curses that had hit Gregory Goyle and herself. While her front teeth had grown excessively, Snape had insulted her by stating that he saw no difference. "After he said that, I gave up trying to understand him," she said with a shrug.

Price smiled. "You know, maybe he did indeed think that you had a crush on him. He would have known that an insult like that would cure you of that crush immediately."

Harry and Ron grimaced, but Hermione frowned. "You think so? Why should I have had a crush on him? He's never been nice, or even fair to me."

"Well, it's not unusual. That's something teachers have to deal with, no matter their gender or age. It's best to be prepared and have some method at hand to deflect or quell those attractions."

"Every teacher?" Ron asked.

"Every teacher," Price confirmed.

Hermione rolled her eyes when she saw Ron and Harry grin at each other. She basically could hear them think, "Someone has a crush on Binns?" That thought made her giggle, too.

Price smirked at them and continued. "Minerva advised me to keep my distance from the students, except for the seventh-years. They are mature enough, usually, to see teachers as humans and not as some idealized authority figure. And power play or, ah, favours for better grades won't help with the N.E.W.T.s, so any type of friendship developing between student and teacher should only be followed through with seventh-years."

"Makes sense." Hermione nodded. "So maybe Snape really thought I had a crush on him. I did make a fool of myself over Lockhart in my second year, after all." She blushed, and Harry and Ron snickered.

Price raised an eyebrow. "That still doesn't explain your emotional outburst, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled sheepishly. "I, err, was a bit distracted for the rest of that year, so I didn't pay much attention to Snape. I take it you know about the events at the end of our fourth year the year of the Triwizard Tournament when Voldemort came back?"

Price flinched slightly and nodded. "Yes, Harry was kidnapped to be part of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's resurrection, wasn't he?"

"Yes. And after Harry returned, Snape revealed his Dark Mark, and we knew that he was a Death Eater. An ex-Death Eater or so we all thought. We thought he was a spy for Dumbledore... No one ever told us, of course, but we thought we could put two and two together. So when I learned that, I really, really admired him."

"Why?" Price looked puzzled, and Harry and Ron stared at her.

"Because if that had been what he was, an ex-Death Eater turned spy, then he would have been an incredibly brave man. To be in such an organization and turn... that takes great determination and resolve." She took a deep breath, looked at all three men in turn and continued. "Don't you see? You can't just leave an organisation like the Death Eaters the same way you cancel your membership in a club. It's more like... I mean, they are being brainwashed there, aren't they, magical folk and Muggles alike? Their lives and little triumphs depend solely on their master, don't they? That makes leaving very difficult. And Snape didn't only turn sides, he tried to fight them from within. Or so we thought." She paused again and glared at Ron and Harry. "If you had paid attention in History of Magic, you'd know that people like that were essential in the downfall of Grindelwald and his mad Muggle general. They were heroes, and most of them didn't survive. So you'll excuse me if I felt a lot of admiration for Snape. I thought that he must be under extreme pressure, and that made his nastiness a bit easier to bear." She hesitated and stared at Harry. "And his behaviour towards Sirius, well, Sirius wasn't exactly acting..."

"Leave Sirius out of this," Harry screeched, outraged. "He always had the right instincts about Snape..."

"Looks like it, yes... I just wanted to explain to you why I admired Snape so much. And Professor Dumbledore trusted him..." She now had tears in her eyes. "I just can't understand how he could trust someone so much who turned out to be such a... a cowardly, perfidious murderer! I hate him..." Her voice faltered, and tears streamed down her face.

"I see where you are coming from, Miss Granger," Price said, staring at her steadily. "It isn't easy to have one's illusions shattered so brutally. And treachery is always devastating..."

"Yes," Harry hissed, seething. "And Snape will get what is his due, and if it's the last thing I do..."

"What did I tell you about controlling your emotions, Mr. Potter?" Price looked annoyed. "Does it really take so little to get your focus away from what really counts? We all

have to deal with You-Know-Who... That has to be our first priority. The other Death Eaters will be dealt with afterwards."

"I don't care about the other Death Eaters," Harry roared. "I want to see Snape dead just as dead as Dumbledore. And I hope he suffers when he dies."

"Harry!" Hermione looked shocked.

"What?" he yelled at her. "I thought you hated him, too. I thought you wanted to kill him..."

"I don't really want to kill anyone," Hermione admitted. "But if people are killed, I hope it is without much suffering. Do we really want to stoop down to their level and torture before killing? Is that what we're fighting for?"

Harry looked at her, startled out of his anger. He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. "No... no, of course not..."

"Well said, Miss Granger," Price said. "I am glad that at least one of you has learned something in my lessons. Or maybe even two; Mr Weasley at least has enough sense to keep his thoughts to himself and not get carried away... If it weren't for the two of you, I'd consider stopping these private lessons. You're not the most attentive student, Mr. Potter. You all may go now."

"What was that all about?" Harry asked, puzzled, after they had left Price's office.

Hermione looked at him, unbelieving. "Harry, you just let your anger control you once again. That's contrary to everything he's tried to teach us. You're not making enough of an effort."

"Stop telling me what I have to do, Hermione." Harry had had enough of her bossing him around. "So what if I don't do what he says? We managed quite well before he came along. All this strategy talk... That's theorizing, nothing else. You said it yourself. In a fight, you need your gut feeling, and you need to rely on your instincts. Don't think that your enemy will wait for you to work out a fancy strategy."

"Oh, you mean the way you didn't wait for my fancy strategy?" she snarled. "You looked rather stupid when you slipped on my ice patch, if you ask me. I'm quite relieved you didn't wait for anything there..."

"Dammit, Hermione. What is the matter with you?"

"Can't you see what a brilliant teacher Price is?" she growled. "You could learn so much from him..."

"I don't believe it! Now she has a crush on Price," Ron said and rolled his eyes.

Harry chuckled, but Hermione was furious again. She started to yell at Ron, who yelled back. They fought until they reached the Gryffindor common room. Harry had had enough of them by then and went to the Room of Requirement to meet Ginny.

Two days later, they all sat at the large table in the kitchen at the Burrow, savouring Molly Weasley's excellent barley soup. They had been invited to the family get-together after Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had returned from their visit to France, and the newlyweds had returned from their honeymoon. Ron was telling his parents about Muriel Prewett and the potential danger to her because of the tiara, as well as about Professor Flitwick's connection to the family. Bill and Fleur listened quietly while Fred and George were talking in low voices with Ginny at the other end of the table.

Arthur Weasley listened with increasing agitation and proclaimed that he would Floo Aunt Muriel the next day, but Molly Weasley seemed distracted and nervously fluttered from the stove to the table and back.

"What is the matter with you, Mum? Why are you so nervous?" Ginny asked after a while.

"I'm not nervous, just a bit disappointed, I suppose," Mrs. Weasley said. "I sent Alouette off to invite Percy, but he doesn't want to come."

"What did you invite that git for?" Fred asked.

"We're having a family gathering, and he should be here. He didn't come to the wedding... I had hoped that he would at least come now to see his brother and his sister-in-law." Mrs. Weasley dabbed at her eyes with a huge, striped handkerchief.

"I say it's no loss," Fred said, and the other Weasley offspring nodded while Arthur looked sad and Molly burst into tears. "He's your brother; he's our son, and I wanted to see him, let bygones be bygones."

"Perhaps Alouette did not deliver the message properly," Fleur suggested and called the elf from the kitchen.

"When you went to the Ministry, Alouette, did you find Percy Weasley and deliver the message to 'im?" she inquired in a stern voice.

Alouette shifted from one foot to the other, her hands nervously wringing the towel that was her dress. Her eyes grew even bigger than they normally were, and she started to wail.

"Of course Alouette 'as delivered the message to Mr. Percy Weasley. Alouette is a good elf."

"And what did 'e say? Did 'e accept it, acknowledge it, turn the invitation down? Where is your training? Speak up, Elf!"

Harry was surprised to hear Fleur speak so harshly to her own house-elf. He hoped for Alouette that this wasn't their usual way of interaction, but Fleur did have a haughty streak, and he really had no idea how she spoke to those she deemed her inferiors. He really didn't know her all that well. A quick glance at Hermione showed him that she was upset, perhaps even angry, with Fleur.

Alouette started to cry softly. "Mr. Percy Weasley is not a nice man, Mistress Fleur," she sobbed. "He yelled at Alouette, something about a hovel staying a hovel whether one used a cheap elf or not. Then he took the parchment with the name of this place from me and threw it into a filing tray."

"That's a bit careless with a note that shows the name of a place under the Fidelius Charm, isn't it?" George threw in.

"It is indeed," Arthur Weasley said. "What did you do next, Alouette?" he asked gently.

"Alouette was coming back here and doing her work. Alouette hasn't done anything wrong, has she?" The little elf looked scared.

"No, you may go, Alouette. I will go and talk to Percy tomorrow and see where he put the paper. If I can retrieve it, I will. If it is lost, we'll have to break the Fidelius Charm and ask Minerva to cast a new one somewhere else or do without one like all the other families do."

"All the other families aren't prime targets, Dad," Bill said. "If you don't want to bother Minerva, I'm certain that Tonks, or Moody, or any other of our old friends would be willing."

"You're right, Bill." Arthur Weasley smiled at his oldest son. "We'll do that, but maybe it won't be necessary. I will talk to Percy tomorrow, and he will hear me out." He turned back to his soup.

Mrs. Weasley had just started to hand out the pudding when a sharp rap at the front door brought all conversation to an end.

"That must be Percy! He must be wondering if he's really welcome if he's knocking on the door, the poor boy. Be nice to him!" Mrs. Weasley whispered happily and rushed to the door, pushing Dobby aside, who had wanted to admit the visitor.

"Molly, wait," Mr. Weasley called, but she had opened the door already. "Percy!"

"I'm so sorry, Mum," a feeble voice stammered.

Then one voice yelled, "*Crucio*," a second yelled a Stunning Curse, and a third voice yelled, "*Avada Kedavra*."

Everything seemed to happen at once. Harry jumped from his chair, wand already drawn. From the corner of his eye, he saw Ron and Hermione do likewise while Fred, George and Ginny flanked Mr. Weasley, who ran to the door where the still shape of his wife lay on the floor, a screaming and twitching Percy at her side. Bill and Fleur had each drawn their wands and stood back-to-back, watching the windows and the back door.

Almost as if in slow motion, the windows shattered, and the back door flew open. All of a sudden, Death Eaters seemed to be everywhere, flooding the house through every available entryway.

Harry was immediately attacked by two of them, but he blocked their spells with an ease that surprised him. A few nonverbal hexes of his own, and his two opponents lay unmoving and bound on the floor.

He looked around wildly. Mr. Weasley had thrown himself over his wife, and Fred, George, Ginny, and Alouette the house-elf were deflecting the attacks of at least seven Death Eaters, who cursed and hexed them incessantly. Harry Stunned two of them from behind and blocked the attack of a third with the deflector spell that filled the house with its booming sound.

"That's Potter. He must not be killed," one of the Death Eaters yelled. Harry used the brief indecision of his opponent to levitate him up to the ceiling at top speed. With a 'whomp', the surprised Death Eater hit his head and got knocked out cold. With a grim smile, Harry released him, and with another thud, the Death Eater fell to the floor.

"Watch out, Harry," Ginny cried.

Harry spun around and immediately leapt to the side, evading the flying cauldron that was aimed at his head.

"I told you not to harm Potter," the Death Eater yelled again, and Harry thought he knew that voice.

"Wormtail," he snarled. But he didn't have time to look for the owner of the voice because he was knocked off his feet by a bunch of flying bananas. A puzzled glance showed him an amazing sight. Several of the Death Eaters were levitating the remaining food, the plates, and the cutlery from the dinner table and were sending them flying at everyone who came into their range of vision. One Death Eater was juggling three apples and was completely oblivious to what was going on around him.

With grim satisfaction, Harry saw Ron Petrify one after the other of their confused enemies while Hermione was sending nonverbal Confundus Charms at every Death Eater who came close, causing some of them to act just as confused as their comrades.

"Let's get out of here," the voice, Wormtail, yelled again, and the few remaining Death Eaters who still had their wits about them headed towards the doors. Fleur skilfully Stunned two of them, and then it was over. It couldn't have lasted longer than ten minutes.

Dazedly, Harry looked around. One of the escaping Death Eaters had managed to cast the Dark Mark, and in its eerie, green light, Harry saw Stunned or otherwise incapacitated Death Eaters everywhere. They had taken out at least twenty of them. Harry's guess was that there had been thirty Death Eaters in total, but while they had been fighting, it had seemed as if there were more. All of the Weasleys seemed unharmed except for Mrs. Weasley, who still lay where she had fallen, and Percy, who was curled into a ball and sobbing quietly. Mr. Weasley sat at his wife's side and stared at her numbly. As Ron slowly walked over to his father, Hermione stood and watched wide-eyed and with clenched teeth, swallowing hard several times. All the Weasleys gathered around their parents, everything else forgotten.

"Molly," Arthur Weasley whispered, then threw himself over his wife and started to shake her, wracked by sobs. "Molly, wake up."

Ginny and Bill were trying to pull him away from her when the crackling of Apparition announced the arrival of new visitors.

Harry ran to the next window, crouched down and looked outside. The new visitors were Order members Remus, Tonks and Moody among them. All came with wands drawn as they carefully approached the house.

"They're gone. It's over," Fred said to the Order members. Harry presumed that it had been Fred who had sent his Patronus for help.

Tonks started to check on the captured Death Eaters and sent them to the Ministry with a Portkey.

The other Order members crowded around the Weasleys, took charge, and started to Floo the family off to St. Mungo's, one after the other. Harry still felt dazed and shocked, and from the look on Hermione's face, he thought that she must feel likewise. They both seemed like intruders and didn't quite know what to do with themselves.

The Weasleys looked similarly shaken, some of them numb. Only Percy continued to sob, and Fleur had started to curse and grumble under her breath. She seemed to see something that fuelled the flames of her ire and started yelling, "It's all your fault, you useless, brainless excuse for a servant. It should 'ave been you who's dead now. I wish... I wish I could..." And then she was taking one of her shoes off and throwing it at the sobbing Alouette, who was cringing on the floor, obviously in pain.

"Not clothes, noooo," Alouette whimpered and fainted. But before Hermione and Harry could say, let alone do something, someone took them by the arms and shoved them towards the fireplace where they were whisked off to St. Mungo's.

What Is Right And What Is Easy.

Chapter 10 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 9 What Is Right And What Is Easy.

Hermione tumbled out of the fireplace in St. Mungo's and looked around, feeling numb. She wasn't quite certain if anyone else was injured, or worse, but she had heard the Killing Curse and saw Mrs. Weasley fall.

Harry was standing at the side of the room, looking as shocked and horrified as she felt. Her eyes searched for Ron, who stood in a group with his brothers, Ginny, and Fleur. He stood slightly stooped and looked at something in his hand. Hermione walked over and put her arms around him.

Ron took a deep breath, showed her the rose-coloured crystal that Dudley's girlfriend had given him and choked out between tears, "How could she have known?"

"I don't know," Hermione whispered, at a loss for words.

After a short while, a Healer came into the room and beckoned the Weasleys to follow but stopped Harry and Hermione from coming along. "Only next of kin, please."

"They belong to the family," Ron said angrily, but the Healer refused stubbornly to let Harry and Hermione go with them.

"Go, Ron, your father needs you now," Hermione whispered. "I'm sure we'll be allowed in later. She hugged him again, and so did Harry. Then Fred dragged Ron away, and the door closed behind them.

Hermione and Harry hugged each other, trying to get over the shock that Mrs. Weasley was dead. Molly Weasley had been like a mother to both of them, but especially to Harry. Hermione thought that it must feel to Harry like he was losing his parents all over again, only this time he was old enough to feel and understand the loss.

After a while, they sat down; Hermione was fighting back her tears while Harry was starting to mutter under his breath.

"Wormtail! It was Wormtail! I should have let Sirius kill him that night in the Shrieking Shack..."

"No, Harry, don't think that. You did the right thing. Remember what Dumbledore said."

"She would still be alive!"

Hermione didn't know how to reply to that, so she simply hugged Harry again, as much for giving as for receiving comfort.

They were still waiting for the return of the family when two Aurors came to question them about the attack. They learned that nineteen Death Eaters had been taken into custody, most of them not in any state to resist the arrest. None of the Death Eaters had been seriously injured or even killed, and Mrs. Weasley, as well as Percy, whose fate was as yet unclear, were the only casualties of the attack.

"The elves," Hermione suddenly remembered. "What happened to the elves? I heard Alouette scream, and Dobby was lying on the floor close to Mrs. Weasley and didn't move. Who is taking care of the elves?"

"No idea," the Auror said unfeelingly. "That's between the elves and their owners."

"They are our friends, and they don't have owners," Hermione said shrilly. "You can't just leave them there."

"We can, and we did," the Auror said irritably. "If you want to know what happened to them, go and look for yourself. We've finished investigating at the Burrow, so you'll have it all to yourself...and your elves." He glared at her and went away.

"Harry, what do we do? We can't just leave them there; Dobby is our friend, and Alouette... It's not really her fault." Hermione had jumped to her feet and was pacing up and down nervously, wringing her hands.

"You're right," Harry said. "But we can't go away now; Ron and his family need us."

Hermione looked at the floor. "Yes," she whispered. "But it could take hours before we're allowed to be with them, and at the moment we can't help them. But, perhaps we can help the elves." She looked at Harry pleadingly. "I'm sure Ron will understand. Harry... I have to go and look after them; I just have to." Her eyes had filled with tears again.

"I'm not so certain that Ron will understand," Harry said sadly, "but I won't let you go alone. I'll come with you. Dobby is my friend; he's always been there for me, even if I didn't always appreciate it."

They both smiled between tears, remembering the unorthodox ways Dobby had tried to help and protect Harry, and together they went to the fireplace to Floo back to the Burrow.

When they arrived in the deserted kitchen, Hermione looked around and gasped. She had been far too caught up in the fight to notice the amount of destruction that had occurred. Shards of glass were covering the floor of the kitchen and the adjacent lounge. The mid-September air that was drifting in through the gaping windows, though still warm, caused her to have goosepimples.

The lights were out; all the candles were lying on the floor with no charm to hold them afloat. The only light illuminating the ghostly scene was the greenish glow from the Dark Mark hovering over the grounds. The furniture was broken, and the big kitchen table was overturned and missing two legs. The crockery had been thrown out of the kitchen cabinet, possibly by her own doing, Hermione thought guiltily. There was rubble everywhere, but the elves had disappeared. The only sounds that could be heard were the sad wails from the ghoul in the attic.

"Let's go and look outside," Harry suggested. "If they aren't in the garden, then they probably went somewhere to get their injuries tended to. And if we don't find them there, then let's get out of here."

"All right," Hermione said and went to the back entrance, stepping over the broken door that had been blown off its hinges.

Although it was a moonless night and a cool mist hid the stars, the Dark Mark cast enough light to light up the grounds. Hermione walked a few steps towards the garden but stopped soon.

"Nothing," she said, slightly disappointed.

"Shush." Harry seemed to have heard something. They both froze and listened intently. From the distance, strange, muted sounds penetrated the night. A deep, low voice chanted something in a rather commanding tone, and two high voices whimpered and cried.

Slowly getting closer, moving soundlessly and hiding behind bushes, they reached the opposite side of the duck pond. They were both stunned by the scene before them. Alouette was lying on the floor, weeping softly. Dobby was sitting at her side, his face buried in his hands, his whole body wracked by sobs. His hats, clothes, and socks were stacked neatly at his side, and an old towel was wrapped around him like a toga. Severus Snape knelt facing the elves. He moved his wand over Alouette and chanted a spell in a low, singsong voice. Whatever it was he was doing, it seemed to be exhausting since sweat was streaming down his face, and his complexion was that of sour milk.

While Hermione was staring, Harry stormed off. "Snape," he cried, firing hexes while he ran. Hermione didn't know what to do; their defence lessons hadn't prepared her for an out-of-control Harry Potter. Hermione resolved to make a few suggestions to Peregrin Price if they survived this encounter and then ran after Harry.

Snape had jumped up, turned around, and cast a protective spell in one smooth movement. The spell deflected Harry's curses, and in the meantime, Snape moved away from the elves and attacked.

Hermione's joining the fight brought a grim smile to Snape's face, and while Harry and Hermione continuously bombarded him with hexes and jinxes, he darted and evaded, deflected and jumped. Hermione thought that he was even swifter on his feet than Price was. When Snape pressed forward to attack them, Harry started to talk.

"Picking up the leftovers, are you, Snape?" he snarled. "Where were you during the fight in the Burrow? Too many strong witches and wizards around for your taste? Easier to get hold of the old and weak, isn't it?"

"I see that you still haven't learned to use your brain," Snape hissed while deflecting one of Hermione's spells and attacking Harry. Harry, however, evaded skilfully and fired off a new barrage of hexes.

"Doesn't that worry you, Snape?" Harry continued. "Thirty Death Eaters attack, and now nineteen of them are in custody? How will you explain this to your master? Where were you during the attack, anyway?"

Snape sneered. "Don't concern yourself with things beyond your grasp, Potter." A red flash left his wand while he jumped to avoid one of Hermione's ice patches.

"Interesting, Miss Granger," he said. "Did you learn that in a book?"

Hermione ground her teeth and tried once again to pull her anger around herself like a shield, but found that she wasn't really all that angry, nor could she summon her hatred for Snape. She was too sad, confused, and tired and not in the best condition to go into another fight. So she was quiet and tried to find weaknesses in Snape's defences.

"There's no escape for you this time, Snape. We'll get you, and then you'll get what you deserve. I'll personally watch when you get the Dementor's kiss."

For a brief moment, Snape's face twisted into an angry grimace, but then it was calm and composed again, and he continued fighting efficiently against his two opponents.

"Dobby, why don't you help us?" Hermione asked, jumping out of the way of a yellow shower of sparks that shot towards her.

"Dobby cannot," Dobby wailed.

"Take Alouette and go, Dobby," Snape commanded, and the elf obeyed. He took Alouette's hand in his own and Disapparated.

"What did you do to the elves?" Harry screamed.

Snape smiled cruelly. "I've enslaved them, of course. But you wouldn't know how that's done, would you, Potter? Neither you nor your little friend here can look beyond what is taught to you at school, can you?"

"You enslaved Dobby? You filthy, cowardly murderer..." Harry was so angry now that he was at a loss for words. Hermione tried to warn him and cast a quick *Rotego*, but it came too late. Snape immediately took advantage of Harry's moment of inattention and Petrified him.

"Elves can be enslaved when a wizard heals them," Hermione said. "It is a sad fact that once upon a time, free elves were captured and injured deliberately, then brought before their future masters who healed them and enslaved them at the same time. The elves' children, children's children, and their children, generations of descendants, inherit this enslavement until it is broken by receiving clothes. It's a bond of blood and obligation. Possibly, it was good for something once, but it has been abused by wizardkind for their own ends for a very long time." While she was talking, Hermione was constantly attacking and warding off Snape's spells, which seemed rather tame to her. She supposed that he was playing with her.

"Quite adequate, quite adequate," Snape acknowledged to her surprise, "but that would be expected from a bookish know-it-all like you." He mock-bowed towards her, pointed his wand at his own shadow and used Hermione's confusion to attack her mercilessly while his now corporeal shadow mirrored each of his movements and cast off the same hexes and curses as the original. Under the continued onslaught of two Snapes, Hermione's defences wavered, and soon she found herself Petrified, too.

"You know," he said, bending over Harry and sneering into his unmoving face. "For a moment there, I thought that you had improved. But you still cannot control yourself, and you are no match for the Dark Lord. He'll be very disappointed when he next meets you. You will hardly be worth his while." He gave them both a final sneer and then Disapparated.

As soon as Snape disappeared, Fawkes the Phoenix Apparated in a red flash. He sat on Harry's shoulder and sang his comforting song; however, it took half an hour before the *Petrificus Totalis* had worn off enough for them to move again and release each other from the remnants of the spell. Harry shook from anger and humiliation, but Hermione was too tired to care much. Fawkes trilled a few final notes and Disapparated again.

"I wonder how he knows when he's needed," Hermione said pensively. "It almost looks as if he's watching you... Let's Floo back to St. Mungos," she suggested. "Maybe they'll allow us to be with the family, now."

Harry only nodded, and they walked back to the house.

Back at St. Mungo's, the Weasley children were all gathered in a separate room, a bit removed from the patients' wards. Bill was sitting on a couch, Fleur on one side, Ginny on the other. Both women had buried their faces in his shoulders, crying silently. Fred and George sat on another sofa and looked completely lost. Ron stood by the window and stared outside.

When Hermione and Harry entered the room, he turned around.

"Where were you?" he asked accusingly.

Harry told him the story while Hermione timidly took Ron's hand, but he shook it off angrily.

"Elves were more important to you than I... than our family... You'd rather go and play games with Snape while my mother..." His face was flushed.

"How could we have known that he'd be there?" Hermione said while looking at him pleadingly. "We had to look after the elves, don't you see? No one cared... The Aurors just left them... and I knew that they were injured."

"So what if they were? My mother is dead, and I needed you to be here... I needed you..." Ron's voice broke, and he turned away from her, trying to hide his tears but unable to hide the sobs that shook him again.

"Don't be angry with us, please," Harry said, putting his hand on Ron's arm. "We weren't allowed to follow you, and judging from the night when your father was attacked, we believed that it would be hours until we would be allowed to see you. And we had to do something."

"Leave me alone," Ron choked and pushed Harry's hand off his arm. Harry shook his head, walked over to Hermione, and put an arm around her. They both sat down on the third sofa, facing the other Weasleys.

Ginny looked up and smiled sadly at Harry. She started to say something, but Hermione thought that she knew what was coming and tapped her lips urgently with her forefinger.

"Oh, if you think we don't know that their break-up was a fake one, then think again," Fred said and gestured towards Harry and Ginny. "Don't worry, Harry, we won't tell anyone. As annoying as she can be, we prefer our little sister alive."

Ginny stared at him and started to cry again. Bill shook his head and closed his eyes tiredly. Fred flinched. "Oh, crap. I'm sorry... You know what I meant, Gin."

"Yeah," Ginny sobbed, "and I'd prefer Mum alive, too." They all started to cry again, more or less quietly.

After a while, Hermione thought she'd try again to make peace with Ron and walked over to him. He just looked at her, clenched his teeth, and tried to suppress the tears. She wiped his face and took him in her arms. As if a dam had broken, Ron started to cry in earnest, but he made no attempt to free himself from her. Despite all the pain, Hermione was glad they were still together, able to give each other comfort and love.

If Hermione thought that Ron had forgiven her, she soon was disabused of the notion. In the first few days that followed, he was very quiet and hardly spoke to her until his mother's funeral was over. It was a much shorter and less formal ceremony than the funeral of Albus Dumbledore, but the large number of people that attended showed how well-liked Molly Weasley had been.

After the funeral, they helped Mr. Weasley, Bill and Charlie to close down the Burrow. Fred and George had invited their father to stay with them, and Arthur Weasley had accepted gladly. He couldn't stand to stay alone in the place where he had been so happy with his wife, and he wanted to be close to Percy, who was still in St. Mungos and seemed to be in a strange stupor. Harry had offered to let him stay in his house at Godric's Hollow, but Mr. Weasley had declined, stating that he didn't want to be alone just yet. Bill and Fleur moved into their own flat that they had bought in Diagon Alley, and Charlie returned to Romania. Ron and Ginny went back to Hogwarts, together with Harry and Hermione. Hermione's eighteenth birthday had come and gone, unnoticed by anyone but Harry, who had found a commentary for *The Art of War* for her in a Muggle bookshop.

After a few more days, Harry and Hermione were ready to take up the search for the Horcruxes again, but Ron seemed to have lost all interest. Hermione tried to involve him in her and Harry's plans and speculations, but he only got angry when she did, and they inevitably ended up fighting. Ron couldn't forget that Hermione had thought of someone else while he and his family were in so much pain, and Hermione felt her heart break when she realized that Ron would never understand that caring for those in need was part of what defined her personality.

About six weeks after his mother's death, Ron began to show signs of his old self again. He became more active in their search and didn't avoid being alone with Hermione any longer. The first sharp pain of loss seemed to have faded to a dull ache. The rest of the Weasleys seemed to be coping as well. Charlie had invited Mr. Weasley to stay with him in Romania for a while, and Mr. Weasley had agreed, taking a leave of absence from his job. Percy's condition had improved slightly, and Bill had promised to look after him on a regular basis while his father was away. Fred and George had offered to take care of Percy, but the rest of the family had deemed it wiser not to rely on the twins' capacity for forgiveness and compassion.

By the end of October, the Horcrux search had, once again, reached a dead end. Harry wasn't making any progress with Professor Slughorn, and the interviews with older Order members revealed no new or helpful information. Hermione watched with sorrow as Harry oscillated constantly between depression and anger while Ron always remained somewhat remote from both of them.

Their classes were complex and difficult, and although, as Bill had predicted, nearly every subject dealt with advanced applied magic, their newly learned detection and deactivation skills were useless if there wasn't an object in sight where they could be applied. Their moods weren't helped by the fact that the last Defence Club training session had found them beaten mercilessly by a group of Slytherins led by Pansy Parkinson. Pansy had advanced to being one of the keenest students in the subject; she hung onto Price's every word and proved to be a rather clever strategist when she led her own small group, fighting against whoever was appointed as their opponent.

"Why does Price have to include the Slytherins in the Defence Club anyway?" Harry growled while they walked towards the Great Hall for tea.

"How could he exclude them? Their house is part of the school." Hermione knew what Harry was getting at but refused to support his ideas of banning the Slytherins from all lessons that dealt with advanced magic, especially Defence Against the Dark Arts that had defensive and offensive strategy as its main theoretical focus.

"Their house should have been disbanded," Harry sneered. "Everyone knows that it almost entirely consists of Death Eater sympathisers, and I can't see why anyone should teach anything to future Death Eaters. The less they learn about what we know and can do, the better."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione sighed. "They aren't all future Death Eaters, and even if they are influenced by their families, they still have to make their own choices in the end. Have you forgotten Draco? He made his choice, and Dumbledore gave him the chance to do this. Do you really think that disbanding Slytherin house is something Dumbledore would have wanted?"

"Oh, stop referring to Dumbledore," Harry raved. "He wasn't infallible, as you well know."

"He was human, and he had compassion and understanding," Hermione grumbled angrily. "And that's something you're sadly missing as of late, Harry." She looked at him with glittering eyes and swallowed. "I want the old Harry back..."

Harry only shrugged and was silent. Ron gave her a quizzical look, patted her shoulder and followed Harry. Hermione, however, wasn't done yet. She went on and on about how each house deserved the same chance at being educated, how prejudice wouldn't help anyone, and how vile rumours could bring a whole house into disrepute.

"Do I have to remind you that Peter Pettigrew was a Gryffindor, and that you yourself were almost sorted into Slytherin?" she finally managed to exclaim, and that stopped Harry in his tracks.

"Let it go, Hermione. The majority of Slytherins come from Death Eater homes and telling them which strategies we are learning is a big mistake. Mark my words."

"So how should it be?" she hissed. "A two-class education system after Potter? The harmless, tuned-down variety for the second-class Slytherins, and the finer points of wizardry taught to the more deserving houses? Is that it?"

"Why not? Harry at least tries to save lives while you are more concerned with theory and principles than with real life, Hermione," Ron threw in accusingly. "The Death Eaters who killed my mum learned their magic at Hogwarts. If they hadn't, she could still be alive."

Hermione went very pale. "Is that what you think of me, Ron? That I put theorizing over compassion? Do you really think that Hogwarts' education is responsible for the deeds of Death Eaters?" She swallowed down a sob. "You think that having principles is wrong? I thought you had understood... both of you... but the pain, I must make excuses for the pain..." Her voice trailed off, and she walked alongside the two young men in silence, eyes bright with unshed tears.

They didn't get further than the first floor when suddenly Kreacher Apparated in front of them.

"Kreacher has been told that the great Harry Potter," said the house-elf, who then mumbled under his breath, "the blood traitor," before continuing, "has been beaten in his lesson. Maybe Harry Potter needs Kreacher's service. Maybe Kreacher can do something for Harry Potter?" He paused briefly, then added, "And revel in his misery?"

"There you have it, Hermione. Another one of your hopeless causes. And where, pray tell, did you hear of this, Kreacher?"

"Kreacher has overheard it when Miss Parkinson, who is a friend of Kreacher's true masters, mentioned it to a house-mate."

"Just what I thought." Harry's face had turned red. "They stick together like glue, don't you see?" His voice was shrill from anger now. "How can we ever accomplish

anything?" He gasped for breath but didn't leave Hermione room to say anything. "How can we ever get anywhere with Slytherins and Death Eaters and oh-so-faithful house-elves all banding together? This has to stop. I can't take this anymore." Harry took another deep breath, took one of his shoes off, and pulled a sock from his foot. He threw the sock at Kreacher, despite Hermione's attempt to prevent him.

"You're free. Now get out of my sight!" he screamed at Kreacher, who stared at the sock and started to cry and sob noisily, drops of snot running from his snout-like nose.

Hermione buried her face in her hands and sat down on the floor, her back against the wall. Ron just stood there, watching the scene with a cool remoteness that made him appear like a disinterested observer.

Kreacher was still wailing and sobbing when Peregrin Price turned around the corner. He seemed to have been on his way to tea as well.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"Kreacher has been given clothes," the creature wailed. "Kreacher is disgraced. Kreacher will have to kill himself, now."

Price scrutinized him for a moment, then glanced at the students with an odd expression. "Don't do anything rash," he ordered. "I may have employment for you, Kreacher. You will wait for me in my office."

He waved his wand at the nattering elf, who said, "Employment? No decent elf seeks employment... The disgrace... What can you expect from half-blood filth?" And Kreacher disappeared.

Price turned around and stared at Harry coldly. "Do you really think that was a wise decision under the circumstances, Mr. Potter?" he asked scornfully.

"What's it to you?" Harry hissed defiantly.

Price moved towards him until their noses almost touched. "It is a very sad thing that I have to remind you of the danger of betrayal. Freeing Kreacher is a threat to the Order's safety and secrecy. It affects the Order and everyone who fights on our side. But you don't need to take these things into consideration, do you? Harry Potter makes his own laws and lives by his own rules, doesn't he? You foolish boy." He spun around and strode off towards his office.

Hermione had never seen Price so angry. But she couldn't blame him; he was right. Kreacher had already betrayed them once, and now freed, he didn't have any obligations to secrecy. But maybe Price could find a solution. If anyone could, he would, she thought. She watched how Price strode off, and how Ron and Harry stared after him sheepishly. She shook herself, took both friends by the arms and pulled them towards the Great Hall.

"There's no use crying over spilled milk," she said. "Let's have tea."

Wisely refraining from commenting, Harry and Ron followed.

Three days later, Hermione was sitting in the middle of one of the largest private magical archives in Britain outside Hogwarts, talking to a ghost who had read every book and every scroll in the archive. Harry had found the address of two brothers who had gone to school with Voldemort but hadn't been interviewed yet. The brothers lived in Arundel, just a stone's throw away from Arundel Castle where the archive was located.

Harry and Ron were to visit the two brothers while Hermione took the opportunity to get a good look at the archive. To their delight and amusement, they had learned that Harry's early and so often unwanted fame at least proved good for something: it opened the doors of the elderly wizards and witches they wanted to interview. Almost everyone was pleased to talk to the Boy Who Lived. He always gave as a reason for the questioning that he wanted to learn as much about his foe as possible, and this gave everyone he interviewed a pleasant feeling of self-importance.

Hermione, on the other hand, often asked questions that were either too blunt or too transparent to yield good results. Thus, no one complained when she suggested checking out Arundel Castle while Harry and Ron were visiting Silas and Alfred Bogmyrtle.

Hermione leaned back in her chair and looked excitedly over the stacks of old *Daily Prophets*, *Quibblers*, and *Witch Weekly* magazines; they were back issues that couldn't be found at Hogwarts except for the back issues of the *Daily Prophet*. The *Witch Weekly* collection was complete and reached back to the first edition. The *Daily Prophet* and the *Quibbler* collections were lacking a few early copies, but the years Hermione was interested in were complete.

She had decided to look as far back as 1942 when Voldemort had murdered his father. While that crime seemed to have gone mostly unnoticed by the wizarding press, later events had been mentioned. Interestingly, it was the *Quibbler* that had reported the murder of Hepzibah Smith. Potentilla Lovegood, the then-editor of the tabloid, had asked some interesting questions about the significance of the lost heirlooms, but sadly the story hadn't been followed up. *Witch Weekly* had published a portrait of Hepzibah Smith and mentioned her interest in antiques, but while this all was quite interesting, it didn't really help in locating more Horcruxes.

Hermione sighed. Reading through all these papers and magazines was tiresome and inefficient. Not for the first time, she wished she had a spell that worked as a database search would on Muggle computers. Madam Pince, who was rather mellow towards Hermione, had taught her some very valuable locating spells, but there were none that could operate with keywords. Hermione sighed again and wished she had the leisure time to develop such a spell by herself.

"Have you found what you need? Or can I help you with something, fair maiden?" the blue-clad ghost asked. He was pleasant, knowledgeable, but also possessed an incessant curiosity that made Hermione uncomfortable. She had told him that she was interested in the lives of the Hogwarts founders and wanted to find as much information about them and their heirs as possible. While he was floating through the corridors between the bookshelves, she went on with her search for items old or important enough that they might be Horcruxes. However, by the end of the day, she hadn't learned anything new. She would tell Ron and Harry that she'd want to return here soon; she had found a few old scrolls referring to blood rites and spells based on sacrifice and wished to pursue the subject further. Ever since she had heard about the true nature of Harry's mother's protection, she had employed the idea that Horcruxes were only a coarse imitation of something much older that was based on love and sacrifice. And by looking for the original magic, she thought she might find out more about the Horcruxes, their creation, and how best to destroy them. Her hopes weren't totally unfounded either since, unlike Hogwarts, this library contained books about the Dark Arts.

Deep in thought, Hermione stared out of the window and watched the sun set. Harry and Ron would be here to pick her up soon, and she wondered if they had learned anything of significance. She was about to resume her research when the paper she was screening was taken out of her fingers by a pale and thin hand.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," the owner of the hand said.

Hermione's head snapped up. "Snape!" she exclaimed in horror, her hand shot to her wand, but Snape had disarmed her before she had even finished the thought. Her former teacher was leaning nonchalantly against the table; two masked Death Eaters watched them attentively from a distance.

"What do you want from me?" she screamed, hoping that someone would hear her.

"I merely want to talk to you. In private," he added, and cast a spell that seemed to form an opaque bubble around them. "They can hear us, but no one will see us." He motioned to his companions. "If they don't hear me speak for a while, they will come inquire, so don't try to think up some fancy strategy."

"Get on with it. What could you possibly want from me?" Hermione snarled.

"Tut, tut, those manners." Snape smirked. "But manners can be taught..." He stared at her with unreadable black eyes. "Listen, Miss Granger, I will say this only once. It has come to the attention of the Dark Lord that you are a witch of outstanding talent and understanding."

Hermione made a faint noise of disbelief and stared at him as if he had lost his mind. Snape merely smiled his cold and cruel smile and continued.

"It seems that our mutual acquaintance, Wormtail, has born witness to your abilities. He has reported to our Lord how skilfully you disarmed Bellatrix LeStrange, and how efficiently you helped fight back the attackers at the Burrow. Furthermore, you are the confidante, maybe even the love interest, of Harry Potter, which about doubles your value."

"Much good will it do you," Hermione hissed. "If you think I would tell you anything about Harry, think again. What do you really want, Snape? Why don't you just kill me and have done with it?"

"Impatient, imprudent, impertinent as ever," Snape growled. "I would have been very surprised to really have found you so changed, but one like Peter Pettigrew is easily impressed." Snape stroked his lower lip with one pale, long finger.

"However, there is more than that. The Dark Lord has a suggestion for you. Apart from your little talent, you are still a Muggle-born witch. Now, everyone knows that the Dark Lord isn't fond of Muggle-borns, but for some time now, he has considered including the worthy ones into our fold, as you are magical, after all. He still wishes for the strict separation from all things Muggle and the promotion of pure-blood culture. However, he feels that a Muggle-born witch at his side will make the transition from the bumbling, incompetent fools at the Ministry to his own strict, but well-planned reign, more painless...smoother. He offers you fame, riches, and all the resources for knowledge and magical advancement you can possibly desire. Think about it, Miss Granger," Snape said when he saw her angry and disgusted face. "Not many are offered such an honour. It is in your hands to decide the fate of your fellow Muggle-born witches and wizards. You can help them better than anyone else. Isn't that a worthwhile goal for you to achieve?"

"And how many do I have to kill before I am admitted?" Hermione asked scathingly.

"Tsk. I'd have expected more from you, Miss Granger. Minerva McGonagall always praised your quick understanding so highly. You have a choice. Isn't it always important to Gryffindors to have a choice? You can move something. You of all people will understand that the wizarding world needs change. It is a corrupt, petrified society. You could be part of that change. You could be one to direct the way things will be going. Think about it. You will have the power to do good."

Hermione laughed harshly. "To do good? Who are you kidding, Snape? Your change comes with murder and violence. Your Dark Lord isn't elected as leader; he's trying to seize the leadership through terror, blackmail, intimidation, and murder. That is your 'good'. But not mine..."

"If you don't accept my proposal, you will die, Miss Granger. You will die, here and now. Think about it. Make your choice." He looked at her with a twisted smile, his bottomless eyes glittering strangely.

Hermione felt how cold sweat was streaming down her back and her forehead. She felt her knees shaking and was glad that she was already sitting. She had been scared and frightened many times in her short life, but never threatened with immediate death by someone who was capable of executing the verdict as soon as it was spoken. Her mind worked frantically. Maybe she could pretend to give in and try to spy on Voldemort.

"Don't even think of trying to deceive the Dark Lord of your motives," Snape said, sneering. "He is the strongest Legilimens alive, and if he finds any duplicity in you, he will kill you on the spot. And it won't be as merciful and quick as it will be when it comes from me..." From the distance, muted chuckles from the two Death Eater watchdogs could be heard. Apparently, they were following the conversation closely.

Hermione closed her eyes and swallowed. Her heart was hammering madly, and she couldn't think clearly; her fear was clouding everything. A few more swallows and deep breaths helped to clear her head somewhat. She took another calming breath and summoned her courage, reminding herself of who and what she was.

"Go to hell, Snape. Go to hell, both you and your foul master." Her voice broke, but she straightened her shoulders and continued. "I shall not betray everything I stand for, everything I believe in, to secure a few years in seeming comfort for me, at the cost of everything and everyone I love. Kill me if you must but stop acting as if that inhuman madman were nothing worse than a ... a dedicated rebel who wants to better the fate of wizardkind. I won't turn to him... I'd rather die!"

"As you wish," Snape said, sneering.

The last thing Hermione saw before everything went dark was Snape reaching for his wand and playing with a lace handkerchief in his hand.

Epilogue of Part I

When Harry and Ron reached the entrance hall of Arundel castle, they were slightly disturbed by its silence. Where earlier there had been the busy hustle and bustle of the librarian, clients, and a noisy and curious ghost, there now was nothing but an eerie silence.

Quietly, they moved towards the place where they knew Hermione would be waiting for them. A quick glance revealed to Harry that Ron had drawn his wand, just like Harry had. They turned a corner and found the ghost stuck to a bookshelf, hanging upside down, apparently sleeping.

Moving even more carefully, they turned another corner and stopped in their tracks.

Hermione was stumbling towards them, her mouth opened as if she wanted to scream, but no sound escaped her. Her eyes were wide-open, horror-struck, and glassy. At her back, two masked Death Eaters stood, and between them, emerging from an area that was concealed from their sight, was Severus Snape.

Before either Harry or Ron could react, Snape raised his wand and yelled, "*Avada Kedavra*." Too shocked to move, Harry and Ron saw Hermione collapse, hit the ground, and then burst into flames. Snape laughed coldly, touched an item in his hand that was glowing in a bluish light, and disappeared together with the two Death Eaters.

"Hermione!" Ron screamed and ran towards her. Harry followed and put his hand on Ron's back, swallowing when he saw what was left of Hermione. There was a pile of ashes and a strand of hair.

"Hermione!" Ron whispered again and then broke down, grabbing Harry in a hug for comfort. Harry hugged his best friend back as hard as he could, his own tears running down his cheeks.

End of Part I.

Part II - Initiation - Laying Plans

Chapter 11 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognise belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Part II Initiation

Chapter 10 Laying Plans

18. All warfare is based on deception.

19. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable;

when using our forces, we must seem inactive;

when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away;

when far away, we must make him believe we are near.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, I. Laying Plans)

"Rennervate!"

Hermione's eyes flew open and stared into a pair of friendly blue eyes. The eyes were set in a heart-shaped, pink face, which was framed by blonde hair tied into pigtails. Hermione knew this face. It belonged to Hannah Abbott.

"You're dead!" Hermione blurted out.

Hannah laughed. "No, I'm not, and neither are you. Welcome to Dumbledore's Army!"

Hermione blinked a few times, swallowed, and looked at Hannah wide-eyed. "Care to explain to me what happened? Who rescued me? Where are Harry and Ron?" Almost as an afterthought, she turned her eyes away from Hannah and looked around. It looked like they were in a cave; the walls surrounding them were rough limestone with a few small stalactites hanging from the roof.

Hannah's face turned serious, and she laid a hand on Hermione's arm. When Hermione looked at her questioningly, Hannah squeezed Hermione's arm gently and said, "You must understand that you are dead to the rest of the world. The leader of our Underground movement rescued you. We call ourselves Dumbledore's Army...in Professor Dumbledore's honour."

"Who ... where ... who is this leader? Is Professor Dumbledore alive, too?" Suddenly, a tiny glimmer of hope sparked to life in Hermione's heart.

"No, he isn't. But many wizards and witches who were reported dead are here, working against You-Know-Who in the Underground."

"Mrs. Weasley?"

"No, I am sorry. Sadly, not everyone attacked by Death Eaters can be saved. But it will all be explained to you. "

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to clear her head but didn't succeed. She had so many questions that she didn't know where to start. This all sounded so absurd, almost surreal. She looked around again. The cave was empty; there was no sign of any occupants.

"What is this place? Where is this Underground? Who is this leader? And how did I get here?" Hermione finally uttered in a shrill, slightly hysterical voice.

Hannah smiled reassuringly. "This is just a random, uninhabited cave. We've never used it before and likely never will again. You must understand that secrecy is of the utmost importance; otherwise we're all dead. If as much as a hint of our existence gets outside the group, we're doomed, and we will barely be able to save our own lives, let alone rescue the lives of others."

Hermione took a few deep breaths, trying to remember her training, and slowly managed to check her panic and to clear her thoughts. "I understand. At least, I think I do. Go on"

"All right, next question. Where is this Underground? I cannot tell you because I am under a magical contract to keep it a secret from outsiders. You'll be there soon enough, I reckon. But first, you need to talk to Nundu, who will explain everything in more detail." Hannah grinned when she saw Hermione's confused frown.

"Nundu? Who or what is that?"

"He's our leader. It's his alias. We do not speak his name" Hannah giggled when she saw Hermione's grimace. "No, he isn't He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, don't worry. Some of the DA use pseudonyms, but only the ones who are active in missions outside our refuges. We never, ever refer to each other by our real names outside, except for situations like this one when a new person needs to be introduced. Then it can't be avoided, but then we're usually far away from everyone and everything that could be endangered. And that's just about as much as I can and will tell you here. Nundu will pick you up soon, and then you can ask him everything you want to know."

"I didn't call you by your name, and now I realise that you didn't say my name, either. So what's your code name?"

"I don't have one. I don't usually go on outside missions; I'm too nervous for that. I make myself useful, though. I brew standard healing potions."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up to her hairline. "You brew potions?"

"You needn't be that surprised." Hannah mock-scowled. "I always got good marks in Potions."

"That's not what I meant." Hermione flinched. "This sounds more and more absurd. You're telling me that you have a place where you can peacefully brew and store potions?"

"Yes. We do have quite a sophisticated infrastructure. I was as amazed as you are now when I was introduced. But it was easier for me since my whole family was there."

"Your family? Your mother? They are all alive?" Hermione's heart went out to the blonde girl.

"Yes, all of them. Isn't that wonderful?" Hannah looked very happy. "I just wish that we could save more ... and that some people could be told" Her voice trailed off, and she looked at the floor.

Hermione understood the sudden sadness. "Er ... HE took it very hard. We were all in the Great Hall for breakfast when the *Daily Prophet* with the news arrived Oh, Merlin, my parents! R.... My friends!" She gulped. "This is horrible."

Hannah shook herself and looked up with a steely gleam in her eyes. "What would be really horrible is if we all were dead. Since we aren't, there is hope that we'll be

reunited with those we love one day. Don't you think that that should be compensation enough?"

Hermione frowned. "Seen from that angle, certainly. I just wish I could spare them this heart-break." She took another deep breath, pushing her sadness and fear out of her mind. "What do we do now?"

"Nundu will be here shortly. Then, you'll go with him, and I'll go back to my group with a Portkey."

"But you must be authorised" Hermione stopped herself, realising the ludicrousness of her own statement, but she still was confused. "Isn't there a trace on the Portkey Spell?"

"The wands casting the spell are traced, if they're registered, but the spell itself isn't. Otherwise, the Ministry couldn't authorise certain people to call the spell without raising the alarm or without Apparating the spell-casters away. That's how the authorisation works." Hannah grinned. "And what do you know, we use unregistered wands. We're quite the rule breakers." She laughed when Hermione's mouth fell open. "Full of surprises, aren't we?"

Hermione's throat was dry. She coughed, wishing for a drink of water, and nodded.

Hannah's expression had become serious again. "Listen. When Nundu comes, try not to be too shocked. I know you will be; we all were when we learned who he was. Go with him and don't be afraid. He won't harm you. I give you my word. It was he who saved you, who saved us all, essentially. Just let him say what he has to say, and then you can ask questions. All right?"

"Uhm ..." Hermione said.

"Oh, there he is!" Hannah spun around at the soft crack of someone Apparating. At the cave entrance, the dark silhouette of a man appeared and dimmed the faint glow of a crescent moon. When the man moved closer, Hermione realised with growing terror that she knew precisely who moved the way that man moved. Her fears were confirmed when the face that looked down at her with a sardonic smile was that of Severus Snape.

"You!" Hermione shrieked but found herself unable to make another noise; Snape must have cast a Silencing Charm on her. Ropes had flown out of Snape's wand and bound her, and now she was quite helpless. This didn't prevent her heart from beating in her throat, or her eyes from casting a murderous glare at Hannah Abbott, all the while mouthing silent curses and threats; however, without a wand, her nonverbal magic refused to work....

Snape stared at Hermione with his cold, black eyes and then turned to Hannah. "Here is the Portkey. I take it that the basics were conveyed?"

"They were," Hannah confirmed. She smiled at Hermione, who flinched, and said, "Relax, I haven't lied to you. No need to kill me with your glare. Trust me. He won't harm you. You can trust him with your life. We all do." Another smile, and she touched the gum wrapper on the ground. "Three Two One " The gum wrapper flashed in a blue light, and Hannah disappeared.

Snape came closer, sneered at Hermione's panicked expression, and grabbed her upper arm, which wasn't covered by ropes. With a soft, barely audible pop, he Disapparated with her.

"I do apologize for the treatment, Miss Granger," Snape said in his smooth, silky voice. "But without it, you would most likely have scratched my eyes out before I had a chance to wish you a good evening." They both had reappeared in a small cave that didn't seem to have an entrance or exit. He searched for something in his pockets and produced two small bottles. Unceremoniously, he forced the contents of one of the bottles down the throat of a furiously struggling Hermione and drank the second one himself. They both shrank until they were the size of mice.

"Will you come with me, or do I have to force you?" Snape asked quietly.

Hermione glared at him, but she was curious despite her anger. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself and nodded. Snape led her to the opposite wall where there was a small opening barely large enough for a mouse.

They reached another small cave, but it was still large enough to appear like a cathedral to tiny Hermione. One niche in the cave was furnished with a miniature table, two chairs, and a cabinet. Snape made her sit on one of the chairs, then he released her from the confining ropes and ended the Silencing Spell.

"You will have to explain a lot of things," Hermione hissed through clenched teeth, forcing herself to stay calm, although her first impulse had indeed been to throw herself at him and inflict as much harm as she could manage with her bare hands.

"I realise that this is all rather confusing for you, but I trust that you will act like the intelligent witch you allegedly are and execute this conversation in as civil a manner as possible."

At least the sneer he gave her was familiar, even if his words were not. Snape apologising? And had he just called her intelligent? This had to be some scheme to deceive her. She sipped at the glass of water he had given her and gathered her thoughts.

"Why should I believe a word you say?" she finally choked out.

"You're alive. Isn't that reason enough?"

"I may not be for much longer. This is likely just some perverted scheme to make me all teary-eyed and miserable for your Dark Lord."

"That's an idiotic assumption! Obviously your reputation for quick thinking is overrated. Why am I not surprised?" He scowled at her, eyes narrowed.

Hermione scowled back. "Why is it an idiotic assumption? It fits with your character: cruel, with a nasty sense of humour. You take pleasure in people's misery ... and you're a murderer. You've been playing cat and mouse with Harry these past weeks. Why should this be any different? Why should I believe that ridiculous story of yours? What do you really want from me?"

Snape walked towards her, eyes narrowed to slits and pushed his nose in her face. She leaned back as far as her chair would let her.

"Didn't you listen to what your friend just told you? Surely you don't believe that she is part of some sinister scheme to confound you?"

"I don't know what to believe any longer. She seemed real and sane enough ... but, maybe she is under the Imperius Curse" For a brief moment, Hermione had suspected that someone had used Polyjuice Potion to imitate Hannah, but then she'd remembered that Polyjuice Potion didn't work with hairs or other bits from dead people. Hannah had to be alive, and that girl earlier had moved and talked exactly like the Hannah Abbott she knew.

"And all that effort was made to confound one Miss Hermione Granger?" Snape snarled. "Idiot girl. I should have foreseen that the formidable Miss Granger would be too preoccupied with her own self-importance to be able to analyze things before she talks. As usual, your know-it-all attitude prevents you from logical thought. But then, it's hardly surprising; you won't have read about this situation in a book."

Hermione glared at him. At least this was the Snape she knew. It was only slightly reassuring, but at least it was something. She really couldn't see what use all this talk would be if Snape merely wanted to kill her. Maybe, she should just listen to what he had to say, she thought. She swallowed and cleared her throat. "You brought me here. If you want me to believe you, for whatever reasons, you need to explain it all to me. So far, you haven't really been all that convincing. And that pseudonym of yours. Nundu! Not the least bit conceited, is it?"

"Is it?" Snape growled. "For your information, those names are given to a witch or wizard by the Underground as a name of honour; they aren't chosen. For some reason, those people gave me that name, and I will continue using it whether you approve of it, or not. And about being convincing? What does it take to reassure you? Ask away. You now have the opportunity to ask anything you wish to know at least, as long as I am able to endure your endless questions."

"Why did you murder Professor Dumbledore?"

Snape blinked once and glared at her coldly. "He ordered me to kill him. I promised him to obey every order he gave me. He was close to death, in terrible pain, and he feared for Potter and Draco Malfoy's lives. I killed him then and there because it was inevitable, and at the same time, an invaluable tactical advantage. I shall never forgive myself for doing so, but I had no other choice. If I had shown my true loyalties at that moment, we all would be dead. Draco, Dumbledore, myself, and your friend Potter. That second broomstick on the tower wouldn't have gone undetected for much longer."

"Prove it!"

"I shall show you my Pensieve memory of that night. I shall also show you Professor Dumbledore's memory from earlier events, leading to his death. I have shown this to each and every member of Dumbledore's Army who joined after his death."

Hermione frowned. This was too easy. "Memories can be tampered with. How will I know that what you show me is the complete memory, and not what you want me to believe?"

Snape shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Once again, you overestimate your own importance, Miss Granger. Think! Why should I do that? Why not just go through with it when I pretended to kill you earlier today? It would have spared me the trouble and the pleasure of your company." That last part was heavily laden with sarcasm.

"I have no other proof, Miss Granger. You will have to take my word for it: the word of Severus Snape, the murderer." His words sounded bitter. "After you have seen the memories, you will be faced with a choice. You can either agree to join our group and fight the Dark Lord you will need to sign a magical contract which will bind you to strict secrecy about the Underground or you can agree to be Obliviated, get a new identity, and then live the life of an ordinary witch somewhere far away from Britain."

Hermione flinched. This all sounded so ... so reasonable. So ... well meaning. Almost benevolent. So very unlike the Snape she thought she knew. She shook her head to clear it and studied him for a long moment.

In the meantime, Snape had sat down on the second chair, and he now met her gaze without blinking. Snape's expression was stern, composed, calm, and lacking his customary sneer or scowl. It was an unreadable face.

"Show me these memories," Hermione whispered, touched by Snape's words and demeanour despite her distrust.

Snape drew his wand, cast some protective spells around the cave and then turned to one corner. He tapped a sequence of taps and swishes on the wall, and, a moment later, a segment of the wall shone in a silvery light, turned 180 degrees, and revealed a table with a Pensieve on it. Since the proportions were right, the Pensieve must have been shrunk before it was brought there.

"Professor Dumbledore's memory is already in there. I will put my own in as soon as you come out again." He prodded the Pensieve with his wand, and the silvery shimmer began to revolve, faster and faster until Hermione, who had come close, felt her head spin. She bent her head to the surface, saw the image of a room, felt herself drawn into it, and tumbled downwards into the scene.

Hermione was standing in a bedroom. The room was dimly lit, and she saw Professor Dumbledore standing in the middle of the room, swaying on his feet, holding his arm and grimacing in pain. Hermione's heart beat painfully when she saw the former headmaster suffer, but she didn't have much time to pity him before someone stormed into the room.

"Sorry I'm late. I came here as soon as I got your Patronus, Headmaster. Why... Headmaster! What happened?" Severus Snape rushed to the old man, who had collapsed on the floor of what had to be his private chambers.

"A curse... Severus..."

"Hold still!" Snape stared at the blackened hand and arm of Albus Dumbledore. The burnt flesh seeped blood and fluid and emitted wisps of smoke from some spots on the skin. "An Incendium Nervalis, I presume?"

"Not sure... not cast... object..." the Headmaster croaked, his face twisted in pain.

"Merlin help you! Any lesser wizard would be dead," muttered Snape, and he started to move his wand over the injury while he spoke an incantation that sounded like a song.

Many long moments later, the blood had stopped flowing and the smoke had vanished. The pain seemed to have lessened as well since Albus Dumbledore took a deep, shaky breath and smiled at the younger man, the familiar twinkle back in his eyes.

"I think that was a bit close, even for me, Severus. But thank you; I feel much better now!"

"You must get into bed. I will call Madam Pomfrey. You call Fawkes; his tears will help you, too. And I will give you a potion." Snape started to rise, but Dumbledore put a hand on his sleeve to stop him.

"Poppy has already left for the summer, Severus. I don't really need her. You are still here; that is enough."

Snape shook his head. "You know that I will have to leave soon. Let me take you to your home and instruct the house-elves. You will need more rest...and time for healing."

Dumbledore smiled. "I'm not going home this summer. There is too much at stake."

"Headmaster! You must rest!" Snape helped the old man up from the floor and led him to his bed where the old wizard sat down, clearly exhausted. After helping the headmaster to lie down, Snape left the rooms. He returned a few minutes later with a phial in his hand. "Drink this!"

The Headmaster drank the potion and sank back on his pillow with a sigh. "I will be all right, Severus. You have healed me. I will recover in no time."

"I have done no such thing," Snape spat hoarsely. "If this is indeed the Incendium Nervalis, then there is no cure, as you well know. I can only slow down the degenerative process and ease the symptoms for a while."

The Headmaster looked grave. "I do know, and it is likely that it was the Incendium. But you've bought me time, haven't you? At least a year? Maybe more?"

"Maybe five years, ten if you are lucky. It depends on the care you get, and how well you look after yourself." Snape jumped up from the chair beside Dumbledore's bed and strode to one of the windows. "With phoenix tears helping you to heal, there may be more years still. In any case, you need to get as much strength back as possible. The stronger you are, the slower the progress. But any new major injury, and the degeneration will proceed rapidly again."

"And in the end, I will lose my mind, won't I, Severus?" The Headmaster sounded worried.

Snape whirled around to face him. "Yes, I am afraid you will. And before that, you will slowly lose the feeling in your extremities. What did you do, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore closed his eyes. "I am sorry. I cannot tell you. So, I will basically end up in a helpless, vegetative state?"

Snape moved back to the bed again. "Yes, Headmaster, I..."

"Don't, Severus," Dumbledore interrupted. "Don't say you're sorry. If you cannot heal me, no one can. I have had a long and good life; I am not afraid. But there are still things I have to do." He grabbed Snape's arm once again. "Severus, I want you to promise me something."

"What is it?"

"Promise you will help me when the time comes."

Snape considered that for a moment and raised an eyebrow. "I am a bit surprised that one of the finest Potions brewers of our time should feel the need to ask that of me instead of making it himself. But then...prerogative of the Headmaster, I suppose?" He frowned. "You know that there is a potion. I can make it for you. When you feel you must, you could take it."

Dumbledore grabbed Snape's sleeve with both hands, sounding almost pleading. "But if, for some reason, I cannot help myself and get to the stage where I am not myself any longer.... You would know; you would see it in my mind. Would you help me die? Severus, please, you know I wouldn't ask this lightly."

Snape stared down at the old man, a vein in his temple throbbing agitatedly. "How...? How could I...? No...." Snape's face was very pale. "Why me? Why not Madam Pomfrey? What else do I have to do before..." His voice trailed off.

"Why you? Because I trust you." The Headmaster looked into Snape's bottomless black eyes. "This has nothing to do with what you have to do, or think you still have to do, to redeem yourself. This is a personal favour I am asking of you."

Snape stared back at the Headmaster, long and hard. Then he took a deep breath, scowled, and said through gritted teeth, "I gave you a promise many years ago. I gave you my word to obey you whatever you asked of me. I gave you that promise because I knew you never ask more of people than what you would be willing to do yourself...and now you ask me to do this?"

"Because I know that you can do it, Severus. You are one of the few who understand...that an expression of compassion sometimes looks exactly like the opposite."

Snape scowled. "Perhaps you take too much for granted, Headmaster. Why not ask your brother or someone like Lupin? He shares your sentimental outlook on life."

"Aberforth couldn't do it, you know that, and Remus would break if I asked this of him. So would many others. You won't. Please, Severus."

"I still stand by my promise, but how can you be so certain that I won't break?"

"You know about the power, Severus. Even if you don't want to admit it. Don't deny it, not tonight. It is the same power that made you come to your senses. The same power that brought you to my door sixteen years ago. The same power that has helped you stay alive." Dumbledore chuckled softly. "The power that has kept you from strangling Harry and his friends all these years."

Snape rolled his eyes. "That is because I heeded your wishes, Headmaster, not because of the power," he said. "But I won't deny its strength, even if I fail to fully grasp its significance."

"You have shown on more than one occasion that you understand it more deeply than many, even if that may be on an unconscious level." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "But we can discuss this some other time. I am very tired. I think I will sleep, now."

"Goodnight, Headmaster."

"Goodnight."

With a gentle pull, Hermione was drawn out of the Pensieve scene. She stared at Snape incredulously. "This was ... he was ... he was so real. That was very believable."

Snape scowled. "I wouldn't have revealed so many personal details, but Professor Dumbledore insisted that I show this memory to everyone who doubted me. Obviously, his flair for the dramatic shines through here."

"Not only dramatic, but touching. He trusted you." However, Hermione had noticed that Professor Dumbledore hadn't told Snape about the Horcruxes. But if he had trusted Snape so much, perhaps he had told him about them later?

Hermione didn't know what to think anymore. Reason and past experience told her to distrust Snape. And yet, his actions, what he told her, Dumbledore's memories ... all of that had been very persuasive. And if Snape knew about the Horcruxes ... he would either be a terrible danger to Harry's mission or an invaluable ally. Despite her distrust, Hermione hoped that the latter would be the case. She had to find out what Snape knew.

"Why didn't Professor Dumbledore tell you where that curse came from? Or did he tell you later?"

"Professor Dumbledore trusted me fully. But he didn't tell me all his secrets, just as he didn't want to hear all of mine. I still do not know what caused his injury. He didn't tell me because I didn't need to know."

Snape looked at her pensively. "Before you make your decision, Miss Granger, you need to understand that the Underground isn't the charming and slightly chaotic group of eccentrics that you undoubtedly have learned to expect from a group of wizards and witches.

"The name 'Dumbledore's Army' hasn't been chosen out of sentimental reasons alone, you see. The Underground resembles a military organization. We're the guerrilla fighters in this war. We come out of nowhere; we strike and vanish without a trace. The enemy doesn't even realise who or what has balked their plans."

Snape smirked at Hermione's surprised expression and continued, "It was all part of Professor Dumbledore's strategy to defeat the Dark Lord. With the Ministry of Magic acting in its usual irresponsible way, he decided to take matters into his own hands and rally an army of loyal and skilled fighters to his cause. The visible part of this force is, of course, the Order of the Phoenix; the secret part is the Underground."

Hermione listened, captivated. Snape's lips twitched slightly, almost as if he wanted to smile.

"Professor Dumbledore was our general. He knew all the different parts of the organization and how they link to each other, but no other witch or wizard has that complete overview. It's not necessary, you see. Every person, group or leader only knows what they need to know. That way, any leaks of information to the enemy will be limited; betrayal, or giving out secrets because of torture, won't cause the whole organization to break down. We're like a spider's web: when one cell gets destroyed, the adjacent cells can take over its function until it is repaired. The whole organization is a perfect example for the high art of Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"What do you mean?" Hermione had followed his explanation with growing excitement, but now he had lost her.

"Didn't you listen to my introductory speech for my DADA lessons?"

At Hermione's confused confirmation, he continued, "Did you really think that practising a few defensive spells and doing a bit of jumping and evading is all there is to it?"

Hermione stared, not sure what he was getting at.

"You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible. Your defences must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo.

"Professor Dumbledore was a master at Defence and a master at waging war. His motto was: *All warfare is based on deception.*"

"Sun Tzu," Hermione threw in, wide-eyed.

"Indeed," Snape said. "I see that your capacity to read and absorb the content of books is still as strong as ever, Miss Granger. The Headmaster perfected the Art of Deception. Didn't you notice how weak he appeared in that last year?"

Hermione nodded.

"I assure you, Miss Granger, he was as strong as ever. The curse, which had blackened his hand, was dormant for most of the year; he was free of pain and in full command of his mental and magical abilities. But Sun Tzu also says: *Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.*"

"And so he appeared weak," Hermione whispered, "to make the enemy believe that all that stands against them is a corrupt Ministry and a weak, too trusting, old man."

Snape nodded, almost looking amused. "Perhaps the rumour about your alleged intelligence is actually based on some truth. That was an acceptable analysis."

Hermione gaped at him, and Snape smirked. She rubbed her eyes tiredly and whispered, "I wish I could trust you, sir. I really do."

Snape nodded. "I shall now show you my own memories."

He took a small phial out of the pocket of his robes and extracted Albus Dumbledore's memory from the Pensieve. When the memory was stored safely in its phial, he put the tip of his wand to his temple (Harry would have called it greasy, Hermione thought distractedly) and extracted a silvery strand of memory, which landed softly and soundlessly in the Pensieve. A prod, a swirl, and it was ready for visiting.

Again, Hermione came close and sank her head into the Pensieve. She saw the image of the Astronomy Tower, and then she fell in.

Severus Snape opened the door to the battlements on the Astronomy Tower and stood there, his wand clutched in his hand as his black eyes swept the scene, from Dumbledore slumped against the wall, to four Death Eaters, including an enraged Fenrir Greyback, and Malfoy.

Hermione experienced a second of disorientation when her point of view shifted, and she suddenly seemed to see the scene through Snape's eyes. At the same time, she could hear his thoughts and feel his emotions. He must have included them in his memories. She hadn't known that this was possible.

'Shit!' That was the crux of Snape's thoughts at the moment. His emotions were more difficult to discern because he actively seemed to push them out of his mind. Hermione thought she could detect fear, desperation, determination and loyalty.

Memory Snape's eyes swept over Draco, the Death Eaters, a weak and almost unconscious Albus Dumbledore, and briefly lingered on two broomsticks.

"We've got a problem, Snape," said one of the Death Eaters, whose eyes and wand were fixed alike upon Dumbledore. "The boy doesn't seem able..."

But somebody else had spoken Snape's name, quite softly. "Severus...."

Snape's attention focussed fully on Albus Dumbledore, now. Hermione could feel a pang of pity, loyalty and love (love?) from Snape, not unlike her own feelings when she saw the old man so hopeless and miserable.

Dumbledore didn't even have his wand anymore. She felt Snape's disappointment that he couldn't communicate with the Headmaster and wondered what he meant. However, in the blink of an eye, Snape had made a decision, all the while staring at Albus Dumbledore.

"*Legilimens.*" Snape cast the nonverbal spell and probed the Headmaster's mind.

"*Severus...Harry is here. You must save the boys! You must save yourself; save the Underground! Too late for me...I drank a poison tonight, and I am weak. The old curse is active again; I can't feel my arms and legs. Help me, before I lose my mind!*"

Shit, shit, shit! Snape desperately pushed all lingering traces of emotion out of his heart and his mind, and with a nauseating spin, Hermione's point of view shifted back to that of a watcher, but she could still feel traces of Snape's emotions and feel his heart beat wildly against his ribcage.

Snape gazed at Dumbledore, and there was revulsion and hatred etched in the harsh lines of his face.

"*Severus, my friend, you must do it. Do it NOW. KILL ME!*"

"Severus, please..."

Snape raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore. "*Avada Kedavra.*"

Shocked by the green flash, despite being aware that it was only a memory, Hermione shot back out of the Pensieve without needing Snape's help.

He caught her by the elbows when she tumbled backwards and helped her to the chair. She sat down and stared at him, tears streaming down her face. Her opinion of Snape had just made an about turn.

"If all that was indeed true, then that was a terrible, terrible, thing to ask of you, sir!"

Snape's face was unreadable. "Some people have to do the dirty work. That way, none of the naive and innocent need be tainted." Despite his efforts to sound detached, Hermione thought she could detect bitterness in his voice again.

"I shall leave you to your thoughts, now, Miss Granger. This place is as safe as I can make it. For once, take the time to think things through and don't assume that you know all the answers. I shall wait outside."

After the second Pensieve scene, Hermione's thoughts had become very clear. That had been exactly the scene Harry had described when he had told them about the events on the Astronomy Tower. Everything now fell into place; everything made sense. Snape was loyal. He could be trusted. She was certain of it. And she felt relieved.

Hermione realised that she wanted to trust Snape. His apparent betrayal had upset her deeply and had shattered her belief in Professor Dumbledore's infallible ability to judge people accurately.

But now, after she could be certain that there hadn't been a betrayal, that Snape was indeed loyal, she was glad. Here was someone who could be relied upon, who was

experienced, skilful and knowledgeable. A powerful wizard.

True, he disliked her. He could be mean, nasty and spiteful, but he could be trusted, nonetheless. Hermione's decision had been made; she knew what she had to do.

"There is no need for that, sir," Hermione said. "I used to trust you because of Professor Dumbledore's word, and I'm ready to trust you again because of the things you've just told me and shown me. I want to join the Underground and fight."

Snape opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say a word, a blinding red-golden flash signalled the appearance of Fawkes the phoenix.

Hermione watched in wonder as the bird hopped to Snape's side and very carefully ruffled the hair on tiny Snape's head, just as she had seen him do to Harry in the past. Fawkes blinked at her...or was that a wink...and hopped onto a rock outcrop where he began to sing.

Hermione and Snape sat motionless. Once again, Hermione felt the phoenix song ease every pain and every fear she had and light a spark of hope in her heart and her mind. A glance at Snape showed her that he must have felt likewise. He sat opposite her with closed eyes, his face as relaxed as she had never seen it before.

The song ended and Fawkes Disapparated. Both humans looked at each other, sharing their very first moment of trust and understanding. Finally, Snape shook himself out of his dreamy state and rose. His lips curled into something like a smile, and he extended a hand to Hermione to help her to her feet.

"Why didn't you call Fawkes right away?" Hermione asked. "It would have saved you a lot of trouble."

"I cannot call Fawkes. He comes as he pleases, but he is always helping. And, as you can see, my anti-Apparition spells don't prevent him from coming and going."

Hermione smiled. "He did that at Hogwarts, too, didn't he? Amazing creatures, phoenixes."

"Indeed! Now, are you ready to sign the contract? We have a long way to go, and I don't want to spend all night here." Snape scowled at her.

Alas, the old Snape was back, Hermione thought and smiled to herself. She hadn't really expected him to change his behaviour towards her just because she had proclaimed her trust. In fact, she hadn't had much time to expect anything, given the events of the day.

"Give me the contract!" She held out her hand and received a piece of parchment. It read:

I, the Undersigned, hold myself bound to keep the existence of one organization by the name of Dumbledore's Army a secret. Neither will I reveal its name, nor the names and identities of its members, nor its whereabouts or activities. The only exception to this rule is if I am chosen for an authorized mission to introduce new members.

If I break this contract, I shall suffer the consequences. Namely:

1. Immediate inability to speak and to write. If I should try to convey the information through any other means, I shall experience the effect of a Full Body Bind Curse, which cannot be counteracted by anyone other than those authorized to do so, the names of three of which will be revealed to me upon signing the contract.

2. The Full Body Bind will take immediate effect if there is an attempt to extract the information from me forcefully.

This contract will stay in effect until one of the three Authorized listed below releases me from it, or all three have died. If I murder any of the Authorized, I will die. If the first Authorized is killed before the other two can sign the contract, I will forget everything about my rescue and the Underground.

In return, the organization will offer me protection, shelter, and stimulating companionship.

The Undersigned Authorized #1

Authorized #2

Authorized #3

"Oh, how clever!" Hermione exclaimed. "How did you do it?"

"I presume you mean how do we effect the binding?"

Hermione nodded. Snape took another phial out of his pocket. Clearly, the contents of his pockets had shrunk with him. Hermione wondered if his seemingly bottomless pockets had been Charmed with the Undetectable Extension Charm that had been used to enlarge the boot of the Weasleys' Ford Anglia.

"You will have to drink this potion. It is a modified version of the Draught of Living Death and will cause an effect similar to the Full Body Bind. It also contains a Forgetfulness Potion. The signature makes the contract binding, and if it is broken, the potion will become active. Unlike other potions, this one will stay in the contractor's body until he or she is released."

Snape handed the phial to Hermione, who swallowed the bitter liquid down in one gulp. Both signed the contract, and Hermione felt a slight magical tingle go through her right hand which was holding the quill. A glance at Snape's hand when he signed also revealed a faint shimmer covering his hand and the quill.

"Your two other witnesses will sign the contract after we reach our destination. And now we had better get going."

A few flicks and swishes from Snape's wand hid the now empty Pensieve. Some careful spell casting removed the protective spells he had put up earlier, and finally Snape led Hermione out through another small crack, which looked suspiciously like a mouse hole. They followed the small path until they reached a large corridor. Both of them swallowed the antidote to the Shrinking Solution, grew back to their normal size and walked on.

"There will be no more magic from now on," Snape warned her before they reached an opening that led to the outside.

"Wouldn't it be easier to hide by just staying in our tiny forms?" Hermione asked.

"There are owls out there."

"Oh," was everything Hermione could come up with.

Outside, Hermione saw a mountain range in the North-East and valleys and fields to the South and West. The cave entrance appeared to be halfway up a steep hill, and Snape led her downhill.

As they reached the foot of the hill, she saw a small river disappear into a sinkhole. Clearly, this was a Karst area, wherever it was. "We'll get wet now," Snape whispered and told her to undress. When he saw her astonished gaze, he started to grope in his seemingly bottomless pockets and finally produced a plastic bag and a swimsuit.

"I'll turn around; you go and change into this swimsuit behind that rock there. Then put your clothes into the plastic bag. I'm already wearing my trunks under my clothes"

Hermione swallowed. *Snape in trunks? Why not, after the day I've had?* she thought and had to suppress a hysterical fit of the giggles. There he was, pale and thin with long, lean muscles on his bony frame. *He has the body of a long-distance runner*, she mused before she had to fight another giggle attack. *Oh, yes. Sure, check out Snape.*

This has got to be the craziest highlight of an unbelievable day. Blushing slightly, she averted her gaze and ignored his raised eyebrows and glittering eyes.

When they had both stowed away their clothes and Snape's wand, he took the bag and stepped into the river. Hermione followed and forgot all about her brief bout of hysteria. The water was unbelievably cold and took her breath away. It took a moment to collect herself and adapt.

"Careful now," Snape said and pointed to a dark area, a kind of fissure, on the riverbed. The water's reflection made the crack barely visible; you had to know what you were looking for to find it, Hermione thought. Even then, the crack seemed far too narrow to be of any significance.

"Be not deceived by what you see and do not use any magic. When I give you the signal, jump into the crack. Hold your breath for approximately twenty seconds and let yourself be drawn in by the current. Don't panic. When you can't feel the current any longer, propel yourself to the surface and wait for me."

Puzzled by these instructions, Hermione could only nod and wonder. Snape inhaled deeply and dived into the river, pulling something away from the crack. It must have been a camouflage of sorts since a much larger hole was revealed. Snape waved at her, and she did as ordered. Filling her lungs with as much air as she could, she hopped towards the crack and let herself be drawn into a tunnel, her eyes firmly closed, her jaws clenched to stop her teeth from chattering because of the icy cold water.

A few heartbeats later, the current stopped, and Hermione let herself float to the surface of a small underground pond in a small cave. Trying to wring out her hair as well as she could, she waited for Snape.

He popped to the surface of the pond only moments later. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Just wet and a bit cold," she replied.

Snape shrugged. "It will get warmer very soon." He handed her the bag with the clothes and took a towel out of his pockets. After getting dressed behind another rock outcrop, Hermione handed everything back to Snape, who stowed it away again. He looked around impatiently. "Let's get moving!"

Snape led Hermione through a narrow passageway that seemed to connect the small cave with other caves. Deeper and deeper they descended until the faint light of Snape's *Lumos* was the only light Hermione could see.

"We shall have to walk for some time," Snape said. "During that time, I shall give you a more detailed overview over the Underground, and you can ask questions."

"All right," Hermione said.

"Professor Dumbledore had the idea about the Underground over a year ago...after the battle at the Ministry of Magic. Death Eater attacks became frequent once again, and I could not always warn the Order in time to prevent the murders. One day, a victim, who had been left for dead by the Death Eaters, survived. I found her but didn't know where to hide her.

"If it had become general knowledge that she was still alive, there would have been more attempts to kill her. Thus, I brought her to Professor Dumbledore."

Snape spoke in a low voice, almost a whisper. Hermione had to strain her ears to understand everything he said. She was walking behind him as the passageway had become so narrow that they couldn't walk side-by-side.

"'We will pretend that she is dead,' Professor Dumbledore suggested. 'If the Death Eaters can do that, then why not we?'" Snape continued. "We hid the woman in the dungeons, in a hidden section that doesn't show up on any plan or map, not even on Potter's Marauder's Map."

Hermione shot him a surprised glance; Snape had turned around briefly and smirked.

"But Madam LaFolle didn't remain the only presumed dead person for long. As you undoubtedly know, I pretended to be a loyal Death Eater, and I frequently learned about targets for planned Death Eater attacks ahead of time. I used to inform the Headmaster of upcoming raids, and together we developed a method to exchange the living victims with Inferi who looked exactly like them. You will learn how it's done. The presumed victim was killed for at least one Death Eater witness to see, and the intended victim was brought to the secret dungeons. And that's basically how you were rescued, too."

"Fifi LaFolle?" Hermione couldn't keep her questions back. "*The Fifi LaFolle?* The one who wrote the *Enchanted Encounters* series?"

"No, she passed away twenty years ago," Snape explained. "It is her daughter, Lola, who is also a famous romance novelist. I believe her series was called '*Suave Seductions*'."

Hermione nodded. She thought she had seen those books at *The Burrow*. Mrs. Weasley, who had owned all of the '*Enchanted Encounter*' books, would likely have read that other series as well.

"Why would *she* be a target?"

"Apparently, you weren't one of those students who constantly read *Witch Weekly* under their desks instead of paying attention in class...although, I seem to recall a time when you were quite smitten with that, ah, gossip rag."

Hermione didn't need to see his sneer; she could hear it.

"Be that as it may," Snape said. "When rumours surfaced that the Dark Lord had returned, Madam LaFolle started to write editorials and critical commentary in *Witch Weekly*. She suggested that people took Dumbledore's warnings seriously...and that caused problems for her...and not only from Death Eaters. But those problems didn't stop her. You are aware that she owned a considerable part of the magazine?"

"No, I wasn't aware of that," Hermione replied, captivated by his tale. "What was she critical about?"

"First lesson in guerrilla warfare, Miss Granger: you must be aware of the factions around you. You must know who supports you, who opposes, who owns the key devices for communication and finance, who supplies goods, who offers protection, who can be relied on, who can be bribed, and who needs to be watched carefully for duplicity."

Snape walked a few steps in silence while Hermione thought about what he had told her. Then he turned her way again and continued, "Lola LaFolle was critical of the Ministry's handling of the situation in particular and the Dark Lord's ideas in general. Madam LaFolle is a half-blood, you see?"

"Oh? I didn't know that, either. So that's why she became a target?"

"Yes. And she escaped death by a hair's breadth. So she ended up in the deep dungeons. However, during the following weeks, many families were targeted, and it became rather crowded. We couldn't hide all the pseudo-dead people and provide them with a minimum of comfort in that section of the dungeons any longer. Professor Dumbledore was concerned about the secrecy and safety of the school as well as about potential conflicts when so many witches and wizards lived in confined quarters and had nothing useful to do. However, they all got through that time remarkably well.

"That's when the idea of the Underground was born. Professor Dumbledore dreamed up the concept of a secret Underground army consisting of make-believe dead wizards and witches. This army would be a mixture of highly trained fighters and people who do the work necessary to keep a community running smoothly. And that's exactly what we did.

"We perfected the method of exchanging potential victims with corpses, and we found areas for them to live. We're mostly using caves in areas with ancient magical sites.

These sites usually attract the attention of Muggles, thus the areas are often flooded with Muggle tourists and archaeologists. Death Eaters wouldn't willingly go to such an area, unless they're on a raid and intend to kill."

"The living areas and some space around them are under Fidelius Charms. They aren't seen, and people living there aren't found. The proximity of ancient magical sites permits the Underground to use magic without fear of being tracked down by someone looking for residual magical traces." He paused for a moment.

"I presume you are aware of the strong magical aura surrounding ancient magical sites?"

"Of course."

Snape nodded. "Naturally, no one uses their old, registered wands, so their magic can't be tracked by the Ministry, either."

"That is brilliant!" Hermione threw in. "Who did all this?"

"Professor Dumbledore and I started it, but the whole secret infrastructure has been built by the DA members themselves."

"And why did they call themselves Dumbledore's Army? Because, you know... I don't know if you know, but...."

"Yes, I know about Potter's little group. Professor Dumbledore was so moved by the activities and the name that he told everyone about it. In his honour, the Underground adopted that name. Professor Dumbledore was very pleased."

Hermione swallowed, nodded, and fought to keep her emotions back. Grief for the old man had attacked her suddenly, sharp and unexpected. She followed Snape in silence.

Waging War

Chapter 12 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognise belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 11 Waging War

5. Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war,

cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays.

7. It's only one thoroughly acquainted with the evils of war

that can thoroughly understand the profitable way of carrying it on.

19. In war, then, let your great object be victory,

not lengthy campaigns.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, II. Waging War)

After walking in silence down the passageway for some time, Snape and Hermione reached another underground river and walked along its shore. It had become warmer; the air was very sticky, and although her hair was still damp, Hermione was sweating. The passageway was very narrow now, and more than once, Snape alerted Hermione to a low hanging stalactite or a rock overhang where they both had to stoop not to bump their heads.

Snape was silent, and Hermione didn't ask questions because they needed their full concentration to follow the narrow and slippery path. Eventually, the path became wider, and Hermione thought that she saw a faint light in a distance. A few moments later, they reached the cave entrance.

Hermione looked around, baffled. The opening led directly into farmland; the stubble on the harvested fields was glowing in the faint, silvery light of the stars and the crescent moon. With a pang of sadness, Hermione identified Sirius, the Dog Star, and a few other constellations, which told her that they were facing South-East.

Snape watched her take in her surroundings. When she finally looked at him again, he gave her a twisted smile, bent towards her ear and whispered, "Uamh Nan Guthan!"

Wide-eyed, Hermione saw the landscape change. Where earlier empty fields had stretched out before her eyes, now a range of softly rolling hills, a harsh limestone peak and a forested valley with a meandering river seemed to nudge the fields aside and take their place instead.

"Welcome to the Appin Nan Guthan Underground refuge, Miss Granger. We're now in the realm of the ancient stone circle of Appin and its residual magic; we can do our own magic again without fear of being detected. However, the whole area is under Anti-Apparition spells, so we shall use other means of transport."

Snape cast a drying charm on their hair and took two more phials out of his pocket. As Hermione drank the Pepperup Potion he had given her and watched the steam coming out of his ears after he drank his own potion, she wondered how many more phials he could hide in those robes.

"Sir, can I have my wand back now?" Hermione gave him a hopeful look.

"I broke it," he murmured.

"What? How could... Why?"

"Would you have preferred it being used by a Death Eater?" he snarled. "Because that's where it would have ended up."

"No." Hermione flinched.

"You shall get another wand. But first, we must reach our destination."

Hermione swallowed and nodded.

Snape went back to the cave entrance, tapped his wand against the wall and retrieved two brooms from a hidden niche.

"They're family models...easy to fly," he told her with a smirk.

"I can fly on a broomstick," Hermione said, slightly offended. "I just don't like flying very much in general."

"It'll do. Being adept at different forms of transportation is essential for an active fighter. I presume, given your history with Potter and Weasley, that you would wish to join the active fighters?"

"Err...."

"You don't need to decide today. We should get going." But instead of taking off, he looked up into the sky and let out a bird-like whistle.

"Why did you do that?"

"You'll see." He mounted his broom and took off. Behind him, Hermione hurried to keep up.

They were flying at a comfortable height, not too fast, following the river into the valley, when a large bird approached Snape and flew alongside him. Snape whistled again and descended to the ground.

When Hermione landed at his side, he was standing with a brown barn owl on his shoulder and whispering something into the bird's ear. With a soft hoot, and a nibble at his hair, the bird took flight again and disappeared into the night.

Snape was about to take off again when Hermione stopped him. "What was that all about?"

"That was my familiar. Fierce Lady Mouse Hunter...Lady Mouse for short. She will announce our arrival."

"But... you didn't give her anything...no parchment... How?" Hermione felt confusion take hold of her again. Would the surprises of the day never end? Only a fraction of her many questions had been answered, and she was tired to the bone. Her face must have shown her perplexity because Snape gave her a resigned sigh and explained, "Lady Mouse is a true familiar. She can communicate with me directly. She will give my message to one of the familiars in the cave, and this, in turn, will alert its master or mistress. She's faster than we are; the cave will know that the intruders are friendly."

"But...."

Snape silenced her with a glare. "There will be time to discuss all this, Miss Granger. If you don't stop your questions, we will never arrive at our destination. So, be quiet and let's get going."

Back on their brooms, they followed the river again until it made a sharp south turn, and the limestone peak rose in front of them. Uphill they flew until Snape stopped at a small spring that was bubbling out of the rocks. He took his wand and waved an intricate pattern, every wave revealing silvery, shimmering lines that crisscrossed and covered the rock surface like a spider's web.

When the completed web was revealed, Snape chanted a seemingly nonsensical sequence of syllables, and the shiny web dimmed, only to reveal another cave entrance.

Snape led Hermione inside, turned, and reactivated the protective web.

While Hermione took in her surroundings, a figure emerged out of the shadows in the back of the cave. It was a young wizard she had seen at Hogwarts; he had been a few years ahead of her and her friends. However, she couldn't remember his name.

"Nundu, good to see you. Everything went well, I see." The young man greeted Snape with a smile and gave Hermione a friendly nod. She watched Snape return the greeting and then followed him into another passageway.

"We're almost there," Snape said, but by now Hermione was so tired, she didn't really care. A seemingly endless descent down a tunnel, then more walking in a stretch of a gradually widening passage followed.

"That young wizard was Jeremiah Cadwallader, also known as Greyhound," Snape explained. "He was on duty; everybody takes their turn on watch duty at regular intervals."

Hermione sighed in relief when she saw a light ahead of her. They had finally reached their destination. Snape led her into a brightly lit, large cavern that appeared to be a sort of Great Hall or common room. A huge fireplace with sofas and armchairs looked like an area for meeting, talking and relaxing. Large tables with chairs indicated the dining area. In the back, fabric and wood panels seemed to separate private living areas from the rest of the cavern. Adjacent caves, visible through the openings, seemed to hold more of these private areas.

A stately looking witch was standing at the cavern's entrance to greet them. It was Emmeline Vance.

"Welcome to Nan Guthan, Hermione. Do you remember me?"

"Of course I do." Hermione beamed. She was too tired to be surprised by dead people showing up left and right. "It is so good to see you alive, Madam Vance!"

"Call me Emmeline, or Bee. That's my DA name. We live like a family here." She ushered Hermione and Snape to the next table and brought them stew, bread and something to drink. Her actions reminded Hermione of Molly Weasley. However, her demeanour was completely different. Emmeline Vance was using swift, precise movements that testified her efficiency without being overbearing.

"You have wine?" Hermione asked while she wolfed down her stew. She blinked her tiredness away and looked at the food and drink. "Where does this come from? Where do you get all this food to feed your people? Don't you need a lot of money for this?"

"We'll explain it to you tomorrow," Emmeline said, while Snape leaned back with a huge yawn and smirked at Hermione. The older witch led Hermione to one of the small structures. Inside, the structure revealed a small bedroom with an adjacent bathroom. Hermione smiled; the same charm that expanded tents on the inside seemed to have been used on these structures.

"Go to bed and sleep well, girl," Emmeline Vance said. "I shall be outside. I won't sleep tonight. If you need me, call. Many people have nightmares during their first night here."

"Thank you. Goodnight," Hermione murmured tiredly. She kicked off her shoes, threw off her robes and fell onto the comfortable bed where she sank into a deep sleep before her head touched her pillow.

Hermione woke up because the sun was tickling her nose. "The sun?" she wondered. A crisp blue sky and a pale November sun were visible above her. However, she was still in her bed in one of the caves. The ceiling must have been charmed like the ceiling of Hogwarts' Great Hall had been. Apparently, Professor Dumbledore's tastes had shaped the refuges of the Underground.

A quick examination of her room showed Hermione that everything she needed was provided for. The small bathroom held a toilet and a shower. In the bedroom, there was a wardrobe with fresh robes and a chest of drawers with women's underwear, towels, sheets and other essentials. Hermione marvelled at the comfort, wondering how all this was achieved. When she had learned about the Underground, she'd imagined a half-starved bunch of desperate wizards and witches, who lived on the fringes of Muggle or wizarding society, scavenging for their provisions, very much like most Werewolves were forced to do. Instead, these people lived in relative comfort and even decorated their surroundings with all the charms and amenities their combined magic could come up with.

While she was standing under the shower, sadness overcame her. Everything seemed so normal, and yet, to the outside world, she was dead. Her parents, Ron, Harry and her other friends would be sick with grief for her and probably preparing her funeral right now. For them, she was dead. For Ron, she was dead. She was on her own.

The tears mixed with the warm water from the shower, and she permitted herself a moment to grieve and feel the full blow of the culture shock she was experiencing. But soon, she remembered Price's lessons about self-discipline and pushed her fears and the sadness out of her mind, determined to focus on the tasks ahead of her. Not all was lost. Here was a group of powerful witches and wizards no one knew about, a group that could be used like the joker in a card game. It was a group of fighters, and she had been offered the chance to become one of them. Offered it by Snape, no less. She could keep herself busy with this, and maybe, just maybe, she could resume her research and help find the missing Horcruxes. Only time would tell. Hermione shook herself out of her sad mood, got herself dressed and was ready to face Dumbledore's Army.

When she left her room, she was met by an empty cavern. The only other person in the room was Snape, who was sitting in an armchair, reading. He looked up when he noticed Hermione leaving her room and drawled, "Not an early riser, are you? It's three o' clock in the afternoon." He beckoned her to the table and called softly, "Dobby!"

With a pop, the house-elf appeared.

"Dobby is very glad to see Miss Hermione alive and well. Dobby is getting breakfast for Miss Hermione." The elf grinned from ear to ear, his huge eyes shining.

"Dobby! I should have guessed that you were here. Where is Alouette?"

"Alouette is preparing the food, Miss Hermione." Dobby's grin got even wider before he disappeared.

"He looks well," Hermione said to Snape. "Did you really enslave them?"

"Of course I did," Snape sneered. "The elves are useful, and they don't mind the service."

"But..."

"Spare me. This is neither the time nor place to promote elfish welfare, Miss Granger. How do you think I could assure their silence after bringing them here? A mere magical contract doesn't work for house-elves; you may have noticed that their magic isn't like ours. Enslaving them solves that problem for the time being."

Hermione looked mutinous but held her peace. Dobby came back and served her tea and a late lunch. While she was eating, Snape explained the Underground's infrastructure. People were busy with their chores; everyone had tasks. A part of the money for the operation came from wealthy Underground members who had been warned before the attacks, and who had found ways of donating money to support the group. However, most of the money came from Albus Dumbledore's fortune. He had set up several straw-man accounts to make the money accessible for the Underground.

Another considerable amount came in through royalties. Lola LaFolle continued writing romance novels, only now they were published under a pseudonym. Unsurprisingly, Salacious Secrets was turning out to be just as successful as Suave Seductions had been.

Hermione was impressed.

But that wasn't all. The Underground was also creating an income from doing business with Muggles. Members of Dumbledore's Army were successfully operating a recycling plant, only in addition to recycling the rubbish, the witches and wizards separated part of the raw materials and Transfigured them into what was required for daily living.

Hermione stared doubtfully at her salad. Snape smirked. "Food isn't Transfigured. We obtain it from farmers in the area through middlemen, mostly Squibs and family members of Muggle-born wizards and witches, who have no idea with whom they are dealing. Some of the caves even grow their own food. However, you will notice that meat is a rare treat. Fishing is good in the valley, though; the people here have fish rather often."

"Ingenious," Hermione praised while wiping her mouth with a soft napkin, not caring what its origin had been.

"Yes, the Underground is doing well," Snape replied, and Hermione was touched by the hint of pride in his voice.

While they were talking, people passed by, and Hermione was introduced to them. Everyone welcomed her in a friendly manner. The romance writer, Lola LaFolle, turned out to be an hysterically funny lady of approximately Minerva's age, who was dressed all in pink but had a dry wit that rivalled Snape's. Listening to their friendly banter made her head spin. When Lola LaFolle left them, kissing Snape on the cheek, Hermione stared after her distractedly. Who would have thought that an author of bodice rippers could be such an intelligent and witty character?

Looking back at Snape again, Hermione nearly choked. Draco Malfoy and his mother, Narcissa Malfoy, had just entered the common area.

"Draco?" Hermione said shrilly.

"Granger." Draco nodded and glared at her while his mother stared haughtily.

"Behave yourself, Draco," Snape said lazily, watching the scene with narrowed eyes and an odd smile.

"Severus, how low does our dignity have to sink...? Constantly confronting us with the likes of her.... Can't you find us a place where we are among true wizards?"

"Not again, Narcissa, please," Snape said in a tired voice. "Haven't you learned anything in all the time you've been here?"

"You don't hear me complain about the, ah, living conditions." She looked around disdainfully. "But to be constantly confronted with these..." She gave Hermione a withering glare.

"Must I remind you, again, that it was Muggle-borns like her who rescued you from certain death? That it was the ingenuity of Muggle-lover Dumbledore that made your rescue possible at all? Without him, and those Muggle-borns, you'd be dead. Very, very dead, and I doubt that the worms who'd eat you would make a distinction between pure-blood and mixed blood."

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. She followed the conversation eagerly.

"Very well, Severus. Have it your way. Beggars can't be choosers, or so they say...." Narcissa Malfoy looked very put-upon. "I suspect we will have to endure it until you see fit to reunite us with people of our kind, who are undoubtedly somewhere in this Underground. It is just undignified...." She flicked her hair and sneered one last time at

Snape and Hermione and then followed Draco into one of the compartments.

"You could have warned me that they were here," Hermione accused.

"Why should I have done that?" Snape looked surprised.

"You enjoy watching confrontations like that, don't you?" She glared at Snape, who smirked in response.

"If you say so." Snape stared at her, his expression sobering. "Understand, Miss Granger, that we are a very mixed group. We don't choose the people we rescue according to their usefulness for the Underground. Only later do we make assessments as to who is the most suited for which work. And if people refuse to work, or are unsuitable, are we to throw them out?"

"I didn't say that. I wonder why you are so defensive, sir." She spat out the latter. "It didn't escape me whose side you took when you were talking to them. I was given the choice to join the group or live elsewhere and be Obliviated. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't wanted to come. Surely the Malfoys were given the same choice?"

"As a matter of fact, they weren't." He sneered. "You don't seriously believe that I can trust them, do you? We saved their lives, but they are not allowed to leave the area that is under the Fidelius Charm. As you'd remember, if you had listened to me yesterday, we are an army. All of the Underground has to work together; we must be able to trust each other completely. Those whose reliability is in question need to be watched to prevent betrayal...whether intentional or unintentional."

"I didn't think that you'd let anyone in who can't be trusted," Hermione interrupted. "I mean, I understand that those two are a special case, but the others? I would have thought that only the pure-bloods who were openly supporting Dumbledore would be targets, but not the, ah, more prejudiced kind."

"Believe me, being a bigoted pure-blood doesn't prevent people from being targets. The Dark Lord's main enticement is fear, not respect. Quite a few old, pure-blood families secretly look down on him and his cronies. He neither has the style nor the manners to appeal to them...as much as he might try to emulate them."

"So there are indeed more of them around?" Hermione stared at him, not quite believing that she was having this conversation with Snape, of all people.

Snape nodded. "There are a few in every group. I cannot allow factions to be formed. It is easier to keep an eye on them that way."

"I can imagine." Hermione nodded. She shook herself. "This is all so surreal. It's like being in a weird dream...the kind that haunts you long after you wake up." She stared at Snape thoughtfully for a while.

"Ask your questions, Miss Granger. Right now, I have time. I still have a few hours before I have to leave."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm a Death Eater, Miss Granger."

"Oh!" Hermione felt as if her head would burst. "How... how is that possible? I mean... you pretend to be a Death Eater, and yet you are loyal to Dumbledore.... I don't understand...."

"I am, if you want to call it this, a triple spy." He looked at her with a raised eyebrow, but her expression showed nothing except fervent attention for his words. "Did Potter not tell you how I betrayed his parents?"

"Yes, he did. You listened in on Trelawney's prophecy and related what you had heard to Voldemort, didn't you?"

Snape cringed. "Do not speak his name," he hissed and grabbed the part of his left arm where the Dark Mark must be. Hermione frowned in confusion, but nodded.

"I was sent by the Dark Lord to apply for the vacant DADA position. But the barman at the Hog's Head caught me listening at the keyhole while Dumbledore interviewed Trelawney...I didn't think that Dumbledore would accept me as a teacher after that incident, and neither did the Dark Lord."

"Were you punished?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

"Yes," Snape said, surprise in his voice. "But the Dark Lord was also very pleased that I had understood the prophecy and related it to him, so I was also rewarded..." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "My... ah... appreciation for that reward didn't last for long. The Dark Lord decided that the prophecy applied to Lily's son, that he should be the one to be vanquished... and I realised that a vague and abstract threat had turned into reality. I realised that people were about to be killed who I knew...a former friend whom I valued. And she would be endangered because of me...because of my foolishness...."

He cast a sharp glance at Hermione. "You and your friends found out that Lily Evans and I had been best friends, didn't you?"

Hermione wondered how he knew but confirmed, "Yes, we did."

"I did not want her to be harmed. I could not live with the idea that Lily's life had been threatened because of me. I had caused her so much pain already...." His voice trailed off, and he stared into the distance. Hermione didn't dare utter a sound, so as not to distract him out of his talkative mood.

"That wasn't the only reason. I had also become disillusioned with the Death Eaters. It wasn't quite the revolutionary organisation I had hoped that could reform our corrupt and unfair wizarding society." He smirked when she looked at him wide-eyed.

"And as unbelievable as this might appear to you, I do not enjoy murder. I didn't want to participate in Death Eater raids... so I went to Dumbledore." He looked at her critically, but she only nodded her encouragement, still all attentive.

"I threw myself at Dumbledore's mercy. I asked him to protect Lily, her son, and my mother. In return, I would turn myself in and go to Azkaban."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Your mother?"

"Yes. If it had been known that I had turned myself in, the Dark Lord would have had her killed. I was certain of that. Dumbledore agreed with me and promised to protect her."

Hermione nodded.

"But Professor Dumbledore had other plans for me. He wanted me as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix. Perhaps I should show you what he said...."

"How, do you have a Pensieve here?"

"No, but I am a reasonably strong Legilimens, and you've had lessons in Occlumency. You should know how the mind works. So, if you let me in, I can show you my memories directly."

Hermione stared at Snape. Letting him push his memories into her mind, the wizard who she had loathed and distrusted until yesterday, would show an incredible amount of trust. This had to be some kind of test. Did she want to pass it? She wasn't certain.

"I will not intrude into your thoughts and your own memories, Miss Granger. You can build up your basic Occlumency shield. I will still be able to show you my memories."

"That won't be necessary, sir. Please proceed." Hermione thought that she'd rather know right away if her newfound trust and openness were justified. She rather preferred clarity to being led on for some time and then being disappointed. She let Snape touch her forehead and looked into his eyes. They weren't really black, she noticed absentmindedly. They were a very dark brown...without the swirls and flecks of lighter colours that were often prominent in lighter coloured eyes. These eyes were like tunnels...tunnels to fall into, and then she saw a light and heard voices:

Professor Dumbledore and a very young Severus Snape were sitting in two armchairs, facing each other. Professor Dumbledore leaned forward and laid a hand on the younger wizard's arm.

"Become a spy for us, Severus. A double agent...or a triple spy, to be precise. And a teacher...."

"What? But...."

"No, let me explain, please. Voldemort asked you to spy on me, didn't he? He wanted you to apply for the Defence against the Dark Arts position. Did he ask you to apply again this year?"

Snape shook his head, "No, and I doubt he will. He wouldn't expect that you believed my waffling about having come to the wrong door after I was caught by the barman."

"Exactly." Dumbledore smiled. "So, even if you tried to spy for us now, you would be prevented from coming to Hogwarts, and it would therefore be difficult to get any information from you. Furthermore, you would still be required to partake in raids and attacks, wouldn't you?"

Snape nodded.

"To get around this, we need a different, less straightforward approach. How are your Occlumency skills these days, Severus? I presume that Horace Slughorn has taught you Occlumency, as he always does with interested students from his House?"

"Yes, he did, and I am rather good at it. I'm a fairly strong Legilimens, too."

"Good!" Dumbledore beamed cheerfully.

Understanding slowly brightened Snape's features. "You want me to suggest to the Dark Lord that I could deceive you. To tell him that I can convince you that I have turned. That I will ask for your protection. And imply that you will surely offer me the position of Defence teacher, while, in reality, I will spy for the Dark Lord."

"Very good, Severus. Yes, to all of it...except for the Defence position. I am going to offer you the Potions position instead because Horace Slughorn wishes to retire. I will tell everyone who asks that I am afraid of giving you the Defence position since it would bring out the worst in you." Dumbledore's smile widened. "And as you will be continuing to serve Tom Riddle in that way, your vow will not be broken. What he won't be told, of course, is that you'll be working for me, too. If I'm not mistaken, nothing in the vow forbids you from working for other people?"

"Of course not. Many Death Eaters have normal professions."

"That's what I thought. You will give him information. Two kinds of information. The information he thinks we want him to have, and the information he thinks we want to keep from him. We will carefully choose this information, Severus; you must be believable. And in turn, you will tell us about his plans, together with the fake information he wants to feed us. We will have to be very considerate about how we use that information and how we act on it; we cannot risk betraying you. However, it is no secret that both sides have spies...information does leak out.... And the double-triple-quadruple spy business will protect you from Voldemort's other spies, too. Even if they see you associate with me, or my organisation, Voldemort will know all about it already. Or, as much as we want him to know."

With a mental bang, Snape closed the connection between them.

"That was amazing. How did you do that?"

"Two strong Legilimens can communicate that way by casting the spell on each other, and each pushing the memories they want to share to the foreground of his thoughts. That was how I communicated with Professor Dumbledore; that was how he ordered me to kill him."

Hermione swallowed. "But I am not a Legilimens," she choked out.

"You could learn to be one; unlike your friend Potter, you have the presence of mind and the discipline. However, this kind of communication is also possible when the witch or wizard trust each other and one of them is a Legilimens. No one wants to have his or her mind be manipulated, and letting a Legilimens inside makes manipulation possible. Only very few people know how to use Occlumency. It is a sign of trust to allow the intrusion."

"But I trusted you, and you didn't disappoint." Hermione smirked. "Which isn't all that surprising, since you would hardly have done something so obvious, if you really wanted to manipulate me."

Snape snorted. "I see that we are starting to understand each other. There may be hope for you yet, Miss Granger. So now you understand how I can be one of the Dark Lord's most trusted servants and a spy for the Order at the same time."

"But you're not spying any more!"

"Of course I am. I report to Minerva."

"Professor McGonagall?" Hermione couldn't believe her ears. Was everything and everyone scheming and deceiving? Was anything surrounding her actually as it appeared to be?

Snape smirked at her bewildered expression. "Yes, she knows about the Underground, although she doesn't know all its secrets, just as I don't know all the secrets of the Order."

"I see."

"Minerva knows that Professor Dumbledore ordered me to kill him when necessary. She helped me with the image of the murderous, evil fiend by proclaiming that she never really trusted me. Of course, she was running in open doors. Everyone was only too willing to condemn me."

"Oh," was all that Hermione could think of saying.

"You've been consulting with her a long time. Why is she getting special treatment? What is so important about her?" Draco's sneering voice startled Hermione. He had come out of his private quarters again and was standing behind her, glaring at Snape.

"This isn't your concern, Draco. Now, leave us alone, will you?" Snape said in the same patient and slightly indulgent way he had always used with Draco Malfoy.

"Just what we need. Granger with her inflated ego being fussed over," Draco snarled, turned and walked away.

Hermione gave Snape a puzzled look. "I get special treatment? Why?"

"I'm normally too busy to spend much time here during the day, or to introduce new members into the daily activities. You're a special case."

Hermione was amazed at the calm and almost pleasant way he answered her questions. "Why? What do you want from me?" She glared at him suspiciously.

The black eyes staring back at her held a spark that could have almost been called humour, if it hadn't been for the fact that they were Snape's eyes. The skin around his eyes had crinkled almost imperceptibly, and he purred in a silky timbre, "I shall not try to enchant you with my irresistible charm, Miss Granger, never fear." He smirked at her startled expression. "I usually leave that kind of thing to Pery Price."

"Price?" Hermione shrieked. "He's aware of this?" Hermione jumped up from her armchair and started to pace the area before the fireplace, trying to calm her racing heart. Too many shocks in one day couldn't be healthy for a person, she thought.

"He'd better be, since he and I trade places quite often," Snape said smoothly. The amusement lighting up his eyes was now clearly visible.

Did he just joke? Hermione couldn't believe it. "I give up!" she said, throwing her hands up in exasperation and defeat. "I think I'm in a madhouse. Or maybe it's me who's gone mad."

"I would have thought that a young woman of your renowned intelligence could put two and two together when enough information is given. Apparently, I was wrong." The amusement had faded, and the sneer was back.

Hermione sighed in relief. This was better. She could deal with a sneering Snape.

"Humour me, sir," she said, pursing her lips. "I don't know where you might have heard about my alleged intelligence, but maybe it is overrated. Perhaps you can bring yourself to explain to me, in simple words, why I get special treatment, and in what way Professor Price is involved in all this."

Snape stared at her, and she stared back. She was just starting to wonder how long this staring contest would last when he grimaced and said, "Very well, then. Peregrin Price and I have both been teaching you and your friends. To achieve this, I take a modified version of the Polyjuice Potion...the same we use to rescue Death Eater targets. Price stepped in to teach you when I was otherwise occupied, but most of the time, it was I who taught you. We keep each other informed about the events through the Pensieve."

"The wedding?" By now, Hermione was prepared to believe anything.

"That was Price. We decided that he should first establish a pattern of how to interact with you. I would later just imitate his behaviour. Besides, it was safer that he went, and not I, with all the Aurors and Order members in attendance there." He looked at her expectantly.

"The prophecy?"

"That was me." He sneered when he saw Hermione stare at him incredulously.

"You flirted with Trelawney?"

"Wrong! Peregrin Price flirted with Trelawney. He would have..."

"I can't believe this." Hermione closed her eyes and gave herself a mental shake. "Before we went to the forest...that talk with Harry in the corridor. That was you, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"So that's how S... how you as yourself found us?"

"Yes."

Slowly, things began to fall into place for Hermione. "The map! You stole the Marauder's map!"

"Yes." This came with a nod and another amused gleam.

"I don't know what to say." Hermione let out a long, shivering breath. "That's why you didn't teach us Occlumency. You were afraid that one of us would inadvertently enter your mind, like Harry did once, and find out your secrets."

"Correct again."

"Why?" Hermione nearly screamed now. "Why go to all this trouble?" She stared at Snape round-eyed. "And how on earth do you manage to make everyone believe you are the real Price? Did you take acting lessons?"

This earned her an amused snort. "I am a spy, Miss Granger. I pretend to spy for the other side. If I couldn't act, do you really think I'd still be alive?"

"All right, but why? Why you? Couldn't the real Price have taught us strategy and duelling? He has to be really good if you can trade places...."

"It's because Minerva thinks that Potter needs all the help he can get. Because Albus came up with the plan when he decided to give the DADA position to me last year. Because your friend Potter never consciously learns anything from me. And, of course, it's because of my Slytherins. Who'd look after them? Slughorn? As Price, I could at least watch them and be alert for trouble. I could see to it that they were confronted with alternative ideas...with other types of magic than they are usually confronted with in their families. This was something, I might add, that was made increasingly difficult by the antics of your friend Potter," he snarled.

"Well, he has good reason to be suspicious of Slytherins, doesn't he?" she snarled back. "Your little harmless protégées didn't exactly endear themselves to us when they formed that foul Inquisitorial Squad last year."

"You sounded quite different when you shouted at Potter the other day, Miss Granger. I would have expected a bit more consistency."

"I don't share Harry's opinion that Slytherins should be taught differently, but that doesn't mean that I trust the lot of them."

"Be that as it may," Snape said smoothly, "my time isn't unlimited. Was there something else you wanted to know?"

"In what way do I receive special treatment? You're winding your way around answering this question like an eel."

Both Snape's eyebrows shot up, and he could barely suppress a snort. "If you must know...." He narrowed his eyes and glowered. "You're receiving special treatment because you are one of the few people I can trust unconditionally."

Hermione's mouth fell open.

"Gaping like a fish does not improve your appearance, Miss Granger."

"You trust me? Unconditionally? Why on earth...? What kind of a trick...? I don't believe you!" She looked daggers at him.

His lips twisted, and the gleam was back in his eyes. "Think, Miss Granger. I saw Price's memory from the wedding...your reaction when you heard the story about Potter and his friends gloating over my humiliation in the Shrieking Shack."

"Humiliation?" Hermione stared at him indignantly. "You were nearly killed. I'd hardly call that humiliation...."

"Be quiet. You voiced sympathy and understanding for my younger self, and you were challenging Potter on his prejudice. I was there after you read the news about the Abbott killings...when you revealed how you had trusted me and why. It wasn't to be expected that you would still trust me after the events on the Astronomy Tower. That was intentional. But unlike so many fair-weather friends who claimed to have known all along that I was irredeemably evil, you looked for motives; you tried to understand. It didn't escape me that you were saddened and quite disappointed by my assumed betrayal. Your little display of passionate outrage a while ago was rather touching."

Hermione grimaced. "What are you getting at? Why is that a reason for special treatment?"

Snape sighed. "Don't try my patience. The fact that I trust you doesn't mean that I have to endure your incessant babbling. If you had listened, you'd know already."

"Will you please get on with it?"

"You've shown over the years, in your interactions with Potter and Weasley, that you are loyal and reliable despite being treated unfairly, laughed at or merely ignored. You've also always been loyal to Dumbledore."

Hermione had resorted to gaping. Snape snorted and shook his head.

"If you can extend your loyalty to the Underground and to me, you will be of invaluable help. You will be one of the very few I can rely on without any doubts to remain loyal in spite of my background, despite who I am. I expect you to assist me directly...as soon as your testing for the required skills has been completed."

"Wha...?" Hermione's eyes felt as if they wanted to pop out of their sockets. Her throat had gone dry. "The special treatment!" she choked out. "What is it?"

"Well, I hope that you will choose to fight actively and become involved in the planning and plotting of the downfall of the Dark Lord. You won't have to be restricted and tested. New arrivals usually live confined to the caves for one or two months. That won't be necessary with you; I'll personally vouch for you. We only need to find out which skills you have that we can use, and then you can start your work."

Hermione swallowed. "I'm honoured... I think," she croaked.

While Hermione was still standing staring at Snape, Emmeline Vance emerged from her quarters and approached them. "How are things, Hermione?" she asked and squeezed Hermione's shoulder while she flashed a quick smile at Snape, who, surprisingly, smiled back.

"Uh...." Hermione was at a loss for words.

"I think Miss Granger will need some time to process all the new information. I shall go now and meet Perry at the Pensieve cave. Until later." He nodded to both of them and walked away.

Hermione stared at his retreating back. "He is... is he for real?" she ground out.

Emmeline Vance laughed heartily. "As real as he ever gets, my dear. Come now, I'll introduce you to a few more people, and then we'll have dinner."

A week later, Hermione had overcome the first shock and started to get used to Nan Guthan's routine. She was now acquainted with all fifty-five inhabitants, some of whom she knew from Hogwarts or through the Order. She had accepted her changed circumstances and even come to admire the huge logistical achievement of running this whole Underground organisation. Emmeline had told her that there were six other groups strewn all over England and Scotland. They were all approximately the same size as the Appin group. More than three hundred wizards and witches, who were determined and mostly very skilled fighters. Voldemort would be in for a surprise, she thought, but only after Harry had found all the Horcruxes. And she couldn't help him with that.

She had learned that not only magical folk were rescued, but also Muggles. Muggles, however, were Obliviased and given a new identity somewhere far away. Voldemort usually wasn't interested in individual Muggles; for him, killing Muggles was either part of his strategy to intimidate the Ministry of Magic, or they were dismissed as collateral damage.

Minerva McGonagall had come visiting once during that week and confirmed everything Snape had told Hermione. That conversation had reassured Hermione, and seeing Minerva McGonagall had given her a link back to the 'real world' as she called it in her mind, as compared to the Underground group that still felt unreal. That link had grounded her and made it easier for her to adapt to the group and her new life. She was now actively making herself acquainted with her new surroundings instead of just letting everything happen to her. It had helped immensely that Minerva had brought Crookshanks, who enthusiastically bumped his head against Hermione's ankles, wove himself around her legs and then went off to investigate his new hunting grounds. Her heart felt lighter, and she was now actually looking forward to making her contribution and to helping the Underground as best as she could.

Hermione's integration was made easier by the friendly and easygoing attitude of most of the DA members, except for the Malfoys, who sneered and complained, but who Hermione learned to ignore quickly.

Meeting the real Peregrin Price had been an intriguing experience. She still found him interesting, charming even, but the dry and cutting wit that had often made his lessons and their talks so enjoyable to her was missing. She realised that this must have been the part that Snape had brought to the role, an aspect of his own personality that he either didn't want to suppress or had difficulty in so doing.

To Hermione's amazement and slight horror, she found that she actually preferred the Snape version of Peregrin Price to the original.

Snape had talked to her a few times, but had mostly returned to his routine of teaching at Hogwarts, attending Death Eater summons, and co-ordinating Underground activities.

That routine changed, however, when less than a week after her 'death', great excitement and busy activities transformed the peaceful cavern into a buzzing beehive. She caught the words "a raid" several times and decided to stay out of the way and watch. The Malfoys had been confined to their rooms, and after Emmeline Vance, who seemed to be a kind of Appin-DA leader, covered their rooms in a faint red bubble with a quick wave of her wand, it dawned on Hermione that the Malfoys were prisoners. To be dead to the world and held prisoner by one's rescuers... not exactly a fate either of them would have expected, Hermione thought, feeling only mildly guilty about the tiny jolt of gloating that this knowledge gave her.

"Who's going?" someone shouted.

"Bee will wait with the Portkey. Lola, where is the corpse?" Snape seemed to have come out of nowhere, but now he stood like a black beacon in the middle of the buzzing activities.

"Here, darling." Lola LaFolle levitated a female body that had been dead for some time and dropped it at Snape's feet. Hermione had learned that a part of the Underground's activities consisted of obtaining corpses from different sources. The bodies were kept under a stasis spell and stored in a small lake in a cave system underneath the main living area. Caves in that system were also used for potion brewing, and thus fondly called the dungeons. Hermione was brought back to the present by Snape's voice.

"Stand back!" he snarled at no one in particular and then began a chant that caused his wand to emit a dark purple mist; a mist that swirled around the dead body until it was completely covered by it. The corpse opened its eyes and rose its upper body to a sitting position. The Inferius, because that's what it had become, looked at Snape with its dead eyes and said in a hollow voice, "At your command."

"You will obey every order this witch gives you," Snape said to the Inferius and pointed to Emmeline Vance. Then Snape left the cave.

Bee ordered the corpse to touch a Portkey, which she activated a moment later. "Three - Two - One!" And Emmeline Vance, aka Bee, and the Inferius disappeared.

Hermione knew that they would emerge in the cave where Snape had given her the Shrinking Solution. Emmeline would immediately deactivate the Portkey...Portkeys that led from and to Nan Guthan were always destroyed...and they would then Apparate to another, randomly chosen, uninhabited cave, similar to the one where she had been greeted by Hannah Abbott.

Emmeline and the Inferius would wait there until Snape found an opportunity to send the potential victim to the cave with another Portkey. Emmeline would then cut a few hairs from the rescued and Stunned victim's head and add them to the modified Polyjuice Potion she carried with her. While the Inferius drank the potion, she would cast a complicated spell to make the transformation complete. The Inferius would don the victim's clothes, then Emmeline would send the Inferius back to Snape. When the Death Eater attack started, Snape would make certain that the Inferius was destroyed completely, 'helping' whoever it was who did the killing.

Hermione knew that both the Transfiguration spell and the modified potion had been developed by Professor Dumbledore together with Snape. The potion caused the change, but unlike the regular Polyjuice Potion which lasted only an hour, the change affected by the modified potion was permanent and had to be reverted with a specific antidote.

The Transfiguration spell made the changes resistant to *Finite Incantatem* and most common antidotes. The specific antidote potion was always efficient in reverting the Transfigured person back to its original state, but only if it contained a part of the person to revert back to.

The rest of the cave had gone back to their tasks, but Hermione had decided to wait and watch the normal procedure of introducing a new arrival. She curled up in her armchair and thought about how Snape had described these missions to her.

Snape had told her that it was easiest when he led, or partook in the particular raid, because then he could direct the Inferi if needed. He had made an effort to be included in as many raids as possible, and over the past year, his reputation with the Death Eaters had changed from being a coward to being a 'bloodthirsty old bastard.'

When Snape learned about attacks and wasn't involved in the raid, the exchange was made in advance, if possible. He would order the Inferius to act shocked and dazed and either to freeze or run around screaming when the attack began. Snape would then come to the scene after the raid and make sure that the Inferius was completely destroyed.

It didn't always work. Snape wasn't always informed about upcoming attacks in advance and sometimes arrived too late when he rushed to the scene. The attack on the Burrow and Madam Bones' murder had been such incidents. Once again, Hermione had to suppress the sadness that Mrs Weasley's death still caused her.

Several hours later, Hermione's ruminations were interrupted when someone yelled, "They made it! They've just left the corridor and are on the brooms." Soon, a beaming Emmeline Vance walked into the cave, leading a tired and shocked grey-haired woman to the sofa to sit down.

"Everyone, this lady here is my old friend, Carlotta Pinkstone."

"Oh, my goodness," Hermione thought. Carlotta Pinkstone was the famous campaigner for the lifting of the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy and for telling Muggles that wizards existed. Hermione didn't even want to try to imagine what would happen when Ms Pinkstone and Narcissa Malfoy ran into each other. Clearly, interesting times were ahead.

Two days later, the first Sunday after Hermione's 'death', Minerva McGonagall visited the caves again. She asked Hermione to accompany her to a small cave in the 'dungeons' that had obviously been used as an office. Hermione had only seen it once when Emmeline Vance had led her around the area.

When they entered the office, Snape was already there. He nodded a greeting, and all three of them sat down.

"How are you getting along, Hermione?" Minerva asked.

"Things are a bit clearer than they were a week ago," Hermione admitted. "But there is still a lot I don't know yet or don't understand."

She glanced at Snape, who stared back, stony-faced.

"If I can help with anything..." Minerva offered.

"I want to do something," Hermione said. "I feel so useless, so out of the loop. I have no idea what's happening out there...to Harry and Ron, to the Order. I know that I'm supposed to get acclimatised, but Professor Snape mentioned that I don't need a, ah, quarantine phase?"

Minerva gave Snape a fond smile, but he glared at her and scowled at Hermione.

"I'm not your professor any longer."

"Then what shall I call you?"

"Nundu!"

At her hesitant glare, he grunted, "Like it or not, it's my name here, and if you want to operate outside this refuge, you'd better get used to it. You don't seem to have this problem with Bee."

"All right, then. Nundu." Hermione rubbed her forehead. "What can I do?"

"There is plenty you can do. I will take you to a dig in a few days, then we'll see how you fare on a simple field mission."

Hermione nodded. She had been told that this would be asked of her.

"If you do well, you will help me with other, more important missions. We need to get this plan going."

"But..." Hermione glanced helplessly at Minerva. "How... what?"

"Severus means to say that we plan to coerce, or force, You-Know-Who into action, rash action."

"And Harry and the prophecy?" Hermione felt panic rise within her. They couldn't push things; Harry had to destroy the Horcruxes first before he could even think of confronting Voldemort.

"The delay has been long enough. We can't put our complete faith in the hands of Harry Potter." Snape snarled, only to continue, "Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays. In war, then, let your great object be victory, not lengthy campaigns."

"Sun Tzu again," Hermione exclaimed. "Do you know the whole book by heart?"

"Almost." Snape smirked. "And so do you, it would appear."

"But what about Harry? He has to confront Voldemort. He isn't ready yet."

"Price will continue with the training. Potter is fit; he is a skilled fighter. All he needs to work on are his emotional outbursts and a basic level of control. He'll never be good at it, but it should suffice. We cannot wait forever."

"Uhm...." Once again, Hermione glanced at Minerva, wishing that Professor Dumbledore had trusted someone else with the Horcrux information, not only Harry. "Harry has to do something. You know that, Minerva!"

Minerva McGonagall nodded.

"Harry has to finish this task before he can even start to think about defeating Voldemort. You need to delay your plans long enough to give Harry time to do this."

Snape jumped up from his seat and stalked towards her, glowering. "What kind of task is that?"

"I am not allowed to tell you. Professor Dumbledore must have thought that you don't need to know."

"Yes," Snape growled. "He kept reminding me that it would be disastrous if my Occlumency shields were broken and the Dark Lord read the secrets in my mind. Does Minerva know?"

"Albus didn't tell me, either." Minerva McGonagall shook her head sadly. "But I believe it when Hermione says that this is essential. However, you are right, Severus. We must move on with the plan, but we must also give Harry a chance to fulfil his task."

Snape was silently contemplating the rocks on the cave wall.

"It might be faster if I am allowed to help. I've been searching for information in old archives. I could do that again. Please! If I find something, there would be ways of getting the information to Harry, surely? Please?"

Snape stood with his back to them, breathing deeply. He stood there for a while, not speaking. Hermione cast an anxious glance at Minerva, but she only smiled gently and shook her head.

Finally, Snape turned around, his face a stony mask, his eyes cold. "Very well then, Miss Granger. We shall see how the dig goes, and then I'll think about it."

"Thank you, sir." Hermione was relieved.

The meeting didn't last much longer, and once Minerva had left, Hermione went to her own room, alone, to have some time to herself and to make plans how to proceed with the research.

Attack By Stratagem

Chapter 13 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? ****Winner**** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 12 Attack By Stratagem

1. Sun Tzu said: In the practical art of war, the best thing of all is to take the enemy's country whole and intact; to shatter and destroy it is not so good.

So, too, it is better to recapture an army entire than to destroy it, to capture a regiment, a detachment or a company entire than to destroy them.

2. Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence;

supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting. (Sun Tzu, The Art of War, III. Attack by Stratagem)

Hermione cast stealthy glances at the sleeping man who sat beside her in the passenger seat of an old and battered VW van. His long legs were stretched out as far as the legroom permitted; the seat was pushed back as far as possible, the seatback set to a reclining position. He had his arms crossed over his chest; his face was relaxed, and from time to time, he snored softly.

She was carefully manoeuvring the vehicle over the narrow winding, rural roads of the Northern Highlands of Scotland. While the scenery was breathtaking, Hermione wasn't an experienced enough driver to truly appreciate it, especially considering the slippery road conditions of a rainy, early December day.

Hermione smirked to herself. She would have time enough to take in the sights when Snape was driving again. Right now, she was using the opportunity to watch and think about the man who trusted her enough to sleep peacefully while she was driving, and who had become something of an enigma to her.

They were on their way to rescue Lucius Malfoy from Azkaban.

"You want me to come with you to get Lucius Malfoy out of Azkaban?" Hermione remembered asking incredulously when Snape told her of his mission.

"If you don't feel up to the task, I shall have to look for someone else."

Hermione ground her teeth. "Why?"

"There are plans to free the prisoners, especially Bellatrix Lestrange. And the Dark Lord wants all of the Malfoy family dead. He wants Lucius punished for his failure in the Department of Mysteries."

Hermione had to bite her tongue. Her attitude towards threatened Death Eaters in general, and Lucius Malfoy in particular, was less than benevolent. She was very much reminded of Harry's attitude towards Slytherins. Was she becoming a hypocrite? And was it fair to compare Slytherins and Death Eaters in this situation?

While Snape watched her stony-faced, Hermione came to the conclusion that she didn't have enough information.

"Is there a reason to suspect that the prisoners aren't safe and secure in Azkaban? The Dementors have left, haven't they? Are there plans to attack the Aurors and prison guards? Are there indications that they aren't up to their jobs?"

Snape gave up the pretence and smirked at her, a gleam of approval in his eyes. "They can be bribed." He paused and raised an eyebrow. "I should know that since I was behind the bribing. I am in charge of the planned Death Eater raid, you see."

"Oh?" Hermione denied him the satisfaction of watching her lose her composure.

"Yes. Albus was mistaken in his assumption that Lucius would be safe in Azkaban." Another half-amused gleam; obviously, Snape was challenging her. He enjoyed baiting her. She had figured that out the second week after her arrival, and by now it had become a game of sorts.

"Was he? I didn't know he was that concerned about Lucius Malfoy's safety, at all," she replied calmly, casting a stealthy glance at him.

Snape was smiling openly now, a sight that could terrify the weak of heart. Clearly, he was closing in for the kill. "Yes, he was. You see, Lucius Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore made a deal."

"What?" she shrieked, but checked herself immediately. "Did they? How interesting!" Grinning at him sheepishly, she conceded defeat.

"You still have a lot to learn," he said almost amiably.

"Well, I'm learning from the master, aren't I?" she threw in flippantly.

"Don't be impertinent," he replied, but failed to rise to her baiting. When he saw her disappointed face, he gave her one of his very rare laughs. "Better luck next time." And with an amused smirk, he quoted, "Sun Tzu said: *In the practical art of war, the best thing of all is to take the enemy's country whole and intact; to shatter and destroy it is not so good.*"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Sun Tzu again? So instead of destroying the enemy, Professor Dumbledore tried to get as many of them as possible on our side, so he didn't have to fight them?"

"Exactly!"

Hermione was still marvelling at the normal, almost friendly interaction between Snape and herself. She had learned more about the man in the last few weeks than she had in her six years at Hogwarts. Her greatest surprise had been the utter lack of anger he displayed at her teasing and challenging. Careful analysis of his past behaviour made her realise that the only times she had seen him lose his temper had been in Potions class, or when Harry or the Marauders were involved. Since neither of them was around at the moment, Snape could almost be called a normal human being. This didn't mean that he didn't get angry or call her names, but she wasn't exactly even-tempered either, and Snape tolerated her own outbursts of outrage with surprising patience.

"So, what was this deal about?" she asked, curious again.

"After the Dark Lord's return, Lucius found that being a servant didn't agree with him all that well, after so many years of independence. He never minded a bit of Muggle baiting and manipulation, but being the one to be manipulated and having his family threatened was not to his liking at all. That's why he went to Albus Dumbledore the year after the Dark Lord returned. Albus and Lucius made a kind of truce: Lucius would protect Harry Potter's life as best he could, and in turn, Albus would protect Lucius' family. And that's what they both did. That was the deal."

"When did Lucius Malfoy ever protect Harry?" Hermione frowned in consternation.

"He stopped the other Death Eaters from killing Potter in that ill-fated quest to retrieve the prophecy."

"So he did...Wait a minute... You're not saying that he was ordered... That would mean that you knew of the trap in advance."

"I did know that something of the sort was planned, and so did Albus. We didn't exactly know when it would happen, though. Why do you think Albus forced me to teach Occlumency to the boy? None of this scheme would have worked had he made an effort and learned Occlumency. No Potter at the Ministry, no trap, no prophecy, no dead godfather..." Snape narrowed his eyes and scowled.

"So you're saying it was all Harry's fault?" Hermione glared at him with all the resentment that had accumulated over the years.

Snape took a few deep breaths and pinched the bridge of his nose. "No," he admitted in barely more than a whisper. "We gambled and lost. Potter, with his idiotic obsession with snooping around and getting into trouble, was wide open for the Dark Lord's manipulations."

"But you knew... You must have known that Kreacher..."

"No, that I did not know. How could I have known about the idiotic actions of Sirius Black? And neither Bellatrix Lestrange nor Narcissa Malfoy were much inclined to share their secrets with me. We had thought the house-elf safely enough bound to Black to protect his secrets. We should have inferred from Dobby's behaviour that a determined house-elf will find a way to get his revenge."

"And that makes the inane arguments for enslaving them even more of an outrage, don't you think?"

"Not again! Can't you leave well enough..."

"Not you, too? Don't give me that shit about them being happy to serve and all that."

Snape sighed and gave her a long-suffering look. "Haven't you learned that the elves don't know how to be free? Why do you think they are so angry with Dobby? The ones who are treated well don't miss a freedom they never knew. And they don't understand the suffering of those who are abused. The loyalty to their families is usually so strong that Kreacher and Dobby's actions are basically unheard of. House-elves are afraid of freedom; they would have to look out for themselves. That's a scary thought if you've never had to do it. If you want to free the elves, you'll need to teach them how to be free first. I thought you'd have understood that by now."

Was there disappointment in his voice? Hermione wasn't certain. She bit her lip and looked at him, not knowing what to answer. He gave her another resigned look.

"Let it be for the time being. An endeavour like that needs a lot of time, patience and planning. If you get through all this alive, then you can do it. And there might even be help. I know that Albus would have helped you..."

"He would have?" Hermione's throat felt tight.

"Yes. He used to praise you highly for your devotion. He used to defend you against everyone who belittled or ridiculed you, stating that you just needed to adjust your methods and to include the ones you wanted to free in the process."

"He had a point," Hermione admitted grudgingly. "But it's so unfair. They deserve justice. I'm glad that Professor Dumbledore, at least..."

"Dumbledore?" Snape laughed bitterly. "If you adopted Dumbledore's interpretation of justice, only the house-elves associated with Slytherins would ever be freed. Heaven forbid that one of the saintly Gryffindor families would be relieved of their servants."

Hermione flushed. "That's unfair. Dumbledore was always..." Her voice trailed off as she remembered, shame-faced, how Dumbledore had always favoured Harry and his friends. "Well, you weren't the epitome of justice either, you know," she finally whispered, glancing at him sideways.

Snape smirked. "Call it balancing the accounts. I at least had the excuse of having to keep the Death Eaters happy, and I was favouring my own house, something every Head of House is well advised to do. What was his excuse as the Headmaster of the whole school?"

Hermione flushed even more. "The sense of justice in the wizarding world seems to be, ah, rather eccentric in general. A bit unreliable...if I think of the machinations of the last Minister and the likes of Malfoy..." She narrowed her eyes. "That brings us back to the main topic: Malfoy's involvement and the events at the Ministry...You said you didn't know about the trap... But I thought you were, and are, a trusted servant?"

"At that time, my role as a spy was more important than partaking in raids. That's why I wasn't always told. It was one of the reasons why Albus wanted me to get closer to the Dark Lord. It was also one of the reasons to give me the Defence Against the Dark Arts job."

"Let me get this straight. The Defence job meant that Professor Dumbledore trusted you completely, and that was what You-Know-Who wanted, so he would tell you more about his plans." Hermione felt as if she had been living in a fog these past years. She closed her eyes. There were so many layers of reality, so many goings-on in the background that she and her friends had never even imagined.

When she looked up again, she saw that Snape had been watching her quietly.

"Exactly," he agreed. "And it worked. The Dark Lord was pleased and so was Albus. And the Underground grew."

"And there are so many people in the Underground. And that's the reason why there are so many, isn't it? Over three-hundred witches and wizards. That's incredible. And it's wonderful. And it's all your doing."

Snape didn't reply. He only smirked at Hermione's enthusiasm, gave her a small bow and went away.

Hermione frowned and turned on the headlights. What she hadn't understood right away, but did now, was that Snape was in the middle of things. He would be hit from all sides if things went bad. She simply couldn't distrust him any longer. When she had decided to believe him after he had shown her the Pensieve memories, it had been a decision of the mind, a decision of reason. But now, after she'd had a deeper insight into Snape's personality, after she had learned what he'd done to amend for the mistakes he had made in his youth...now she found that trusting Snape had become a decision of the heart.

She sighed and cast another glance at the sleeping wizard. Who would have thought that he was such an intriguing character? The thought still filled Hermione with horror; it seemed simply impossible to actually like the man. And yet, these last few weeks, often spent in his company, had been so exciting and stimulating that she had hardly found the time to think, let alone grieve over the separation from her friends or to bemoan her isolated state.

After she had learned about the plan to coerce Voldemort into hasty and ill-thought out attacks, the urgency of her wanting, and needing, to help Harry with his quest had hit her full force. However, there hadn't been any need to remind Snape of her wish to indirectly help her friends. Snape seemed to feel a similar urgency because he had approached her two days later. If she felt ready, he would take her on her first mission: a "dig".

Going on a dig meant going to a graveyard and exhuming a freshly deceased corpse. The digging had to be done without magic to avoid leaving any detectable magical residue behind.

Hermione took turns with the other members of the small group for digging and standing watch. It was a sweaty, dirty job, but Hermione hadn't complained. She had listened, watched, obeyed Snape's commands without question and worked hard.

When they returned to Nan Guthan, Bee helped her clean up, and when most of the group were assembled after dinner, they gave her a name.

This had proven to be a bit of a problem. Normally, newcomers had a month or two to adapt and be tested before going on their first mission. The people in the cave had time to get to know the newcomer and make suggestions for a name that fitted the personality. However, Hermione had only been with the group for a little over a week, and hardly anyone knew her. Thus, there were only two suggestions for her pseudonym.

The first came from Draco Malfoy, who suggested 'Beaver'. The second suggestion was 'Nightshade' and came from Perry Price. To Hermione's great relief, the vote for 'Nightshade' was overwhelming with only two votes for 'Beaver', and Hermione could just guess who had cast those.

"Why Nightshade?" Carlotta Pinkstone asked, puzzled.

"I like the name. Plants of the Nightshade family are very useful," Hermione replied, back in full know-it-all mode. "They can be nourishing, like potatoes, peppers and aubergines."

"And they can be sweet and succulent like fresh, ripe tomatoes," Price said, smiling flirtatiously.

Hermione blinked. "Err... They can also be deadly poisons, like Henbane and Datura. And they can be potions ingredients, like the Bittersweet Nightshade, or the Black Nightshade."

"And Belladonna," Snape added.

All eyes turned to him; no one had noticed that he had joined the group.

"If you are ready, Nightshade, I would like to discuss your tasks with you." He gave her a small nod, and she followed him into the office cave.

Since Hermione had chosen to join the active fighters and go on outside missions, she was required to partake in the fighter training that was alternately led by Price and Snape and which closely resembled the special training Price had given her and her friends at Hogwarts. Snape had also offered to continue her Occlumency lessons and to introduce her to Legilimency.

He had not, however, mentioned her request for continuing her research to help Harry. Hermione had had to remind him.

"What is so important about Potter's quest that you are willing to endanger the whole Underground in order to help him? If I allow this, you will try to contact him."

Hermione winced. "It is essential that Harry does not fail. The whole outcome of this war depends on Harry's success. If you want this to end quickly, then we'd all better support Harry as much as we can."

"Merlin help us! I don't know what Albus was thinking! To leave a task as important as this to children..."

"We're not children any longer," Hermione snarled, annoyed. "I don't quite see why he shouldn't have given the task to Harry, seeing as Harry is the one who will have to face You-Know-Who. At least then Harry will know that he's done everything possible to prepare himself for the confrontation."

"Then tell me what this task is."

"I can't. It is so very important that it must remain a secret. Please!"

Snape studied her quietly with narrowed eyes. She stared back, defiance and a plea for understanding chasing each other on her face.

"And what is it you wish to do?" he finally asked.

"I want to go back to Arundel Castle and finish what I started. And there are other magical archives I'd like to check out. I could go in disguise..."

"Someone will have to accompany you at all times. It is very risky. If any of your group were to be captured, the secret of the Underground would be revealed."

"Is it more of a risk than grave-digging and other outside missions?"

"Those are all essential. No one else can do that for us. I am still not convinced that you really need to do this. Surely your friends will be able to continue without you? There are more important things you could be doing here."

"Such as?"

"Helping Bee with the modified Polyjuice Potion. She is looking for a way to make it efficient through skin contact. The rescue missions rely too much on me and my ability to control Inferi. If the corpses could be doused with such a potion, it would be possible to make the exchange without using Inferi in most cases when there is an advance warning. I may not always be around."

Hermione swallowed. That use of Dark Magic was something she needed to ask him about. She had been very surprised that Professor Dumbledore had agreed to use such means. However, at the moment, she knew it was more important to convince Snape to let her go and continue her work for Harry.

"I could still help Emmeline," she said. "But your own plan of not delaying the war for too long would make my contributing to Harry's task prudent. It could speed things up if I could find something."

"Could it? And would this be worth the risk of all these people's lives?" Snape gestured around him.

Hermione hid her face in her hands, shocked. Worded like that, her plea had sounded horribly selfish. She'd had to remind herself forcefully what Horcruxes were. She took a deep breath. "Yes!" she whispered. She looked up at Snape and wailed, "I can't believe I just said that."

Snape looked as if he had sucked on a lemon. "Very well, then. I shall talk to Bee about it. We will have to find a way for you to proceed with as little risk to the Underground as possible."

"Thank you, sir." Hermione let out a long, quivering breath of relief and gratitude.

After several consultations, Emmeline Vance, Snape, Minerva McGonagall and Hermione had worked out a routine that would allow her to visit the magical archives and to do her research. She had already revisited Arundel Castle accompanied by Snape, who as of late had sent Price more and more often to teach Harry and Ron and had spent more and more time with Hermione's training. Only, the search hadn't gone any faster now than it had before. Looking through the archives and searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack was tiring and monotonous work. Once again, she wished for a database charm.

"Make one if you need one," Bee suggested. "You have an excellent knack for Charms; you can do it. Break the problem into little solvable parts for a start."

Bee was an expert at Charms and a competent consultant as well as a warm-hearted and caring woman. She had remembered Hermione from the time she had spent at Grimmauld Place after Order meetings, and the two of them had become friends of sorts. Hermione felt that she could always go and ask Bee for advice.

Hermione stopped the van because a flock of sheep was blocking the road. She waited patiently until two border collies rounded up the last of the stragglers, reliving in her mind how that unexpected friendship had led to a rather embarrassing moment for her. She grinned sheepishly and peered at the sleeping Snape again. It had been embarrassing for her, but it had also shown her Snape in a completely new light. It was then that she had started to see her former teacher as an ordinary man and not the threatening teacher or the intimidating archetype of a powerful wizard with unclear morals and loyalties.

She had been working all night because she had known that she was close to solving the puzzle of the Google Charm, as she had called it. Google was a new search engine, something her parents had been quite delighted about the last time she had visited them. They were fascinated by computers and a worldwide virtual source of information, interaction and entertainment: the Internet. When they had shown her how fast that Google program found information for specific keywords, Hermione had wished that she had something like that for searching the library, instead of always having to meticulously go through Madam Pince's card files.

And now she'd done it. In the early morning hours, a streak of genius had induced her to combine a simple Four-Point Spell with a Summoning Charm and the complicated sequence of charms used on enchanted quills. The Google Charm worked perfectly in the Underground's library. Hermione had every right to expect it to work just as well when used in an archive or another large library.

Hermione had been so happy and excited that she'd just had to share her success with someone. Looking at the enchanted ceiling, she noticed that the sun had already come up. She left her books and notes in the library cave and hurried to Emmeline Vance's quarters.

"Bee, I've got it! It works," she cried, running into Emmeline's bedroom. A rather unexpected sight met her, making her stop short. A head with lanky black hair lifted itself up from the pillows, and a tired face smirked at her sarcastically. Hermione thought she could see Emmeline's head buried in the pillows at the side of this disconcerting vision, but she wasn't certain. With a shrieked, "So sorry!" she turned on the spot and ran out again, breathing heavily. Her face was flushed beet-red, and she didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. In the end she decided to laugh. The quiet walk back to the library cave had calmed her down somewhat.

Had she just seen Snape in bed with a woman? The bat of the dungeons, who could only ever sneer at people and belittle them unless they were Slytherins? Snape, the Death Eater, one of the leaders of the Underground, whom she respected, admired even, but had never really seen as a person. Snape, who hadn't bitten her head off but seemed amused instead? He was a human being. He was a person with needs and wants. Snape was a man.

Hermione cringed. She did not want to think in more detail about that last aspect...that was far too embarrassing. However, her idiotic, childish view of the man (yes, the man) had been shattered forever. And that struck her as rather funny.

After years of telling Harry and Ron to treat the man (yes, the man) with decency and respect, it had needed an embarrassing moment like that for her to realise just how biased and narrow-minded she herself had been. So maybe she hadn't been quite as grown-up as she'd thought. She shook her head. That had to change. From now on, she would try to look at the people behind the facade, to try not to be intimidated or blinded by a mask, by the camouflage these people had created around themselves.

With a shiver, Hermione understood that her view of Snape hadn't been all that different from her view of Lockhart. She had seen what they had wanted her to see and reacted to them in a way they had wanted her to react. It was a bitter realization that she could be manipulated that easily. That would stop now. From now on, she would try to always look beyond the veneer. She would try to find and interact with the personality, not the persona. That resolve allowed her to face her next meeting with Snape gracefully and without too much embarrassment.

Her resolve was helped by Emmeline, who had apologized for having been too tired ("Tired? From what?" a sneaky inner voice asked but was silenced vigorously) to hear her and was excitedly listening to everything Hermione had to tell her about the Google Charm.

Hermione had expected her next meeting with Snape to be more awkward, but Snape had merely looked at her with raised eyebrows, and when she had acted normally and not overly embarrassed, he had just fallen back into their usual routine. Hermione thought she had seen a glitter of approval in his eyes, but that might just as well have been wishful thinking.

"How late is it?"

Aha, her passenger had woken up. "Half-past three," she told him.

"Stop at the next lay-by. I'll drive now."

Hermione did as she was told. Getting out of the car, she stretched and walked around a bit. "How much further do we have to go?"

"We should reach the safe house by late afternoon. We will leave the car there and then spend the night at the Bone Caves. We'll collect the corpse; Narcissa had some hairs from Lucius, so we can Transfigure the body ahead of time, and then we'll drive until we reach Thurso. In Thurso, we will stay with my Muggle cousin, and his home will be our headquarters for the operation. Remember not to use any magic there." He shot her a sharp glance.

Hermione sighed. They had gone through this many times already. "I shall not use any magic; I shall not talk about witches and wizards; I shall act like your slightly daft girlfriend; I shall not speak to anyone about what I hear or see there."

"Exactly."

"But why? What is it that I could see or hear in a Muggle house that I haven't seen before? Are you going to be performing some unspeakable Snape rituals? Why are you stressing this point so much?"

"It's nothing. Just do as you're told," Snape grumbled and climbed into the car.

Hermione made herself comfortable in the passenger seat and stared out of the window. They had been driving north all day. The previous night had been spent at one of the DA's safe houses where Snape had taken her by Side-Along Apparition. Safe houses were Muggle houses that were used for storing Transfigured goods until they could be transported to the caves where they were needed. They were also used to hide Muggle equipment that might be needed for outside missions, and finally, they provided shelter when DA members were travelling without magic.

"Why aren't we Apparating all the way?" she had asked after she'd learnt they would be driving most of the way to the North.

"I would have to Apparate in my Death Eater persona, and only those movements should be traceable, if anybody was tailing me. I don't want any magical traces of your presence in the area. Side-by-side Apparition would be unreliable with you and the Inferius to take along for such a distance. And we'll drive because brooms aren't the most comfortable of long-distance vehicles, wouldn't you agree?"

Hermione nodded and shuddered. Not only was it uncomfortable to sit on a broom or a magical beast for several hours, but it was also quite cold, and if they couldn't use magic, they couldn't use any warming charms or drying spells in the case of bad weather. Driving was slower but more comfortable, and certainly the least suspicious means of transport. It was also the least interesting means of transport. Hermione was bored to death. While only driving on secondary roads would keep them out of trouble, accidents, traffic jams and controls, thereby avoiding detection, it also slowed them down a great deal.

Hermione could only spend so much time thinking about the 'new and improved' Severus Snape, about their mission, or about her life of the past four weeks. In between these recollections, there was nothing but boredom. The countryside would have been pretty, in a rugged sort of way, if it hadn't been raining all the time. Rain clouds concealed the surrounding hills and mountains; the treeless slopes looked like grey-green sponges. Occasionally, a flock of sheep, also drenched and grey, would interrupt the monotony, but these distractions passed quickly.

Hermione couldn't read while driving on these winding roads without getting sick, and unsurprisingly, her companion wasn't the entertaining sort, either. But at least he was willing to answer her questions, and so she had learned a great deal more about the Underground in these past two days. There was still one thing that puzzled her, though. The occasion to ask this question had never seemed quite right. Now, however, there was nothing to distract them, and Snape couldn't get up and just leave, either.

"Nundu, if you don't mind me asking another question..."

"What is it now?" Irritation was evident, but there was no anger.

"Uhm, you know... All this time, err, I kept wondering. The Inferi... The procuring of corpses... All this is Dark... I always thought, err... You know how Professor Dumbledore..."

"Yes," he hissed impatiently. "I know what Professor Dumbledore thought about Dark Magic." He glanced at her through his curtain of black hair. "He hated it. But he couldn't come up with a better, more efficient way to rescue all these people. He happened to have a Dark Wizard at his beck and call, and I was able to convince him to use that resource."

"Don't call yourself that," Hermione interrupted. "You're not really a Dark Wizard!"

"Out of the mouths of fools and babes..." Snape snarled. "Albus used to say exactly the same thing. Things don't change their essence if you call them by another name, you know? I am what I am, and it can't be denied. But he finally remembered what he'd known all along: that being a Dark Wizard simply means having studied and being able to use Dark Magic; a branch of magic that is predatory, opposing and complementary to the so-called neutral or benevolent magic. Didn't you listen to my speech in Defence class? Without Dark Magic, nothing evolves. There would be stasis; there would never be anything new. Only with the light and dark complementing, completing each other, will the full potential emerge, either of witch or wizard, or of magic itself."

"So you're saying that the intent of the witch or wizard doesn't determine if it's Dark or not, but it's by its very nature. It's like an independent part?"

"Not independent. Never independent. Without Dark, there is no Light; without evil, there is no good. Merlin, Nightshade. Surely you don't need to be told the most basic truths of magical philosophy?"

"Uhm... And Professor Dumbledore agreed to this because the Inferi were used for saving lives and not for destruction?"

"Yes, and because he had a Dark Wizard at his command. He didn't need to tempt one of the innocent, the guileless. As you know, I'm the one who does the transforming." Another sharp glance cast in her general direction while he stopped at a passing-place to give way to a lorry that was coming towards them on the single track road.

"But he didn't like it, did he? That's why you're all working on that potion to be absorbed by the skin, so no Inferi need to be created?" Hermione nodded, thinking that she finally understood what was going on.

"Yes and no. He wanted that potion to be altered because he did not want to be dependent on Inferi. When the warning comes early enough, and we can pretend that the wizard or witch is killed in their sleep, then an Inferius isn't necessary...a corpse that looks like the intended victim works just as well. But if it is a killing in action, like yours was, then the Inferius would still be needed. It's like a safety valve in case something happens that prevents me from assisting the Underground."

"He was worried about your safety, wasn't he? He didn't want you to have to use so much Dark Magic either, did he?" Hermione declared in a no-nonsense voice. She knew that she was right, even if Snape was too stubborn to admit it. He did concede defeat, however.

"You're right. That's what he wanted," he replied, sadness thickening his voice. "I don't know why, but the old man really cared for me."

"Of course he would have," Hermione said, astonished that this should surprise him. "And deservedly so. You're risking so much for the cause you've worked so hard for all this time. All of the Underground cares for you. I'm certain. I know that those at Nan Guthan do, anyway."

"Do they now?" Snape murmured and refused to answer any more of her questions. With a sigh, she leaned back in her seat and soon fell asleep.

The visit to the Cave of the Bones had been fascinating. It was the second Underground refuge Hermione had got to see. The cave was a new refuge; there weren't too many people there yet. Hannah Abbott and her family were living there, and Hermione was delighted to meet them all. She also met Floean Fortescue and Mr. Ollivander, who had been rescued from a Death Eater raid on Diagon Alley a little over a year ago. Mr. Ollivander had shown her his collection of newly fabricated wands, and she had been allowed to choose one. This new wand was so much better than the substitute wand she had been given at Nan Guthan. It was even better than her old wand...the one Snape had taken from her and broken.

Feeling more complete than she had in the past four weeks, Hermione had helped Snape with the Inferius. "Drink this," Snape had commanded after the corpse had come to life and pushed a vial into the skeletal hands. The Inferius downed the potion immediately, and Hermione watched in horrified fascination how the potion was swallowed. Not having a fully functioning gullet or digestive system mattered as little to drinking as not having a functioning windpipe seemed to matter to speaking. Well, if half-beheaded ghosts could speak, why not an Inferius, she mused.

Feeling slightly sick, Hermione watched as boils and bumps erupted from the rotten flesh of the corpse. While the Inferius changed form, Snape performed a complicated sequence of wand movements and murmured a spell. When both were finished, an identical twin of Lucius Malfoy was standing where the Inferius had been before. The expression in his eyes was strangely empty, though.

All three of them hit the road again the next day to drive on to their final destination before the rescue mission: the city of Thurso on the northern-most part of the Scottish mainland.

Azkaban, she had learned, was just north of the Shetlands. Snape was going to Apparate to the Shetland Islands a day before the raid, meet the bribed prison guard who'd bring him to the island by boat, and gain access to Lucius Malfoy's cell. There, he would make the transfer, sending the Stunned Lucius to her via Portkey and receiving the Inferius in return. He would instruct the Inferius and then Apparate to one of the Death Eater hide-outs to meet up with the Death Eaters, who would accompany him on the raid where Inferius-Lucius would be killed.

But first they would establish their headquarters. They were going to visit Snape's cousin Paul in Thurso.

Paul Snape could have been Severus Snape's twin brother, except for the fact that his hair wasn't long and greasy, and his skin was slightly tanned. He was thin, bordering on gaunt, and he had the same large hooked nose, slightly crooked, yellowish teeth, thin black hair, and ink-black eyes. His personality, however, was exactly the opposite of Snape's.

"Your Highness!" he bellowed. "How good to see you again. It's been ages. I couldn't believe it when you phoned. Do come in, come in. And what do we have here? A little girlfriend?" He winked at Hermione, who had a hard time playing the clueless girlfriend and had to work hard to suppress her giggles. Instead, she gave Paul an innocent smile.

"Your Highness?" she asked sweetly.

"Oh, don't you know? His mum's maiden name was Prince. And his first name comes from a Roman emperor. His Highness, Severus the Half-Prince. A half-prince emperor." And Paul laughed hard while Snape looked murderous.

"Enough of that," Snape finally said. "I see that you still haven't grown up, Paulie. This is Nightshade." He put an arm around Hermione, who had the presence of mind not to flinch.

"Nightshade?" Paul said, giving her an appreciative once-over. "Looks like her parents were Hippies, eh?"

"I wonder what gave that away," Hermione said, smirking.

"Ah, sharper than you look, little girl, eh?"

"What do you mean?" She frowned and tried to get the empty expression back into her eyes.

"Us Snapes do like smart girls. I remember when you brought that fiery little redhead to a concert in London once. Bright as lightning and full of spunk. What was her name? Lisa? Lillian?"

"Lily," Snape croaked through clenched teeth.

Hermione watched the exchange wide-eyed.

Paulie winked. "Right, but never mind. That was the past; this is the present. There's no need to play the daft one, little Nightshade. I bet our Prince put you up to it. He's afraid that my charms will outshine his."

"Can we settle down, now?" Snape growled, but Hermione laughed heartily.

"You're a dangerous man, Paulie. I'd better be careful around you."

"You'd better be, love!" he cried, wiggling his eyebrows exaggeratedly and leering. This only made Hermione giggle more.

"If you two don't mind?" Snape interrupted, looking very sour. "We have a friend with us. Lucius is ill. He needs to lie down. All this driving, you know?"

"Lucius?" Paulie guffawed. "Where do you meet these people? Blimey, Severus, all these extravagant names. Do bring him in."

They led the Inferius out of the car, and after Snape had commanded it to greet Paulie politely, it was led to a small guest room where it was ordered to lie down, pretend to sleep, and not do anything until further orders from either Snape or Hermione.

Snape and Hermione were given the master bedroom. Paulie grinned at her and winked when he showed them the room. "This one should be right for you two. Nice big bed in there."

Hermione blushed. After Paulie left them, she spun around and faced a smirking Snape.

"You could have given me a bit of warning, you know."

"What, and miss all this?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Always glad to entertain, but what, exactly, is expected from me here?" She motioned to the big bed.

"What do you take me for?" he hissed. "The bed should be large enough, don't you think? If you keep to your side, and I to mine, we should be able to sleep peacefully." He glared at her and ground out, "I am... sorry... that I can't change the room into two but using magic here would be bad for my alibi, if it were ever found out. I had thought you understood that. And Paulie has given us the best bedroom in the house."

"Is it his? Where is he sleeping?"

"This was his parents' bedroom. He sleeps in his old room whenever he stays here. He often has visitors; he has many friends. But if it is a problem for you, I can sleep in the car. We can always say we had a fight."

"No, it's all right," Hermione said, smiling apologetically. "It just came as a bit of a surprise. And Paulie isn't quite what I expected. You know, if I have to pretend to be your girlfriend, you could at least act a bit more possessive. I don't know if I would be able to control myself should he get the idea to pinch my arse."

"Paulie is mostly bark, not bite," Snape tried to placate her. "He enjoys a bit of teasing. I thought you were grown-up enough to not be embarrassed by it." He frowned and looked at her thoughtfully. "I keep forgetting just how very young you still are."

"I'm an adult, and I'm sure it will be fine, sir," she said. "I didn't really think that he was serious. He's rather funny, actually."

Snape raised an eyebrow and gave her a half-smile. "Paulie will treat you with all the respect he can manage. But he won't stop making insinuations and teasing you. Do you think you can handle this? The other alternative would be for you to be sitting on my lap, literally, most of the time, acting completely infatuated and blind to anything else around you." He shrugged. "That would be a bit out of character for me, but then, you never know what a young girlfriend could do to a middle-aged man."

Hermione snorted. "I think we can leave that as a last resort, sir," she said with a slight smile. "I think I can manage the flirting. Paulie seems a kind enough man."

"He has his moments," Snape admitted grudgingly. "We'll be talking about old times most of the time, anyway, and then you'll have your peace."

"I see," Hermione said, but she was wondering what the next days would bring.

"And one more thing, Nightshade. Do stop calling me sir, if you please. If that slips out while someone else is listening, we'd have some explaining to do why my very young girlfriend calls me that, especially if Paulie heard it."

Hermione looked chagrined. "Right. I shall remember it. Nundu."

He nodded and went to the bathroom.

Dinner progressed amiably with a lot of teasing from Paulie and laughing from Hermione. Snape said little, and the Inferius stayed in its room.

After dinner, they shared a few drinks, and then Hermione excused herself, saying she was tired. They had told Paul that they were travelling to the Orkneys to participate in some of the Hogmanay celebrations and later moving on to the Shetland Islands to see the Up-Helly-Aa. To Paul, this explanation seemed completely plausible. He started to reminisce about customs and traditions of the area, and soon he and Snape were trading memories of their childhood. Apparently, they had spent several holidays here together.

Hermione smiled when she went to bed. It was very strange to see Snape interact with his cousin in this Muggle environment, acting like any ordinary human being.

'He is an ordinary human being', her nagging inner voice reminded her, but she shook it off. He is a human being but certainly not ordinary, she thought. It surprised her again and again just how many facets this man, whom she had only known as a stern and unpleasant teacher, kept hidden under this dour disguise.

It was undeniable that he was an interesting character. He was unfair, angry and stern but also talented, knowledgeable and intelligent. He possessed humour, a sharp wit and biting sarcasm, and his appearance underlined these traits, she thought. His demeanour was stern and un-conceited, and yet, he looked dangerous: his power seemed to ooze from every greasy pore; a fact that made him oddly attractive. A glare from him could silence a room and not only at Hogwarts...she had seen it happen in the Underground as well. A whispered threat could terrorize people; an appreciative nod from him would elate those who wanted to learn from him.

He was more of an enigma now than ever before, Hermione thought to herself. She was beginning to understand the fascination Emmeline Vance and several other women in the Underground had for Snape. 'Blimey, do I have a crush on him?' she wondered worriedly but dismissed the thought as being childish and superficial, paying no heed to the rapid beating of her heart. She had started to like the man. She wanted to be his friend. Of course she would think about and appreciate all the good qualities of a friend. Yes, that was it. She wanted to be friends with him, and now she was going to get some sleep.

Sleep didn't come. Instead, she went over the planned rescue of the next few days again and again and thought about Snape some more. Finally, she got out of bed and walked to the kitchen to get a glass of milk. She passed a half-open door that hid a flight of stairs leading to the basement. When she went back, the glass of milk in her hand, she heard sounds coming up from below. Wondering if Paul and Snape intended staying up all night, she stopped to listen.

They were playing music. At least, that's what it sounded like. One of them must have been playing the drums, the other the guitar. They played blues and rock songs from the sixties and early seventies. They didn't play too well, though they did have a lot of enthusiasm. Hermione had just decided to join them and listen when they stopped.

"The world has never been the same since John Lennon died," Paulie said, his voice slightly slurring.

"Bloody right, and it got worse when Freddy Mercury died," Snape replied earnestly, in the firm, cordial tone of voice that only one glass too many can achieve.

Hermione backed away slowly.

The music started to play again. "I put a spell on you becauuuuse you're miiii-ine!" someone roared. Was that Snape singing? Or Paulie? Their voices weren't all that different. Hermione rolled her eyes and went back to bed, regretting the promise she had made to never tell anyone what happened in this house. Snape rituals, indeed. This was just too good to keep to herself. If it weren't for that bloody promise... But then, no one would have believed her, anyway.

With the drums hammering in the background, she finally fell asleep, only to be woken up abruptly two hours later by Snape falling into bed and making the mattress bounce. Before she knew what was happening, he'd started to snore, and the rest of Hermione's night was spent between colourful curses, vain efforts to tune out the racket and brief episodes of quiet rest. *If I hadn't promised not to use magic, I'd hex him into next Tuesday* Hermione thought and stared at the ceiling. However, her complaints at breakfast the next morning only earned her Paulie's amused laughter and an indignant comment from Snape that he never snored.

Two days later, they started off early. Snape, Hermione and the Inferius...now clad in Azkaban prison garb...left Paul's house, ostensibly to do a bit of shopping for their trip North. In reality, they drove out of town and stopped in a forest close to the beach where Snape led them to a small cave.

"This is where you will wait for the exchange. No one ever comes here. Don't use your wand unless there is an emergency."

Hermione nodded, and Snape left her, driving the van to another cave and Disapparating to the Shetlands from there. That second cave was well hidden and would serve as the Introduction Cave for Lucius Malfoy.

"Why me?" Hermione had asked when Snape had first told her about the plan.

"Because I can trust you to not kill Lucius as soon as you see him, something almost every other Underground member would feel inclined to do," he had replied, glancing at her. "I know that I can rely on you. This is not a regular mission; we will have to modify procedure and adapt it to the circumstances. I need someone I can trust

completely."

"Very well, then. Tell me about the plan," Hermione had conceded, not able to suppress a pleased smile.

The cave at the beach was cold and uncomfortable. Slight drizzle was falling, and the sea looked as grey as the sky. Hermione wished she could cast a Warming Charm but instead paced the length of the cave, up and down, round and round.

After two hours of pacing, a blue light indicated that the transfer was about to take place. Only a moment later, a very surprised looking, petrified Lucius Malfoy appeared in the cave.

Hermione pried the Portkey out of his stone-like hand and ordered the Inferius to take it. She counted down, three...two...one, and the Inferius disappeared. The transfer had succeeded. Lucius Malfoy was safe.

A/N: I searched the web for weather data for the winter of 1997/98 and learned that, at least in parts of Scotland, it was an exceptionally mild December. I posted some weather- and traffic-related questions on the Snape-centric livejournal community snapedom, and people who know the Highlands of Scotland confirmed that the scenario I presented here can happen at that time of the year. Thank you, Underground! (Underground is the name the snapedom users chose for themselves, and is not at all connected to this story. :)

Tactical Dispositions

Chapter 14 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 13 Tactical Dispositions

4.11. What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins,

but excels in winning with ease.

4.12. Hence his victories bring him neither reputation for wisdom nor credit for courage.

4.13. He wins his battles by making no mistakes.

Making no mistakes is what establishes the certainty of victory, for it means conquering an enemy that is already defeated.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, IV. Tactical Dispositions)

"I am quite certain that you are surprised to see me, Mr. Malfoy. Listen to what I have to say, and then I will release you. Do not attempt to escape or harm me in any way; that would not be to your advantage."

Hermione had practised this speech over and over, but now, staring into the cold, surprised and still piercing eyes of an immobilized Lucius Malfoy, she felt panic rising from deep within her. Being able to use her wand again made her feel only slightly better. Snape had sent a second Portkey back with Malfoy, and that Portkey had brought them both to the hidden cave where the introduction would take place.

Hermione had to remind herself that she had become a skilled duellist and a fighter. Malfoy would be weakened from his long stay in Azkaban, and he didn't have a wand, but he was still dangerous and not to be underestimated. Snape had told her not to trust him until the contract was signed and even then to be careful. Hermione wished that she didn't have to do this, that Snape was here to make this particular introduction to the DA as had been planned initially. However, shortly before the mission, they had decided that it would be better for Snape to stay in Azkaban as long as possible before meeting the other Death Eaters. That way, he could ensure that most of the guards were drugged and safely out of the way. Accordingly, the introduction had been left to her. So, if she really wanted to help Snape, wanted to be more than a dogsbody, then she'd better do this properly. She looked at Malfoy.

"Your wife and son are alive and well. The same wizard who rescued you today rescued them, too. After that, they were brought to safety and are being protected. Professor Dumbledore's part of the deal is fulfilled. For the rest of the world, you are dead. You will be reunited with your wife and son soon; all of you will be given refuge. You then can decide if, and how, you will help us."

She stared at him while she spoke and then cast, *Incarcerous*. Ropes shot out of her wand and bound the unmoving figure. Then she cast the counter-spell to the Full Body-Bind and held her wand to Malfoy's throat.

"Is this really necessary?" he rasped. Obviously, he hadn't had much opportunity to use his voice in Azkaban.

"That depends on your behaviour. You can ask questions, now. Then I shall decide how to proceed."

"What proof do you have that my wife and son are still alive?"

"What use would you be to us if we deceived you?"

"My, ah, friend could present me to the Dark Lord. And how do I know that you are who you appear to be? You were reported dead almost two months ago."

"Now that makes sense," Hermione sneered. "He would go to all this trouble to get you here, fake your death and then present you to your master? Very logical. Honestly, I expected you to be more intelligent. However, your friend, the one who rescued you, predicted this."

She took a small piece of parchment out of her pocket. "Your wife wrote a letter. She said that you would know that it was from her and from no one else, and that it was written freely. I shall let you read that letter now."

She held the piece of parchment in front of Malfoy, and his eyes skimmed the letter quickly. When he had finished reading, he closed his eyes and sighed deeply. A whispered, "Narcissa!" escaped his chapped lips. And were those tears trickling down his cheeks? Hermione didn't really want to know.

After a few moments, Malfoy opened his eyes and simply said, "Thank you."

Hermione gasped in surprise. Malfoy smirked. "I should have known that I could rely on, ah, him. He always was a loyal friend. Since you work for him, I conclude that I can extend my trust to you as well. What do you expect me to do?"

"I have a magical contract you need to sign." Hermione told him about the conditions he would have to meet before he would be allowed to learn more about the Underground. These conditions were quite different from the ones she had been asked to fulfil.

Malfoy asked a few more questions and then signed the contract with Hermione as his first witness. Reluctantly, she released him from all his confinements and Transfigured his tattered prisoner's robes into Muggle clothing of the kind the Inferius had been wearing.

They then hiked to the van, and after she'd explained to Malfoy what to do, she led him to the passenger seat and buckled him in.

"Isn't some sort of Muggle licence required to operate these vehicles?" he asked when Hermione started the engine.

"I learned to drive last summer," she explained. "And the Underground can issue you with any Muggle document you might need. I have a driving licence in the name of Nightshade Smith, and I'd appreciate it if you called me that from now on."

She told Malfoy about the pseudonyms. When he heard about 'Nundu,' he laughed out loud.

"It seems that my old friend finally found the recognition he's always craved."

"If you say so." Hermione didn't want to discuss Snape with Malfoy.

Back at Paul's house, she led Malfoy to the Inferius' room, impressing on him the importance of acting slightly dazed, pretending to not feel well and being mostly quiet. Hermione had told Paul that Snape had gone to John o' Groats to check out ferry connections and would only return the following evening. However, the next evening, only Snape's Patronus came, instructing Hermione to take Lucius and drive south. Snape would join them at the safe house where they had spent the night six days before.

Early the next morning, Hermione made Snape's excuses to Paulie, who hugged her enthusiastically and invited her to come again, with or without his cousin. She kissed him on the cheek, performed a mild memory charm on him that made him forget everything about Lucius and promised to come back one day if she could.

It was a strange drive back to the safe house. Malfoy was quiet, and so was Hermione. She preferred it that way. Although Malfoy treated her politely, she neither liked nor trusted him, and Hermione didn't feel like small talk. The drive with Snape had been a lot more interesting.

When they finally arrived late that night, Snape was already waiting for them.

While Lucius Malfoy took a long and much-needed bath, Snape told Hermione that the raid had been successful: the Inferius was destroyed, the Death Eaters among the prisoners were free, and the prison guards had been stunned by him and hidden safely out of the way. Bellatrix Lestrange had been the witness to the fake Malfoy's murder. However, she had raged so insistently at Snape for murdering her sister that Voldemort had had to step in and put her in her place.

This had resulted in Snape having to endure one of Voldemort's speeches to his Death Eaters, which went on endlessly. Voldemort was impatient. He wanted action.

Snape glared at Hermione. "I need to have a good plan for delaying him any longer...especially now, with Bellatrix Lestrange egging him on just to spite me."

Hermione was worried. The Horcrux hunt had not been successful at all. And while she had told Harry that they would take as much time for it as needed, she now knew that this wasn't possible any longer, that they would be forced into action very soon if they didn't come up with a convincing reason for a delay.

"I'm working as fast as I can, sir. If Harry doesn't succeed, everything will just go on forever," she said sadly.

Snape stared at her hard. "Eventually, you will tell me what this is about."

Hermione was spared having to answer by Lucius Malfoy, who came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a bathrobe, his skin still slightly steaming.

"Now that I feel human again, perhaps you would be so kind as to answer some more of my questions, Severus?"

"Certainly." Snape followed Malfoy into the lounge and left Hermione alone in the kitchen.

Hermione knew that it would be better if the two men talked alone, but it angered her nonetheless. "Being ignored like a house-elf," she muttered, but chided herself immediately for being childish. She had decided to look beyond the pretence. And yet, once again, she had only too willingly succumbed to the image someone wanted to project. Despite being wandless, virtually powerless and at their mercy, Lucius Malfoy emitted an air of superiority and entitlement. He didn't ask for explanations; he demanded them and expected his demands to be met. And Snape hadn't batted an eyelid at those demands but had merely fulfilled Malfoy's expectations, just as Hermione had quietly conceded to keep out of the way, to not interfere. And yet, despite maintaining appearances, she knew that Malfoy was aware of the shift of power between them. It was an unspoken agreement. Everybody knew where everybody else stood, but that was no reason to act out of character.

Slightly amused by her own revelations, Hermione rummaged through the cupboards and the freezer to see what she could find for dinner. She put three frozen pizzas in the oven and made a salad from canned beans and onions. If Malfoy found this simple Muggle fare after Azkaban cuisine beneath him, he could go hungry for all she cared. Neither she nor Snape were picky eaters...they'd put away the pizza on their own, thank you very much.

Back at Nan Guthan, Hermione watched the reunion of the Malfoys with mixed feelings. Narcissa was in tears, and Draco looked happy as she had never seen him before. Lucius Malfoy embraced them both, and they just stood there for a long time, holding each other, before they retired to their quarters.

Despite her dislike of the family, Hermione was moved. The affection between them was palpable, as was their friendship for Snape.

Unlike his wife, Lucius developed a calm and polite manner when dealing with Hermione and other Muggle-borns. On occasion, when Narcissa was fighting with Carlotta Pinkstone or complaining about the company she had to endure, he would calm her down and remind her gently as to whom their new allies were. His behaviour had an effect on Draco as well, who sneered and taunted less and developed a more active interest in his surroundings.

About a week after Lucius Malfoy's arrival, Emmeline Vance called a meeting of all the Nan Guthan refugees.

"We are going to restructure the caves a bit," she said, smiling. "With so many children and young people amongst us now, we think we should offer them some sort of education. It is sad enough that they can't continue their schooling at Hogwarts. To survive in our times, they will need every skill they can get. Although we all hope that this war will be over soon, of course, so that the children can resume their formal education without losing too much time."

Hermione listened raptly. Did they want to open an Underground school? The idea excited her.

"We will relocate some of you to other caves and move the families with children here. This cave is our oldest and safest refuge. We will also concentrate people here who can teach. The older children can teach the younger ones; that way, everyone should still have time to fulfil their normal tasks." Emmeline beamed at the excited murmurs her announcement had caused.

Hermione was glad that she could stay in Nan Guthan. She had been very busy these past weeks, but she still felt that she was missing out on all the lessons in advanced magic. She'd never given up hope of being able to sit her N.E.W.T.s eventually. She was looking forward to this Underground school.

A few days later, the relocation started. Hermione had learned that Susan Bones and her remaining family had been rescued just a few days previously, and now a still confused Susan arrived at Nan Guthan, hardly believing it when she saw Hermione alive and well. Hannah Abbott had arrived with her family, as well as a surprising number of other children Hermione knew from Hogwarts. Most of them were half-bloods or Muggle-borns.

The Malfoys were moving to another cave, in the south of England. Snape wanted Narcissa Malfoy and Carlotta Pinkstone separated. While their frequent and loud fights were quite entertaining at times, most often they were annoying and disturbing for those who weren't on duty. One of them had to go, and since Carlotta Pinkstone was needed to teach Ancient Runes, it was Narcissa who had to leave, and her family with her.

Draco, however, insisted on staying. "I want to be part of this school, too," he had complained. Despite his mother's protests, he had offered to teach Potions to the younger children, and his offer had been accepted.

Hermione ran into him while he was having an argument with Kreacher. She had been aware that Kreacher was around, but she had rarely seen him. He had been happily serving the members of his 'old family' and stayed in their quarters most of the time.

This time, however, Draco's angry shouts and Kreacher's subservient bullfrog voice sounded loudly through the empty community cave. Most people had left to perform their daily tasks, other than those who were supposed to move to different caves, and who were packing and shrinking their belongings.

"Give me that album," Draco yelled. "What do you want with my old photo album anyway?" He took hold of the album, which was sticking out from a pile of keepsakes Kreacher was carrying in his arms. Kreacher pulled back, stumbled, and fell backwards, all his treasures falling to the ground with a loud clatter.

"Good Master, good Master," Kreacher whinged and crouched on the ground.

"Stop the grovelling and give me my album," Draco snarled, bending down and taking the book back, which elicited a high-pitched wail from the elf.

"What is so important about that album?" Hermione asked kindly, approaching Kreacher, who looked at her suspiciously and turned away from her.

"Stay away, Granger. This is none of your business." Draco glared, but Hermione ignored him.

"Kreacher's old master. The good master. That's all that Kreacher has left of him. In young master's album." Kreacher whimpered and pointed at the album.

Draco looked puzzled, but Hermione frowned.

"Your old master? You can't mean HarryDo you mean Sirius Black, Kreacher? Is there a picture of Sirius in there?"

"Not him," Kreacher snarled scornfully. "Kreacher's good master. The younger Master Black."

"The young...? Uh, you mean Regulus Black?" Hermione felt as if she should understand something here, but it seemed just out of her grasp.

Kreacher nodded and wailed, "Young master Regulus, yes. After Kreacher has lost his most precious ..." The rest of the sentence was lost in wails.

"Regulus Black," Hermione muttered under her breath while Draco watched them both nonplussed.

"Regulus ... Black ... may I have a look at your album, Malfoy?"

"Why?"

"It could be important ... Come on, we're on the same side now, somewhatIt's just a feeling. Please?"

Draco scowled but handed her the album, anyway.

Hermione opened it. The album was one of the few things Draco had taken with him from Malfoy Manor before his and his mother's deaths had been staged by Snape. It was full of family pictures. On the first page, an old, imposing man was scowling at her; the inscription under the moving photograph read, "Abraxas Zoroaster Malfoy, my grandfather."

There were pictures of Lucius' and Narcissa's wedding, of Draco as a baby, of Narcissa Black's sisters... Oh, here it was: "My Great Aunt Walburga Philomena Black and her sons Sirius Orion Black (blood traitor) and Regulus Arcturus Black (Slytherin). She looked at the picture of two young teenagers: Regulus looked a lot like Sirius, but he was thinner and more wiry.

"Is that your good master?" Hermione asked, pointing at the picture.

A desperate wail was the answer.

"Can't you give that picture to him?" Hermione asked Draco. "You could easily get a copy from the document forgers."

"I suppose I could," Draco drawled. "But why should I?"

"Can't you see that he loved his old master?" She pointed at Kreacher, whose long, thin fingers lovingly stroked the inscription, Regulus Arcturus Black*Regulus ... Arcturus ... Black. R. A. B.* All the blood drained from Hermione's face, and she nearly fainted.

"Granger!" Draco barked. "Have you gone mad?"

Hermione swayed on her legs; her knees felt like rubber. "Have to sit down for a moment," she mumbled and staggered to the next chair. R. A. B. was Sirius' brother. It was like a slap in the face. All that time spent at Grimmauld Place, and they'd had no idea. She'd have to go there. Maybe the locket ...

"Kreacher," she whispered. "What was it you said you lost? Another keepsake?"

Kreacher suddenly looked very scared. "Why should I tell the Mudblood? The Mudblood is too nosy."

"Look," Hermione said patiently. "If you care for your young master, here, and his family..." She gestured in Draco's direction. "... then you'd better tell me. You know how much danger they're in. What was the keepsake?"

"A locket," Kreacher muttered.

Hermione closed her eyes. So close. And he had lost it.

"How did you lose it?" she asked. "Did it seem... Was it, uh..." She didn't know how to proceed.

"There was magic on the locket," Kreacher whispered, still looking terrified. "Strong magic. Dark curses. Master Regulus ordered Kreacher to destroy the locket, but Kreacher couldn't open it. Kreacher couldn't destroy it, so Kreacher kept it as his treasure."

"Couldn't open it ... Bloody Hell!" Hermione groaned. While they had been cleaning out Grimmauld Place after Voldemort's return, they had come across a locket that couldn't be opened. That had to be ...

"What happened to it?" she asked.

"It was stolen," Kreacher wailed. "That thieving scum ... Kreacher saw him take it. Master Regulus' locket and other treasures from Mistress Black's place. Kreacher couldn't stop him."

"Stop whom?" A terrible suspicion rose in Hermione.

"Mundungus Fletcher!" Kreacher snivelled.

"Merlin's pants!" Hermione cursed loudly. All the time they had been so close, so close... and now Mundungus Fletcher was in Azkaban. He hadn't been among the group that was freed during Snape's raid to spring Lucius Malfoy. There was no way that she could ask Mundungus any questions in Azkaban, and she doubted that Snape would be willing to go there again without knowing her reasons. She closed her eyes and recalled the last time she had seen Mundungus. He had been coming out of the Hog's Head when Harry had confronted him and seen all those Black heirlooms in his suitcase. The Hog's Head! Maybe he had tried to sell the heirlooms through the Hog's Head? She knew that the pub was a popular place for all kinds of shady business transactions; Hagrid had acquired his Dragon's egg there. She would have to go to the pub. It would be a start. It was better than having to go to Azkaban. She took a deep breath and looked at Kreacher.

"Thank you, Kreacher. That was very helpful. I'm sure, ah, Master Draco here will give you the picture, and then you can move with your mistress to the other cave." She stood up and walked briskly to the office, leaving a puzzled Draco Malfoy and a teary-eyed house-elf behind. She'd have to talk to Snape. He'd be coming to the office cave later today, and she would be waiting for him.

"The Hog's Head? Impossible. Too much of a risk." Snape glared at her when she made her request.

"Please, sir! I'll go in disguise again. Why should this be any worse than going to an archive? I have to ask the barman there a few questions."

"And you think he'll just blurt it out if you ask him nicely?"

"Uh... maybe, if I posed as an Order member, he would..."

"Out of the question," Snape bellowed. "What do you think would happen if that 'Order member' were attacked and caught by Death Eaters? Would you ask the Dark Lord for a bit of Polyjuice Potion?"

"Someone from Hogsmeade, then... Surely he would talk to his neighbours?"

"Aberforth Dumbledore seldom does what is expected of him."

"Please! I have to try. Otherwise, I'll have to go to Azkaban and talk to Mundungus Fletcher."

"What is this all about, Miss Granger? Your requests are outrageous! I won't risk the safety of the Underground for your self-imposed importance, no matter what you say."

"Pro... Nundu! I beg you. I have to go there. I must... Or I must get a message to Harry. Sir, this is essential!"

Snape became very still. He emitted a coldness that made Hermione shiver. His teeth were bared, and he gave her such a look of contempt that she wanted to sink into the ground. His eyes seemed to burn into hers, and she felt him try to force a way into her mind with his Legilimency. However, her defences were strong, and her almost daily Occlumency lessons had not been in vain. With a rather unfriendly push, she threw him out of her head. Now it was Hermione's turn to glare.

They stared at each other murderously for several minutes until Snape gave in and growled, "Very well. Be ready tomorrow. I shall go with you. He is the only 'living' person apart from Minerva and Price who knows about the Underground."

Hermione closed her eyes and released a breath of relief. "Thank you, Nundu." She got up and stalked from the office, forcing herself not to run.

Hermione and Snape had taken modified Polyjuice Potion, using hairs from a couple of Squibs with whom the Underground was doing business. The likelihood that someone in Hogsmeade would recognise them was low; the barman would not need to recognise them if they could provide the correct identification. They walked down the main street, but soon turned south into the side street where the Hog's Head was located. They lingered for a moment, watching the main entrance, and then Snape led her around the building to the backdoor.

Just as they approached the door, he pulled her back around the corner. There was a noise; the backdoor had opened.

Hermione cast a quick Disillusionment Charm nonverbally on both of them to hide them from casual observers. They both peaked around the corner, and Hermione could barely suppress a gasp.

Harry, Ron and Luna came out the backdoor of the Hogshead.

"That was easier than I thought," Harry murmured to Ron.

"Wasn't it just?" Ron replied and turned to Luna, smiling. "And it was because of your brilliant idea, Luna." He put an arm around her and drew her to his side.

Hermione watched them dumbfounded.

Luna smiled dreamily at Ron and didn't say anything. Harry merely nodded, and they walked away as if they didn't have a care in the world. Ron apparently couldn't keep his hands off Luna since he alternately held her hands, hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, or drew her to his side, putting an arm around her. Obviously, something was going on there.

Hermione didn't know what to say. She felt dazed, as if her head was immersed in a cloud. She just stood and stared at her friends' retreating backs.

"Let's go in and get it over with," Snape murmured when they were out of sight.

Hermione performed the counter spell to the Disillusionment Charm, and they went to the backdoor. Snape seemed to know his way around; he hit the door with his wand several times, murmuring a sequence of numbers and letters. When the door opened, they went in.

It was dark in the corridor and smelled strongly of goat. Hermione wrinkled her nose and followed Snape, wondering if there was a stable behind one of the doors they'd passed. Snape tapped a sequence of long and short knocks on the last door to the right, opened it and went in, beckoning Hermione to follow. Before she could look around, a voice said, "And who would you be?"

Spinning around, Hermione became aware of the old man, who must have been already standing there when they came in. He had his wand pointed at them, looking grim, and yet he looked vaguely familiar. This had to be the barman, Aberforth Dumbledore.

"It's Nundu. I'm on Polyjuice. This here is Nightshade."

"Polyjuice, eh? Let's wait for an hour, then, so I can see if you're lying or telling the truth."

"It's not normal Polyjuice. It's the one with the old goat."

"Is it now? I wonder what the goat has got to do with it?"

"As you well know, you old geezer, it's all the goat's fault. Without your perverted ideas to develop a potion to become an Animagus, there wouldn't be permanent Polyjuice."

"All right then, Nundu. What do you want?"

Hermione looked from one man to the other, not really understanding what they were talking about, but that didn't matter. Snape apparently had put the barman's doubts to rest, for when Aberforth asked Snape what he wanted, he pointed at Hermione. "Nightshade here has a few questions."

"Nightshade, is it? What do you want, girl?" Aberforth's bright blue eyes twinkled merrily, just like his brother's often had.

"Just a question, if you don't mind," Hermione said. "I was wondering about the three people who just left your house through the backdoor. They were my friends. What did they want?"

Aberforth pursed his lips and looked at her pensively. "Why would you want to know that? Don't they think that you are dead? Shouldn't you stay away from places where they could see you?"

Hermione saw Snape smirking, but she only shook her head. "I don't really look like myself, do I? And if they've already found what I am looking for, then I can go back to the, uh, place, and not worry about this any longer."

Aberforth nodded. "It's all the same, anyway. You be careful, though. Don't talk about the place or the people there outside of it, ever."

"I know, but ..."

"They were asking about the goods Mundungus Fletcher gave me to sell for him. They looked at them, and then they took a locket. Your friend Potter paid a good price."

"You sold it to him?"

"Of course. That's what I'm supposed to do with commissions like this. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Uh, not really, no. So they have the locket? What did they say?"

"Nothing of much importance, I'd say. Your friends were mostly listening to the advice the girl gave them. Then they checked the locket with a few spells, charmed it, and went away."

"I see. Thank you so much. That was very helpful, Mr. Dumbledore," Hermione said and glanced at Snape, who was sitting on a chair at the window looking outside.

"Call me Abe, or old goat, if you want, girl. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No, thank you. I think we'd better go, now."

When he heard this, Snape jumped up, nodded to Aberforth and held the door open for her.

After they'd Apparated back to the Broom Cave, Hermione noticed that Snape was treating her politely, with great care and attention, totally lacking his usual sarcasm. He glanced at her from under his curtain of black hair while he whispered to Lady Mouse, his owl. He glanced at her while they each grabbed a broom and headed off towards the river valley.

Hermione was glad that Snape didn't say anything to her; she had to get over what she had seen at the Hog's Head. Ron? With Luna? And they had found their first Horcrux all alone, without her assistance, without really needing her. She swallowed a few tears but didn't want to cry just yet because it would have caused an eruption of anger from Snape, or so she thought. She didn't think that he would deal too well with overemotional females.

How wrong she was.

"Many men have a tendency to get over a painful loss by engaging in a new relationship quickly, you know," Snape said quietly while glancing at her sideways when they reached the spring with the hidden entrance. "That doesn't make their feelings less strong." He gave her another concerned glance and walked to the rock, about to tap the opening sequence on its surface.

Hermione just stared at him, slack-jawed.

"By all means, let it out, Nightshade. The earlier you deal with it, the easier it will be for you to come to terms with it."

"Uh... I, that is to say..." Hermione's tongue seemed to have gone numb, as numb as her brain felt right now. Friends. Right, she wanted to be Snape's friend, so why shouldn't she confide in him if he was so obviously concerned? But this was so unlike Snape...

He raised an eyebrow, crossed his arms and waited. All of a sudden, Hermione was reminded of the stern teacher who was waiting for a confession of mischief.

"It hasn't even been two months since I, err, died," it suddenly burst out of her. "Isn't that a bit early for that kind of consolation?" Anger started to build up within her.

"It's a war. In wars, people have to find consolation wherever they can get it. When Weasley learns that you are still alive, which he will eventually, then you'll see what he does. Don't judge the strength of his feelings on what he's doing now. Miss Lovegood may be in for a big disappointment. I thought her cleverer than to get involved with Weasley."

"She can keep him. I don't want him back; that's not it," Hermione said, angrily wiping a few stray tears from her eyes. "I think our relationship ended the night his mother was murdered...when Harry and I ran off to check on the house-elves. But to replace me so soon... It's not as if he misses me, is it? And they don't need me, either. I was wasting my time, and yours, with what I was trying to do. I was so certain they still needed me..." She looked up at Snape, wondering if he understood a word of what she was saying, but he was looking at her calmly. "I can't do a thing for them. I might as well give up. It's useless. I have no part in the task. I have become useless." She swallowed and stared at him, stubbornly forcing the tears back that threatened to spill over. If she cried now, she knew, she wouldn't be able to stop.

"*What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins, but excels in winning with ease. Hence his victories bring him neither reputation for wisdom nor credit for courage,*" Snape quoted.

Hermione shook her head in disbelief and started to laugh. "Is there any situation in life where you can't find a fitting quote from Sun Tzu?" she choked out, feeling her fears and the tension leave her with each new bubble of laughter.

"Hardly." Snape smirked. "Why do you think the book can be applied to so many different situations?"

Hermione shrugged and gave him a shaky smile. "Are you trying to tell me that I should not be out for the fame but try to be efficient instead?"

"You could interpret it like this." His expression had become serious again. "The ones who do the work, quietly, efficiently, without boasting, rarely get much fame. And yet, they are the ones who decide the outcome...There is so much for you to do. You have a very important position in this war. Your friends have theirs, and they have to solve their own problems and find their own support. Your paths have separated for now. You can help them best by helping the Underground become as strong an army as possible."

"I know." Hermione grimaced. "But it still rankles that I can be replaced so quickly, so easily."

"No one can be replaced," Snape almost shouted, his black eyes glittering in a way Hermione had come to associate with barely suppressed emotion. Was that pain in his eyes? She wasn't certain. She blinked and looked at him, frowning.

"And yet," he continued, more quietly now. "And yet, no one is irreplaceable. Otherwise we couldn't function. It's the very structure of the Underground. Everyone counts, but when one is lost, someone else takes over quickly. It is the only way to win, Nightshade. The only way...even if it breaks our hearts; even if it forces us to give up some of our compassion."

Hermione was speechless again. She had made an effort to see the person behind Snape's cold façade, but to have him talk with so much understanding, passion almost, still boggled the mind. And yet, his words had the desired effect; they were indeed comforting her.

"I will get over it, Nundu," Hermione murmured after a while. "There is no need to waste time or energy on it. I don't want to waste your time."

Snape nodded approvingly. "It wouldn't do for you to pine away. With Potter's quest out of the way now, we can think about how to force the Dark Lord's hand."

"No!" Hermione cried. "Not yet. Harry's task is far from over; this is only a first step. Only...I don't even know how to find out how far they have proceeded. It doesn't make much sense for me to continue doing the research. Luna will do that. Apparently, they have told her the secret."

"Don't you think it is time to tell me, too? I might be able, as Price, to find out when they have succeeded, or what they're up to."

Hermione sighed. "I'm not sure. It's not my secret...it's Harry's, and he decides to whom to reveal it. I just don't know..."

"Very well, then," Snape said, giving her a narrow-eyed glare. "For now. Let's get inside." He chanted the pass phrase and tapped the opening sequence on the rock. A moment later, the gate opened.

A/N: Amiew won third place in the Action/Adventure category of the 2007 OWL Awards. Thank you to everyone who voted for me!

Energy

Chapter 15 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? ****Winner**** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A very big Thank You and many hugs go to my beta-reader, Maggie, who is now too busy with college to continue beta-reading. Although I'll miss her, I also know what an exciting time this is for her. And so I let her go. Sniff.

My beta-reader and brit-picker Melusin deserves a medal for putting up with my whims, transforming my scribble into English and for wading through my dreadful punctuation. I don't know what I'd do without her.

Finally, a heart-felt thank you to the admins here, who made it possible for me to continue posting my stories.

Chapter 14 Energy

5.16. Amid the turmoil and tumult of battle, there may be seeming disorder and yet no real disorder at all; amid confusion and chaos, your array may be without head or tail, yet it will be proof against defeat.

5. 21. The clever combatant looks to the effect of combined energy, and does not require too much from individuals. Hence his ability to pick out the right men and utilize combined energy.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, V. Energy)

Hermione spent a few days moping about and crying, but no one paid her much attention. The move still wasn't finished, and people were busy packing or getting accustomed to their new surroundings. Emmeline Vance gave Hermione a few curious and concerned looks but otherwise left her alone. Snape was nowhere to be seen; according to rumours, Death Eater activities had increased in the South. Some of the other refugees were reporting a dramatic increase in new arrivals.

Hermione was rather glad that Draco Malfoy was staying with his parents for the Christmas holidays; she was in no mood to put up with his sneering and taunting. She spent some time with Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott and some of the younger children, but their cheerful chatter got on her nerves. Obviously, Hannah and Susan were very impressed with Snape. Susan seemed to have a severe crush on him and couldn't talk about anything but how wonderful Severus Snape had turned out to be. While Hermione couldn't quite disagree, the term 'wonderful' in connection with Snape somehow sounded wrong, and she doubted that he would have appreciated being called that. Hermione greatly admired Snape's good qualities, most of all his humour and intelligence, and (hidden under his sarcasm) his deep loyalty, compassion and sense of

responsibility. However, calling him 'wonderful' and openly having a crush on him...that just didn't feel right.

Susan Bones didn't have these misgivings and followed Snape around whenever he was there. Hermione found this rather annoying since Susan glared at her jealously whenever Hermione had her almost daily Occlumency session with Snape in the office. Hermione wondered how Emmeline would react to Susan's behaviour, but Emmeline seemed oddly tolerant, even amused, by the girl's crush. Hermione hoped that things would get better once their school project, as it was called, started in January. She would have told Susan about Emmeline's involvement with Snape, but she didn't feel free to do so; that relationship was never mentioned, or acknowledged. Either everyone in the caves knew about it, or it was kept a secret. In any case, no one mentioned it, and she didn't think that it was her task to inform Susan that her crush had a lover already.

Not much longer, Hermione thought when Christmas finally arrived. The move had come to an end, and Nan Guthan had become noisy and lively with all the children running around. Hermione didn't mind; it reminded her of Hogwarts, and she took up the tasks of a Prefect almost automatically, arbitrating fights, helping the children getting accustomed to the new cave and keeping them in line. Hannah and Susan followed suit, and Hermione was pleased to see that Susan could still focus on something other than Severus Snape.

The holiday was mostly quiet. Only one party was planned for Christmas Eve to give the newcomers to the cave an opportunity to get to know each other. Hermione didn't feel much like partying; she wasn't exactly certain why she still felt so depressed. She honestly didn't mind that Ron was with Luna, now. The more she thought about it, the more she came to the conclusion that Ron and she had never really been in love. They had loved each other as best friends, very much so, and they obviously had confused that attachment with attraction. Ron had been constantly around; she'd felt flattered by his attention after it had taken such a long time to finally get it, and being with Ron seemed so convenient. She realised that she must have been in love with the idea of being in love with Ron. Everyone expected it, so they'd expected it themselves. They'd had the opportunity...but what they had thought to be romantic love hadn't survived the first crisis. They would be much better off as friends.

Her depression, she thought, came from the painful realisation that her friends could get along without her, that they didn't really need her help. She had always been in the centre of things with Harry, had always known what was going on, and now she felt isolated. She should be relieved that her friends had made progress with their difficult task; she knew she should be, but she wasn't. All she could think of was that she wouldn't know if they'd managed to destroy the Horcrux and how, and if they managed to find clues for the next, where they would go and when the Horcruxes would all be destroyed. And Snape would be impatient, and Voldemort wanted action. And she was sitting around in this cave, planning to teach basic Charms and Arithmancy to young children while taking advanced lessons herself. This was all far too normal. How could they live and act as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening? Some people had been living in these caves for almost two years, now. She thought she would go mad if she had to stay here that long. Something had to happen soon.

Her mood was only slightly lightened by the party. The food was good; Dobby and Alouette had outdone themselves with the resources the cave had. There were no presents, but the cavern was decorated festively, mostly thanks to Emmeline and her aptitude at Charms. The dessert came as a real surprise because it consisted of Florean Fortescue's delicious ice cream. Hermione learned that Mr. Fortescue had been moved from the Bone Cave to Nan Guthan because he would be teaching History of Magic. She remembered how Harry had been invited to by Mr. Fortescue the summer before their third year, and how he had learned a considerable amount of history through Mr. Fortescue's stories about the Goblin wars. This would be interesting; she was looking forward to his lessons. She predicted that they would be rather different from those of Professor Binns.

After dinner, someone brought a stack of sheet music, each piece charmed to perform the instrument it was written for. Hermione wondered how it was done; she resolved to ask Emmeline later if that charm was in any way related to the production of Howlers or the musical messages she had seen used on Valentine's day. Those were the only other occasions she knew where sound was preserved and recreated on paper. The Charmed paper was now playing light dance music, and soon many people were dancing. Hermione was asked to dance by Jeremiah Cadwallader, Hannah Abbott's younger brothers, a few other young wizards, Mr. Fortescue and Snape.

Snape had been dutifully making his rounds, dancing a few dances with every female present and finally came to Hermione. She found that he was a good dancer; he moved with confidence, which wasn't all that surprising, given his normal graceful way of moving about. Besides, it had been him in his Price disguise who had initiated the regular dancing at Hogwarts as a preparation for their advanced Defence lessons. She thought that it probably surprised her more that he would dance with her, rather than that he danced at all. Despite having been on missions with him alone, having come to the conclusion that while he was an extraordinary person, he was still a normal human being, despite wanting to be his friend and even having slept in the same bed as him, dancing with Severus Snape was still a scary thought, yet it turned out to be a rather enjoyable experience.

"After Christmas, and before the lessons start, I would like to introduce you to the old Art of bonding with familiars. It would be beneficial if you could communicate with yours since you will be needed for even more outside projects in the future. You should be able to work independently, and you will need your familiar as a messenger."

"Oh!" Hermione had almost forgotten about the way the Underground communicated with their familiars. And projects? "What kind of projects?"

"Standing guard in Hogsmeade, mostly. I have reason to believe that attacks on the village are planned in the new year. I have no precise time or date, however. We need to be alert at all times. I have informed Minerva, and she has, in turn, informed the Order, but we don't have too many Order members for guard duty. We will help secretly."

"Isn't that dangerous for you? If V... You-Know-Who finds out that there is a guard waiting for him, won't he suspect treason?"

"These plans aren't exactly a secret and have been discussed many times in the past. Many Death Eaters know that Hogsmeade is of great strategic value and that the Dark Lord is impatient for action. I see no reason why I should be more suspect than the others under the circumstances."

Hermione nodded, and they finished their dance.

A few days later, the lesson on how to bond with a familiar took place. Hermione and Crookshanks, Susan Bones and her owl and a few other new Underground members with their pets had gathered in a small cave in the 'dungeons' and waited for Snape to arrive. Fierce Lady Mouse Hunter, his own owl, preceded him when he strode into the cave.

"As you all have learned already, we are operating with true familiars in the Underground," he immediately started his lesson without greeting or introduction. "Working with true familiars has become rare; it is considered to be a shady, even Dark, activity. Why is that so? Does anybody know?"

Hermione had done her homework and read up on familiars, but she was reluctant to wave her hand in the air like she used to do in class. So she kept quiet. No one else seemed to have a clue, however.

Snape looked around until his glance settled on her. "Nightshade, you surprise me. I would have thought that you would have read up on familiars and their binding."

"I have," she said, "but it is only book-learning, and I could only recite textbooks. That's why I didn't say anything." Hermione smirked, her eyes gleaming mischievously.

Snape coughed, obviously suppressing his amusement, while Susan gave her an odd look.

"By all means, Nightshade, enlighten us with your book-learning."

"All right. Binding an animal to oneself used to be a common activity until the introduction of the concept of Unforgivable Curses in Wizarding Law.

"The binding involves the opening of a connection between the animal's and the human's mind; it's not unlike the Imperius Curse. The closeness of the spell's effect to the Imperius Curse makes it suspicious. Any manipulation of the mind, even that of an animal, is considered dangerous, bordering on illegal." She sniffed. "Which is rather surprising and more than a bit hypocritical, given the implicit and careless use of Memory Charms by the Ministry, instead of using familiars in the traditional ways, owl post and other means of communication have become fashionable. While pet animals are still called familiars, they are really just kept as pets and mail carriers."

"Quite." Snape nodded at her. "As you can easily imagine, the ability to communicate with your familiar is very useful. For the Underground, it has become an essential

part of our security measures.

No one can enter the Watch Cave without being announced and identified by their familiars. The familiars recognise each other; they can communicate with each other and their respective human partners. They can be safely used to transfer messages within, and in close range of, our refuges since they aren't suspected. Owls, Kneazles, cats, rats, toads or snakes can transfer messages, identify intruders as friends and give warnings without raising suspicion. Familiars will only communicate with one human partner...occasionally with their partner's spouse. No one can manipulate someone else's familiar into sending false information."

Hermione and the other newcomers to the caves listened eagerly. Snape showed them the wand movements and taught them the incantation. When Hermione felt, for the first time, the direct connection with Crookshanks, felt the love and devotion of her pet, she looked up and said, "Why didn't you mention that it's not only useful but emotionally deeply satisfying?" She scratched Crookshank's belly, heard him purr and felt his contentment knowing that he was content without a doubt.

"It is not always like that," Snape replied, his lips twitching in a way Hermione had learned was an effort not to smile. "If you have just purchased a new animal, that level of trust and affection won't be there. However, making it a familiar will make the taming of any animal easier."

Hermione nodded and continued communicating with Crookshanks. She watched how the others shared the same experience with their own familiars, the looks of astonishment and delight on the participants' faces reminding her of the time when they had learned to produce their Patronuses in the secret DA meetings of her fifth year. And now another DA had learned a different, but equally satisfying, way of communication.

"This being more anonymous than using your Patronus is another reason for using the familiars, isn't it?" Hermione asked.

Snape nodded. "Indeed. Anyone who knows about your otter Patronus would be surprised to see it and think about you. They would automatically want to know who'd produced the Patronus, which would make you conspicuous and get you the kind of attention you neither want or need."

"Makes sense," Hermione muttered. "But Crookshanks is quite well-known among my friends, too."

"That's why, even with a familiar, it doesn't hurt to actually think before acting." He smirked. "As you know, we've adapted your variation of the Protean Charm to our lockets for signalling each other to move in or get out during missions. Besides, you rarely go on missions alone. Many people have owls as familiars, and most are ordinary barn or eagle owls, which hardly attract notice. They can be used for longer distances. Your friend Potter, of course, would be recognised with both...his unusual owl and his flashy Patronus."

"But Hedwig is so beautiful," Susan gushed. "If she didn't carry mail, she'd be left alone, surely?"

"Perhaps," Snape said, dismissed them curtly and walked away.

On New Year's Eve, Hermione was on watch duty. She really didn't mind. There was another party planned, but she felt too nervous to want to celebrate. Not knowing what was going on with Harry, Ron and the Horcruxes was driving her crazy. She had talked to Minerva again, but other than promising to ask Harry how far he had proceeded and to remind him that time was running out, Minerva couldn't offer much help.

Hermione was supposed to relieve Snape from the watch; she knew that he would probably be at the party for a short while and then go to some kind of Death Eater gathering. She expected to have a few quiet words with him before he left but was surprised to hear voices as she approached the Watch Cave.

Two of the voices were female and giggled a lot. The third voice belonged to Snape. He seemed to be talking quietly, but most of what was being said was coming from the female voices. Hannah and Susan, Hermione realised and wondered briefly which excuse Susan had found this time to be close to Snape. She sighed. Poor Susan, she should have been smarter than that. It was painful to see a friend, and she considered Susan a friend, make such a fool of herself. Perhaps she should talk to her? But from the jealous looks Susan gave her whenever Snape scheduled a meeting with Hermione alone, she didn't really think she'd be the right person. Susan would likely believe that Hermione was after Snape herself. She chuckled. What an idiotic idea!

"You definitely should celebrate your birthday, Nundu," Susan cooed. "****There should be a party. I shall gladly organise it for you, I have just the right ideas for it. Leave it all to me. I will invite your guests."

"No," he calmly replied, "there is but one woman in the world whom I can ever allow to invite what guests she pleases, in my stead, and that one is "

"Professor McGonagall, I suppose," interrupted Susan, rather mortified.

"No Mrs. Snape; and till she is in being, I will manage such matters myself.****"

"So you do want a family when the war is over, Nundu?"

That was Hannah Abbott, trying to change the topic of the conversation, bless her, Hermione thought. Hermione was interested in Snape's answer, too, so she schooled her features into indifference and walked into the cave, nodding a greeting and looking expectantly at him.

Snape looked pensive. "It would take a very strong-minded witch to put up with the bat of the dungeons, don't you think? Though I wouldn't mind settling down after the war if..."

"I'm sure there are many young witches who'd gladly put up with you," Susan gushed adoringly.

"I'm not interested in children and silly girls, Miss Bones," Snape snapped, irritated, and Susan's face fell. Hermione suppressed a snort and Hannah rolled her eyes.

"I'm surprised to hear that you want to settle down, Nundu," Hermione said. "I thought you'd have ambitious plans for revolutionizing potions research, going into politics, or perhaps for writing a few books."

Snape smirked. "Those goals aren't mutually exclusive, Nightshade."

"I can't believe you're just talking to us about all this, Nundu. If you'll forgive me, this is so... so unlike you," Hannah blurted out but immediately covered her mouth with her hands and stared at him.

Snape gave her a sardonic look. "I used to be Head of House, Miss Abbott. The situation here isn't so different from that."

"Professor Sprout never talked to us in such a personal manner," Susan whispered, wide-eyed. Hannah nodded.

Hermione bit her lip and admitted, "Neither did Professor McGonagall."

Now Snape looked truly surprised. "No?" He shrugged. "I suppose having a house where so many pure-bloods have to worry about marrying in the right circles makes talks of this kind necessary."

He stood up. "You'd better go back to the main cave now, Miss Abbott, Miss Bones. I will brief Nightshade, and then I have to leave." He ushered the two girls towards the corridor that led to the main cave.

"Aren't you coming back with us?" Susan asked disappointedly, giving him another adoring look but got dragged away by Hannah before Snape could reply.

Snape sat back down again and faced Hermione. "There is a lot of owl activity tonight, Nightshade. Be careful and question anything that comes in, closely. Don't open the

protective wards when there is any doubt, any at all. Refugees can spend the night in the Broom Cave, if necessary," he suggested. "We can't be careful enough, these days. Where is your cat?"

"He's right here, and he's never wrong about people or other creatures, for that matter. He accepted Sirius, in both human and dog form. He hated and hunted Peter Pettigrew, and he left you completely alone. That should have told me in third year that you could be trusted, but I claim ignorance caused by immaturity." She grinned cheekily.

"No cheek, not even from you," he mock-growled, eyes glittering. "Crookshanks is a very reliable familiar. Trust his instincts. I shall be back before morning, and your own relief should arrive in four hours." He got up and Disapparated.

Hermione stared at the empty spot where he had stood just a moment ago for several minutes. How strange that he could talk so amiably about his private wishes and expectations. So that was what he was like as a Head of House? What an intriguing character he was... A moment later, she shook herself out of her reverie and forced herself to think about other things.

Two hours later, a flustered and ruffled Lady Mouse appeared in the cave and screeched at Crookshanks. Crookshanks hissed, arched his back and told Hermione that Snape was about to arrive in a few minutes.

She neutralised the outer protection spells and hid in the shadows, wand raised, watching Crookshanks. When a dark figure appeared at the entrance, she saw the Kneazle relax and start to purr. Reassured, she stepped out of the shadows and put the wards up again. Snape didn't say anything; he just stood there, breathing heavily, a hand pressed to his side.

"What happened?" Hermione looked at him more closely. His face was bruised, one eye closed and swollen. A deep scratch on his cheek was still bleeding slightly.

"Not important... Get someone... two boys in the Explanation Cave... alone, need help."

"Do we need corpses?"

He shook his head, and Hermione conjured her Patronus, sending it to the main cavern to call the alert team.

"What's the matter with your side?" She gently pried his hand away from his side and gasped when she saw blood drenching his shirt. A large tear in the fabric revealed a ragged wound.

Moving her wand slowly over the injury, Hermione chanted a healing incantation she had learned recently from Hannah Abbott's mother, who had worked as a Healer at St. Mungos. Satisfied, she saw how the wound closed, and the nasty redness and swelling diminished. Before she could heal his face, however, the alert team arrived.

"What is it?" Jeremiah Cadwallader, Lola LaFolle and Mrs. Abbott were ready for action.

"Two boys in the Explanation Cave... They are Stunned. Emergency procedure. Bring them in."

The team went outside and Disapparated without further questions.

"Who are they?" Hermione asked while she worked on his face. The scratch could be healed, but the swelling around the eye would have to wait until Mrs. Abbott could look at it. Hermione didn't feel confident enough to work so closely to his eye.

"The Creevey brothers, Dennis and Colin. They were with their parents when the whole family was attacked. It was a spontaneous Death Eater raid, caused by boredom and too much to drink. I couldn't alert anyone but Minerva; she alerted the Order, and they came just in time." He coughed and rubbed his face.

"The Order managed to get the parents out, but the boys were still in the house with the Death Eaters. I managed to Stun the boys while I was yelling threats at them and got them out of sight of the other attackers. I'd just set the room on fire and was about to Apparate when Tonks and Moody stormed in and fired hexes at me. They must have recognised me despite the dense smoke. Before they could harm me, however, they were attacked by other Death Eaters in the corridor, and I used the opportunity to cast a blasting spell on the empty room. The room exploded, and the falling debris hit me before I could Disapparate. I wanted to leave some hairs from the boys behind, so people would think that they were dead."

"And did you?"

He nodded. "Tell the alert team the boys aren't injured, merely Stunned. Make sure that they don't see anything before they sign the contract. You know where Dumbledore's memories are. I have to go." He gripped his left arm.

"Are you being Summoned again?"

A brief nod, and he walked out of the Watch Cave and Disapparated.

When he'd gone, Hermione sent another Patronus, asking for early relief since she had to inform the alert team about what had happened. When her relief came, she took Crookshanks in her arms, left the Watch cave, too, and Apparated to the Explanation Cave.

"They are Stunned, not injured," Hermione informed Carlotta Pinkstone. "Let Crookshanks get a good look before we wake them up."

Crookshanks merely sniffed at the two boys and walked away, settling in a corner and grooming himself.

Hermione explained to the rest of the team what had happened and where Snape had gone. Mrs. Abbott checked the two boys for hidden injuries, and when she couldn't find anything, she woke them up to be introduced to the Underground. Everyone hoped that they would sign the contract and would not need to be Obliviated. Hermione agreed to help with the basic introduction and smiled when she saw Colin and Dennis's surprised faces when they saw her. She told them that their parents were safe and explained about Snape, Professor Dumbledore and the Underground.

"We trust you, Hermione, and this is so exciting." Dennis, as usual, bounced excitedly on his chair.

Colin had become a bit calmer over the years and looked at her thoughtfully. "If Snape is organising all this ... He saved our parents, you say? I believe you when you say that Snape is on our side. I wish I had my camera and could take pictures."

Hermione grinned at him and explained the conditions under which the boys would be allowed to join the Underground. They willingly took the Shrinking Solution and followed her through the mouse hole to the Pensieve Cave. The other members of the team took Crookshanks with them and Apparated back to the Broom Cave.

Half an hour later, both brothers had seen Professor Dumbledore's memories and signed the contract. Hermione guided them all the way through the maze of caves and tunnels. At the Broom Cave, Susan was waiting for them and showed them a piece of paper with the location of Nan Guthan written by Snape, the refuge's Secret Keeper. Now the boys were sitting at the big dining table in the Central Cavern, drinking a Calming Draught and looking around round-eyed. No one thought of celebrating the New Year any longer. Everyone was waiting for Snape to return; everyone was worried.

Three hours later, he came back. He looked tired; his face was very pale, and his hands were shaking. Hermione watched him with a concerned frown.

"Did they torture you, Nundu?"

"The Dark Lord wasn't pleased that I was recognised, and that I, er, killed the boys instead of bringing them to him. He was very upset that the Order members appeared so quickly and is convinced that there is a traitor in his ranks." He leaned his head back and breathed deeply. "Everyone thinks that the boys are dead. The parents are with the Order and will be cared for, so it could have been worse."

Hermione didn't know what to say. She wanted to help Snape but wasn't really qualified. Mrs. Abbott would do a much better job. The best she could do was to get him something to drink. The grateful look he gave her when she handed him a cup of tea confirmed that she had done the right thing.

By the time that Mrs. Abbott had checked him out and proclaimed that he would be all right, everyone was retiring to their private quarters. Hermione lingered for a few more minutes and noticed that he was smiling.

"You look content. Aren't you worried about that unexpected raid?"

His smile broadened. If she hadn't known better, she could have called it smug.

"It was unexpected, but everything worked like clockwork. I am very pleased."

When he saw Hermione's confused face, he laughed softly. She blamed his exhaustion for his mellow mood.

"Why don't you give me the appropriate Sun Tzu quote for once, Nightshade? Come on, think. I am certain you'll find the one."

Hermione glared at him. "Will you keep quoting that book until the moment Harry has to confront Riddle?"

"Thank you for reminding me that I have to ask you about that quest again. But for now, the quote will do." He yawned and looked at her expectantly.

"All right, let me think..." Hermione closed her eyes and thought long and hard. She considered a few options and then narrowed in on a chapter. Finally, she spoke hesitantly, "There are several that would fit in this situation. But the one you're probably thinking about would be this one, I suppose: *Amid the turmoil and tumult of battle, there may be seeming disorder and yet no real disorder at all; amid confusion and chaos, your array may be without head or tail, yet it will be proof against defeat.*"

Snape looked very content. "Quite. It is a pleasure to see that you've finally learned to think for yourself and can draw intelligent conclusions from what you read and from what others tell you. This is exactly it: in the middle of confusion and disorder, our structures function, and we can successfully deal with what is put before us at short notice. I'm rather proud of this group and the Order..." He closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

Hermione huffed. She thought that she had drawn her own conclusions for a while now, but just when she was about to give him a proper reply, she saw Emmeline Vance come towards them. Hermione thought it wiser to stop the conversation now, waved at Emmeline instead and retired to her quarters.

During the next few weeks, Hermione didn't have the time to feel bored or anxious. The school project had started, and she found that giving lessons was even more work than taking them. Draco Malfoy had returned from the Creswell Cracks Caves, and she was dreading his taunts and sneers. However, despite the academic rivalry that had been fought between them since their first year, they found that having someone with whom to share the new experience of teaching and learning at the same time was rather helpful. Hermione knew that Draco was clever, and he finally admitted that she wasn't all that stupid, either. To everyone's surprise, especially their own, they formed a kind of truce that allowed them to endure each other's company and learn together and from each other.

Apart from teaching, learning and her other chores, Hermione stood watch in Hogsmeade almost every day for a few hours, but nothing ever happened.

Snape's birthday had come and gone. The house-elves had organised a small party for him; however, he hadn't shown up. Instead, his owl had come and asked for two corpses and a team. A husband and wife had been targeted, both half-bloods. Voldemort had given permission to attack them as a celebration of Snape's birthday. Snape lost no time and picked a Death Eater team with the dullest, stupidest Death Eaters he could find. He sent them on errands to prepare for the attack while he informed the Underground. The actual raid and rescue mission itself had gone smoothly, and Dumbledore's Underground Army had two more astonished but delighted members.

At the beginning of February, the Hogsmeade watches were still going on. Standing watch, now, was very uncomfortable. While December and January had been unusually mild, foggy and wet, early February brought a cold spell with a lot of snow and ice and low temperatures. To make matters worse, it had started snowing, and an icy wind cut through even the warmest cloak. Every witch and wizard in their right minds stayed in their houses. The streets of Hogsmeade looked deserted; no one ventured outside without good reason.

Hermione shivered. This was weather for drinking hot chocolate or Butterbeer in front of a cozy fire, not for standing half-hidden on the roof garden of the Three Broomsticks. She and her group had taken Polyjuice Potion, as usual, and were under Disillusionment Charms. They were fairly secure up there; even Rosmerta, the owner of the pub, didn't know that they were there. The group was very quiet, dutifully watching the comings and goings on Hogsmeade's main street. Only, no one was coming and going in that horrid weather.

Hermione swept a few loose strands of curly hair away from her face. Each of them had used the potion with parts of randomly chosen Muggles from different countries, who were similar in body type to the drinkers. It was easier wearing their own clothes and not having to Transfigure them to fit all the time. Besides, it was essential that the team members recognised each other in an emergency. Always using a bit of hair from the same person, and staying in type without looking exactly like their real selves, made this possible. Thus Hermione still was a slim, curly-haired, brown-eyed girl of medium height. Furthermore, they all had some kind of adornment...either a brooch, or a small appliqued design on their clothes, which linked them to their pseudonyms. Hermione wore a brooch in the shape of a Datura blossom. She was rather glad about that...having to remember all the code names and different faces of each person would be very confusing otherwise.

A joke whispered by Geoffrey, one of Hannah Abbott's brothers, who was the leader of their team that day, made Hermione and the rest of the group giggle. However, the laughter froze in her throat when they saw something silvery moving towards them at top speed. It was Snape's silver doe Patronus. It stopped in front of Geoff and spoke in a voice resembling Snape's.

"Warning. Hogwarts intrusion planned. Mrs. Patil, school governor, at Three Broomsticks. Family is with her. Imperio suspected. Rescue team is ready with four corpses, just in case. I will be present at the attack and try to send the family off. Keep the Patils in Hogsmeade as long as possible." Once the Patronus had given the message, it vanished.

They looked at each other, anxious and surprised. Then Geoff gave commands, and they went to work.

"Nightshade, I believe the daughters were in your year. You would recognise them?"

She nodded.

"Go down. Keep the Disillusionment Charm, but when you see the girls come out of the building, either alone, accompanied by their parents or with someone else, end your charm and approach them. They won't recognise you, but act as if they should. Call them friends, urge them to have a drink with you. You know the routine. The longer you can keep them where they are, the better. They will be in less danger of being taken hostage when they are with you. The rest of us will provide backup further down the road that leads to the castle. We'll watch and get ready for the rescues and intercept Mrs. Patil."

Hermione nodded again and went down the stairs that led to the back of the Three Broomsticks. Walking stealthily to the main road, she hid opposite the pub's main entrance in the shadows, waited and watched, thankful that her new position brought her out of the cold wind.

She hadn't even begun to get bored when the door to the Three Broomsticks opened. Instead of the whole family, however, only a middle-aged, short witch emerged,

flanked by two burly wizards wearing their hoods drawn deeply over their faces. They marched swiftly down the road towards Hogwarts, passing Hermione without noticing her. Was that Mrs. Patil? She did look Indian...

Hermione stayed where she was, knowing that the other members of her team would stop the group from getting to Hogwarts. However, before they reached her team, the woman turned around, screamed "My children!", and ran back to the Three Broomsticks. The two Death Eaters followed her at top speed, wands drawn. After they passed her, Hermione activated the Protean Charm on her locket and sent one of the people in the painting with a message to the rest of her group. She followed the Death Eaters more slowly, wanting to help but not quite ready to give her presence away yet. She hoped that the rest of the team would catch up soon; they did have a routine worked out for that kind of situation. She would lead the activities as necessary, as the one closest to the scene. The others would back her up, work as relays for messages and help get everyone to safety.

The witch had reached the pub and ran inside, the two men on her heels. Before she could reach the door herself, Hermione heard screams and saw a green flash through the gap of the closing door. She started to run.

Inside the pub, chaos reigned. The clientele were running around and screaming; the Indian witch was lying on the ground, empty eyes staring at the ceiling. A man, also Indian, lay a few feet away from her, arms outstretched, unmoving. Hermione suspected that this was Mr. Patil, killed moments after his wife.

The two burly wizards had donned Death Eater masks and were firing curses left and right. Some more Death Eaters had appeared on top of the stairs to the first floor, firing hexes into the crowd while they descended. Hermione deftly dodged the curses flying her way, realising that her Disillusionment Charm must have worn off. She tried to reach the stairs to the first floor where the guest rooms were located. Apparently, Mrs. Patil had been under the Imperius Curse but broken free. Hermione feared that Parvati and Padma were either dead, or being held hostage. They would be in one of the guest rooms.

Just when she reached the stairs, she heard a hoarsely whispered, "Nightshade!"

She froze but didn't look towards the direction of the voice.

"Start a mock fight with me and get up the stairs. Second door to the left. There'll be two guards inside; you'll manage."

Hermione did as she was told and cast flashy but harmless spells towards the Death Eater who was following her up the stairs. She had no problems dodging the spells he was sending her way.

Breathing hard, she stopped at the second door to her left. What now? Snape, for it had to be him under the Death Eater disguise, had followed her to the door.

"I'll cover you. Hurry! Blast the door away and Stun them all," he hissed.

Hermione took another deep breath and pointed her wand at an angle that would allow the rebounding spell to hit the ceiling and hopefully ricochet further down the corridor. *"Confringo!"*

The door shot out of its hinges, taking a part of the supporting wall with it. Screams came from inside, together with curses. Pieces of debris were flying around, and Hermione ducked quickly, covering her face, but not stopping. She ran towards the opening, wand at the ready but barely able to see anything..

Something moved inside. *"Stupefy!"* With a thump, that something fell to the ground. A reddish flash came her way. She dodged it. Another *"Stupefy"* towards the point of origin of the red flash, and another heavy body hit the ground. *Goodness, these guards couldn't really be that stupid, could they?* But there was no time for musings about the intelligence of Voldemort's cronies. Snape had run past her and Vanished as much of the debris and dust out of the way as he could manage.

When their vision was clear, they saw two girls huddled together in a corner, eyes wide in fear: Parvati and Padma Patil.

"Come, if you want to live," Snape urged. "Take the Portkey," he snapped at Hermione and handed her a Butterbeer cork.

"Got it," she said, grabbing Parvati's arm and dragging her towards the bathroom. "You'll be safe," she whispered. Parvati stared at her but let herself be dragged away. Padma, however, resisted, wriggled out of Snape's grip, ran towards the gaping hole that had been the door, and started to scream. Before Snape could Stun her, another male voice yelled, "What the fuck? Snape?" And then, *"Avada Kedavra!"*

"Merlin!" Hermione thought, fear gripping her heart and sending streams of cold sweat down her back. She Stunned a now struggling Parvati, who wanted to follow her sister, and sent her away with the Portkey. Hermione cast another Disillusionment spell over herself and carefully edged her head around the bathroom door.

With a sigh of relief, she saw Snape kneeling over a body. The relief didn't last long. It was Padma on the floor. Another Death Eater was standing in front of them, wand drawn, looking around wildly.

"Where is the other one?"

"She ran down the corridor, I think," Snape hissed. "Get a grip on yourself, man. We weren't supposed to kill them."

"Their parents are both dead. The girls have lost their usefulness," the other Death Eater said coldly. "You stay here, Snape. I'll check the corridor. If that fool Crabbe had cast a decent Imperio on the woman..." But Hermione couldn't listen any longer. A blue flash at her side indicated the arrival of the Inferius-Parvati. She ended her Disillusionment Charm and faced the Inferius.

"Run through that door, scream "Padma" loudly and look fearful," she instructed. The reanimated and transformed corpse did as it was told, and the immediate "Avada Kedavra," yelled by two wizards at once, sealed the fate of the fake Parvati.

Hermione heard Snape curse loudly, and then running footsteps indicated that the two wizards were leaving the room and running down the corridor...

"Get out, get out. It's over!" she heard Snape yelling at the other Death Eaters.

Hermione waited a moment longer, renewed her Disillusionment Charm and went to check that the Inferius was really destroyed. Satisfied and hoping that the other members of her team had made it out unharmed, she Disapparated from the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks.

A/N: My sincerest apologies to Jane Austen. The part between asterisks was shamelessly stolen. It won't be the last time.

Weak Points and Strong

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who is always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

A/N 1: I hadn't realised that I was made a validated author for a long time: thank you, TPP-team! :) Later, I was overwhelmed with work in RL and delayed posting while gradually drifting out of fandom. But I want to tie things up and will post the remaining chapters now.

Chapter 15 Weak Points and Strong

6. 11. If we wish to fight, the enemy can be forced to an engagement even though he be sheltered behind a high rampart and a deep ditch. All we need do is attack some other place that he will be obliged to relieve.

6. 12. If we do not wish to fight, we can prevent the enemy from engaging us even though the lines of our encampment be merely traced out on the ground. All we need do is throw something odd and unaccountable in his way.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, VI. Weak Points and Strong)

When Hermione Apparated into the Broom Cave at the entry point to Nan Guthan, she grabbed one of the brooms that were hidden in a niche. Holding on to the broom with all of her remaining strength, she flew through the valley, but instead of crossing the river and heading up the slope of the mountain, she followed the river for a while and then headed off into the forest. Feeling sick and completely drained, she needed a few moments to herself. When she got off the broom, she stumbled and was barely able to stay on her feet. After a few faltering steps, she sank to her knees, retched violently and threw up.

So much for being strong and focused, Hermione berated herself. She remained crouching there for a while, breathing heavily, dry retching and trying in vain to get the imprint of a screaming Padma Patil out of her mind. And as if seeing her classmate die hadn't been horrible enough, she also felt guilty for being relieved that that Killing Curse hadn't been aimed at Snape. The last time Hermione had felt so completely shaken had been the day of her own faked death. *Get a grip on yourself. There is work to do.* The mantra and her breathing exercises finally helped her to focus again. She had to get to the caves; she still didn't know what had happened to the rest of the group. There was no need to worry about Parvati; she should be safe in one of the introduction caves by now.

After finally calming down enough to get to her feet again, Hermione vanished the mess and got back on her broom. When she reached the small spring on the mountain slope where she knew the entry to the Watch Cave would appear, she whistled softly. A moment later, Crookshanks came running towards her, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. A few friendly head-bumps and head-scratches later, she asked her familiar to inform the watcher in the cave that she wanted to get in. Crookshanks wove around her ankles, purred, and set off, disappearing behind the spring through a magical gate that opened only for familiars.

Hermione felt the slight, magical tingle, which told her that the outer defensive spells had been released from within. She took her wand out and wove the pattern that revealed the shimmering spider web over the cave entrance. She had to cough several times before she could chant the syllables necessary to open the gate; the shock seemed to have taken her voice away, and she could only croak out the syllables that caused the gate to finally open. As soon as she went in, Susan Bones came out of the shadows and exclaimed, "Thank Merlin you're safe, Hermione! When the others arrived without you, we were all very worried." She hugged Hermione briefly, and Hermione sighed in relief.

"So the rest of the group is back? Is anyone hurt?"

"No, only badly shaken."

"What about Parvati?"

"Hannah went for the first introduction, and Nundu will bring her in."

"She will need comforting. Her mother, father and sister died tonight. And we couldn't do anything to help them, Susan. We tried, but everything went wild there..." Tears were rolling down Hermione's cheeks, and she closed her eyes, feeling beaten and powerless. Susan hugged her again.

"You rescued Parvati, Hermione. Never forget that. You all did everything you could. Without you, Parvati would be dead now, too."

"That's right," Hermione rasped. "But it was so close... We almost had Padma, but she ran away and screamed. And that sealed her fate. And I... I couldn't do anything to help her. Not without risking Parvati's life, too... Oh Merlin, how she'll hate me!"

"Shhh..." Susan hugged her some more. "She won't hate you. Maybe a little in the beginning...until she is over the worst of the shock. She'll see soon enough what you did for her, and she won't be sorry to have survived. Not Parvati. She loves life. Like we all do."

"I don't know... She'll be devastated." Hermione sighed again, trying to calm down. Breathing deeply, she pushed her fear and grief to the back of her mind once again and focused on the tasks ahead. She had to get to the cave, get some rest, debrief together with the rest of her group and wait until Parvati and Snape arrived. After a few moments, she smiled a thank you at Susan and disappeared down the corridor that led to the Central Cavern. She was glad that Susan had finally overcome her crush on Snape and could once again act like the gentle, compassionate girl she was. Hermione suspected that Greyhound, Jeremiah Cadwallader, had something to do with Susan's changed behaviour. Hermione had seen them both talking and laughing together during the last few weeks.

When she entered the Central Cavern, Geoffrey Abbott and the other members of her group jumped up from one of the large tables where they had been eating.

"Hermione, are you all right?" Geoffrey asked.

"I'm OK." Hermione sat down and let the others tell her what had happened after she'd followed Mrs. Parvati and the Death Eaters into the Three Broomsticks.

"We got your message and followed you. Then we heard the screaming and shouting in the Three Broomsticks. When we went in, we saw Mr. and Mrs. Patil dead on the ground; there were Death Eaters and other people running around, screaming and hexing everything that moved. We didn't see you, but we kept ourselves ready in case we were needed. Even though we were Disillusioned, we had our hands full avoiding hexes and curses. It was complete chaos in there. After a few moments, we heard Nundu order the other Death Eaters to get out, and they all Disapparated. We checked the upper floor and saw the two dead girls in one of the rooms. At that time, we didn't know that one of them was an Inferius. We couldn't see you anywhere, and there was still so much confusion...so we looked after the injured people in the Three Broomsticks, and when help arrived, we got out."

"I'm sorry, but things were too chaotic. I couldn't send you another message."

"We couldn't have received it, anyway, in all that confusion. But you did manage to save one of the girls, didn't you?"

"Yes." Hermione swallowed, close to tears again. "But we lost her twin sister." She buried her face in her hands, sobs shaking her body. Geoff put an arm around her

shoulder and squeezed her briefly; the others patted her on arms and shoulders.

"First time for you to lose someone, isn't it?" Geoff asked.

Hermione nodded. "If just... If she hadn't panicked... If we had stunned her earlier... Damn!"

Rose Chambers, an older girl who had also been part of their group, crooned in sympathy. "It comes as a shock when you've successfully saved a few people, and then things go wrong and you lose someone. We've all been through this, but we'll never get used to it. It's horrible each time it happens."

Hermione still couldn't speak. She didn't know why Padma's death had affected her so much. She had been present when Mrs. Weasley was murdered, but back then she had known that she couldn't have done anything to prevent it. This time was different though; she went over her actions again and again, wondering where things had gone wrong. She was still weeping when the message came that Snape and Parvati were on their way to the Watch Cave.

Hermione sighed, wiped the tears from her face, blew her nose, and waited, dreading the moment when she would have to face Parvati Patil.

Hermione's worries proved to be unfounded. When Snape led Parvati into the Central Cavern, she merely looked around in astonishment and then greeted Hermione calmly. Parvati's face was very pale, but her features were composed; there was a steely gleam in her black eyes.

"Parvati... I'm so sorry..." Hermione stuttered, not daring to approach her former classmate.

"Don't be." Parvati replied coldly. "You saved my life. I can never thank you enough for that. I owe you, Hermione."

"You owe me nothing." Hermione had to fight the tears again. "I just wish..." She swallowed and looked down. When she looked up again, she was staring right into Snape's narrowed eyes.

"There was nothing you could have done, Nightshade," he said. "You did everything that was required of you. If someone were to blame, it would be myself since I didn't stun the girl quickly enough. Miss Padma had a very strong desire to run away... We can beat each other over the head endlessly over this, Nightshade, or we can help her sister adapt to life in the Underground. She has decided to become one of the fighters."

"I see," Hermione said, feeling weak. She sat back down at the table and watched Parvati's introduction to the people in the cave. She didn't believe for a moment that Parvati really felt as cold and unmoved as she appeared. She knew Parvati Patil. The girl had always been rather emotional, bordering on silly. She was convinced that Parvati was suffering from severe shock, and that it only was a matter of time before a violent eruption of emotions would happen. She resolved to be ready for that moment and help as best she could.

Parvati, however, seemed determined to behave out of character. Hermione offered to share her quarters with her for her first night in the Underground, but Parvati refused.

"Don't worry about me, Hermione," she said. "I need to cry, long and good. And that is best done alone." A bit of her composure cracked; she swallowed, her eyes gleaming with unshed tears. "And then I'll have my revenge. Professor Snape promised me that I'd have the opportunity for revenge. And I'll take that opportunity, if it's the last thing I do." She turned around and walked towards her quarters.

Hermione stared after her. So that's how Snape had circumvented an hysterical outburst from a girl he knew to be emotional. He saw what she needed: she needed to find a task, and he had given it to her. It wouldn't be a permanent solution, but it would be enough for the moment. Oddly comforted, Hermione went to bed as well.

A week later, Hermione helped Snape with a reconnaissance mission. He had told her that Voldemort was planning to move closer to Hogwarts.

There was a deserted house in Hogsmeade that had once belonged to an old family of purebloods, but the last descendants of that family had been sent to Azkaban after the first Voldemort war. They had since died, and the property had been bequeathed to one of Voldemort's minions and thus was out of the reach of the Ministry. It seemed to be the ideal base for Voldemort, who wanted to attack Hogwarts, take the children hostage, and then take over the Ministry and the rest of the wizarding world.

Snape was supposed to find out if the place was safe, and Hermione's task was to stage a fight with him in as flashy and dramatic a manner as possible, so it would be noticed by the neighbours. Hermione would act as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, which she was. That way, Snape could tell Voldemort a half-truth about being attacked by Order members without having to tell a blatant lie. Hermione thought that it was a rather silly scheme, but she was prepared to do sillier things than a fake fight if it helped with Snape's deception. The attack on Hogwarts would be postponed for a while longer without revealing to Voldemort that Snape was actively sabotaging his plans.

Snape had explained to her that he was surreptitiously encouraging rash and imprudent actions by pretending to give in to Bellatrix Lestrange's impatient urging. Like the reconnaissance mission, many of these 'on the spur of the moment' skirmishes were less than successful and would, over time, lead to restless and distrustful Death Eaters. They also showed Snape's own overt advice of caution and careful planning in a good light. It was a subtle way to undermine Voldemort's forces, but also a dangerous one if Snape was ever found out.

When they had completed their mission, she followed Snape to the office cave for debriefing, as usual. However, instead of going over the mission, he asked her about Parvati Patil. Hermione told him what she knew about her house and classmate, and he seemed particularly interested in Parvati's fascination with Divination...and her admiration for Sybill Trelawney.

"I may have found a way to delay the Dark Lord's plans long enough for your friend Potter to accomplish his quest, whatever it may be," he said distractedly. An idea seemed to have formed, and evidently he was pondering about how to put it into practice. Hermione watched him, fascinated.

"Military tactics are like unto water; for water in its natural course runs away from high places and hastens downwards. So in war, the way is to avoid what is strong and to strike at what is weak," he quoted Sun Tzu again. "Tell me, Nightshade. Is Miss Parvati truly courageous, or is it merely the ever-present Gryffindor bravado?"

Hermione scowled. "I thought you didn't like silly house attributes? So why now?"

He smirked. "It is undeniable that the Hat Sorts according to the character of the student, as little sense as that may make in a school setting, when it would be far better if all types of characters were randomly distributed in the four houses. However, as that isn't how it's done, we must make the best of it. There must be a reason why Miss Patil was sorted into Gryffindor. If she has any of you and your friends', ah, taste for adventure... It would be a very dangerous mission, but it could help our side greatly." His expression had become serious.

Hermione studied him for a moment. "Parvati is changed from the attack. She wants revenge; she's almost fanatical. She doesn't mourn; she seems to simmer with unresolved tension. I'm afraid of what will happen when she boils over. I hardly recognize her any longer." She frowned, at a loss for a better explanation.

Snape nodded slowly. "I've come to a similar conclusion. She has little in common with the giggling, silly young girl I knew from Hogwarts. You may have noticed that she soaks in everything concerning the Underground. She seems thrilled by it."

"I've noticed it, too. She admires you and everything you've done. As we all do, of course." She smiled at him sheepishly. "But we don't constantly talk about it. It's not a crush, I don't think. It's almost like... I'm sorry..." She grimaced, glancing at him, embarrassed.

Snape narrowed his eyes and grumbled, "Out with it. What is it?"

"It's more like worship, if you know what I mean." Hermione flinched when she saw his scowl. "I mean, I've seen people have crushes on someone, and that's not it. It's like she sees you as a beacon in the dark, as a substitute for her mother, father and sister. The one person who can order her to do anything."

"That won't do," Snape snarled. "I'm not the Dark Lord. I neither need nor want fanatical followers. I need people who will work with me and are able to think for themselves. If Miss Patil is driven by fanaticism... No, that would do more harm than good. Damn." He jumped up and started to pace.

"Give her a bit more time. Is she getting special treatment, too? Otherwise, there is still a month or so before she'll be ready for outside missions, anyway. Maybe she'll have calmed down a bit by then. Or..."

"Or what?"

"Or you'll have to break the hero-worship by... I don't know... How does one break fanatical worship? How do people get out of something like that?"

"Many don't. If the object of their devotion is providing what they crave, then they'll get in deeper and deeper until it becomes religious, almost. Look at Barty Crouch and Bellatrix Lestrange. Nothing the Dark Lord did could diminish their adoration; they proudly went to Azkaban for him. It takes a certain madness, a certain mindset to become that fanatical, I think. I'm not certain. I never quite understood it. My fascination with the Death Eaters was very short-lived."

"You came back to our side when Harry's mother was threatened, didn't you?"

"Her, and my own mother. You saw my memories; I had become disillusioned, too. Clearly, I didn't get what I wanted."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe if Parvati is denied what she craves as well... More than anything, Parvati wants revenge. You put her up to it yourself, after all."

Snape gave her an approving look. "That's true. And if we don't give her an opportunity for it until she deals properly with her loss... that might work." He pinched the bridge of his nose and briefly closed his eyes. After a moment's thought, he looked up again and nodded. "I shall assign Miss Patil to work with Cassia Fenwick. Miss Fenwick lost her father and her uncle in the first war, and her mother and two siblings last year. She knows what it feels like to be the only one left. And she's adjusted admirably. I think if anyone can set Miss Patil straight, it would be Cassia Fenwick."

"She's Transfiguring old fabric and plastic into clothes and other items, isn't she?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. She's with the recycling team."

"I hope for Parvati that it works. And as for your plan, Nundu... What exactly did you have in mind, anyway?"

Snape shook his head. "I don't think it will work... I'd need someone very brave and level-headed to go through with it. And I'm not certain, yet, that Miss Patil would be the right person to do it."

"Couldn't I go?"

"No!" he almost shouted. "You're needed here, Miss Granger. How often do I have to tell you?"

Hermione was surprised at the outburst. Did he think she wasn't brave enough?"

"Err... I mean, it's only been a week. I really think that Parvati needs time to grieve."

"Plans have to be made, Miss Granger, plans with people who can be relied upon. Time to grieve and heal is a luxury we don't have. Some people need it, but they aren't of much help if it takes them longer than two months to become productive in the group."

"Well, not everyone loses their whole family at once, do they?" Hermione felt her anger rise. Planning and scheming was all well and good, but shouldn't the people get a bit of consideration, too? She told him as much, which earned her a disapproving scowl.

"Pseudo-military organization, Nightshade, remember? Guerrilla. Underground army. That's what we are and have to be, not a therapy ward. Miss Patil claimed that she wanted to fight. When you fight, you have to mourn in private and deal with your emotions on your own, mostly. Just like you did, Miss Granger, and most of the others."

Hermione wasn't convinced. "If we give up our compassion, don't we give up one of our strengths? We can help each other. We aren't one-dimensional. We can fight and still take care of each other."

"So we can. And that's why I suggested Cassia Fenwick. But we don't have much time. The Dark Lord wants action. Miss Patil would have been just the right person..."

"I wouldn't give up on her just yet, Nundu. I think it very much depends on your plan. Parvati was in the original DA; she wanted to be prepared and worked hard. She was never afraid to speak up, either, and she always supported Harry. It wasn't her fault that she was removed from school after... err... Professor Dumbledore's death."

Snape closed his eyes, a painful expression flickering over his features for a fraction of a second. "Very well. I shall wait. And perhaps I will come up with another plan to delay the Dark Lord a while longer."

Hermione didn't see Snape again for a whole week. She kept herself busy teaching basic Charms and Arithmancy to the younger children and felt challenged by the advanced Charms lessons Emmeline Vance gave them. Minerva McGonagall came once during that week to teach Advanced Transfiguration. She focused on the practical aspect in her lessons; she expected the students to do their theoretical assignments independently.

As expected, the History of Magic lessons turned out to be quite different from those of Professor Binns and were very interesting and enlightening. Florean Fortescue didn't only teach them about historical events, he had a way of connecting past events to present conflicts that had never been made all that clear by the ghost-teacher at Hogwarts. Hermione was fascinated.

Defence was taught by Snape, and in his absence by Perry Price. Price was a good teacher, Hermione thought, but Snape was better. She really started to miss his dry humour and grew slightly worried by his long absence, but Emmeline assured her that this had happened before. Snape had the means to contact the Underground when he was in trouble.

"Price is good, isn't he?" Parvati said after a very exhausting, but also successful lesson, where they had practiced to levitate each other towards their opponents as a surprise attack. "But he's not as brilliant as Snape, is he?" Her eyes shone.

"Snape is brilliant, that's true," Hermione admitted. "When he's in the mood. At other times, he can be pretty nasty."

"Can you blame him with all the things he's burdened with?"

"Not really," Hermione replied. "But he's human, you know. He makes mistakes." She glanced at Parvati sideways.

"Does he now?" Parvati arched an eyebrow. "You know, you don't need to look at me like that. I don't worship the ground he walks on. I don't have a crush on him." She sighed heavily, eyes still shining. "I just can't believe that he built all this. That he is so... good! We did him such injustice, back at school. Everyone was either complaining or laughing about him. No one really respected him, with the exception of the Slytherins, perhaps. Do you remember the hard time we gave him when he taught Defence for Professor Lupin in our third year? And he was right to teach us about werewolves. My father was so furious when he learned that Dumbledore had let a werewolf teach children at Hogwarts, you know." She looked at the ground, swallowing hard several times.

Hermione didn't know if she should be pleased that Parvati was showing signs of mourning, or be upset about the things she'd said about Remus Lupin.

"Professor Dumbledore trusted Remus Lupin. And Nundu had his reasons not to trust him... but that's his private problem." She scowled. "You know, he's not been the fairest of teachers. Snape, I mean."

"No, but he still did what he could to help our side, didn't he? I don't even want to think about all the dangers he must have faced...and still does. At least he gets the recognition he deserves, here, doesn't he? I mean... he's got the name Nundu. That's as good as the Order of Merlin, First Class. And he deserves it." Parvati's eyes were shining again. "I just wish I could do something to help. I want to be part of the Underground fighters."

"You know, Parvati, everything you said is true," Hermione said thoughtfully and slightly ashamedly. "I don't think I even said as much as 'thank you' to Snape after he saved my life. Instead, I doubted him constantly and used to challenge him all the time. I thank you for reminding me...reminding all of us of what Severus Snape has done for us."

Parvati nodded. "Yes, indeed. And I don't think he'd be angry if someone said 'thank you'. I did, and he looked so surprised. Not many people can have said it."

Hermione blushed with embarrassment. There she was, thinking that Parvati fanatically adored Snape, when instead she was seeing clearly what she, herself, and others hadn't seen. That they owed their lives to Severus Snape, that they owed their well-being and considerable comfort to his efforts. That they were relatively safe in their refuge caves while he went to Voldemort's camp almost daily and risked life and limb by still spying for them...and not only spying but also trying to influence the actions of their enemy. She'd completely forgotten how often she and the other Underground members had risked their lives when they went on rescue missions. The achievement was Snape's, and he should finally get the praise he deserved.

"Don't you want revenge any more, Parvati?" Hermione asked.

"Of course I do, but that's secondary. What's needed for our fight here comes first. I think I'd get my revenge indirectly in any case, if we're successful. Of course, I still want to tear every limb slowly from the monster that killed..." Parvati couldn't continue, tears were streaming down her cheeks now, and she was unsuccessfully trying to suppress her sobs. Hermione put her arms around her and kept her in her hug, letting Parvati cry, trying to give her comfort and a warm shoulder to lean on.

When the worst sobs had subsided, Parvati wiped her face, hiccupped and tried to smile. "Thank you, Hermione, I needed this. You're not quite like I remember you from school, you know. Seems like I was blind, and everyone around me has so much more depth than I suspected." She gave Hermione a squeeze and the same bright-eyed smile she'd reserved for Snape up to now.

Hermione felt oddly relieved. Apparently, she had been completely wrong about Parvati's feelings. "That goes for you, too, you know. Perhaps it just means that we've grown up a bit and started to see each other as we really are?" She winked.

Parvati swallowed the last of her tears and giggled weakly. "I just wish I could have learned that without..." and she burst into tears again. Hermione held her quietly, sad and relieved. She would talk to Snape as soon as he got back. Parvati would be fine; if there was a mission only she could do, she would be up to it. Hermione was certain of it. Why had she underestimated all her friends so much? Perhaps she had been just a bit too full of herself? Humbled, Hermione resolved once more to look at people more closely in the future and not to take herself quite so seriously any longer.

Valentine's day had arrived, and everyone who wasn't on watch duty or another essential assignment had assembled in the central cavern for breakfast. On special days like this, all of the DA who didn't have essential tasks liked to congregate and spend the day in each other's company. In most cases, such days were completed with a party and dancing in the evening.

Hermione was surprised to see Snape sitting at the breakfast table when she entered the central cavern. The room was nicely decorated. There were a few hearts and pink balloons, but mostly, the tables were decorated with pale pink and white roses. Bee's tastes were a far cry from Professor Dumbledore's garish preferences for festive decorations.

Hermione flashed a smile at Snape and nodded a greeting. She was determined to thank him for all he had done for them as soon as she had the opportunity and to tell him about the development with Parvati. She was certain that he'd be glad to put his plan into action.

She watched Snape inconspicuously during breakfast. Many who entered the cavern, Parvati among them, showed surprise and pleasure at seeing him and nodded greetings in his direction. He acknowledged each of them gracefully with a nod of his own.

When everyone was seated, he stood up and tapped his spoon against his teacup. Hermione stopped eating and looked at him in surprise, as did many others.

"While I have your attention, everyone," Snape said, a slight smile lightening up his harsh features. "I wish to ask you all to be present at dinner tonight and stay on afterwards...everyone who isn't needed for the Watch or for an urgent mission. I have the great pleasure not only of announcing a party tonight but also a very joyful event. There will be a wedding, and everyone is invited. And now you may proceed." He sat down again, flashing a smile at Emmeline Vance, who blushed becomingly.

***Hermione sat petrified. A lump had formed in her throat and she sat silently meditating for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. She touched...she admitted...she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Emmeline should be married to Severus Snape instead of them secretly being lovers? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by such a commitment? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Severus Snape must marry no one but herself!

How long had Severus Snape been so dear to her, as every feeling declared him now to be? When had his influence, such influence begun? When had he succeeded to that place in her affection, which Ron Weasley had once, for a short period, occupied? She looked back and realised that it had been so for some time already. But could she ever hope of gaining his affection? Now that he was planning to get married to someone else that same day?***

Hermione despaired. She did not deserve his affection; she had often been negligent or antagonistic, slighting his advice, or even wilfully opposing him, insensible of half his merits, and quarrelling with him because he would not acknowledge her false and insolent estimate of her own. Would her lesson in humiliation never end? Wasn't it enough that Parvati Patil had shown her how blind she, Hermione, had been, convinced about her own infallibility, arrogantly judging everyone by her own standards? And now she was reaping her rewards and had to accept what she'd got.

A stealthy glance showed Severus Snape deep in conversation with Emmeline Vance. Both were smiling. And here she was, begrudging both her friends the happiness they had found, begrudging it because of her own selfish desires. Swallowing hard, Hermione got up and left the cavern. She went towards the Watch Cave and picked up a fishing rod on the way. She needed fresh air. She'd spend the day out of doors, trying to catch as many salmon as would bite in mid-February. Perhaps the fishing would calm her down sufficiently to face the events of the evening with some grace and acceptance. It wouldn't do to spoil the ceremony with wails of disappointment and self-pity.

A/N 2: Please don't kill me.

A/N 3: My apologies to Jane Austen, again. That part between the asterisks has been shamelessly stolen, mangled and forced into the plot.

A/N 4: Fishing in February isn't impossible in Scotland. This was confirmed through an inquiry on the insanejournal community 'snapedom' and after consulting several 'Fishing in Scotland' websites. And salmon fishing is allowed from January (February in some rivers) to November.

Manoeuvring

Chapter 17 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who is always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

Chapter 16 Manoeuvring

7.2. Having collected an army and concentrated his forces, he must blend and harmonize the different elements thereof before pitching his camp.

7.3. After that comes tactical manoeuvring, than which there is nothing more difficult.

The difficulty of tactical manoeuvring consists in turning the devious into the direct, and misfortune into gain.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, VII. Manoeuvring)

Hermione stood at a bend of the river in an area that was well sheltered from the cutting wind by a cluster of bushes. She stood on a ledge over a deep pool of water and looked down into its cold, clear depths. It was just what she wanted: a slight current, some roots and large pebbles on the ground. She could almost smell the salmon. Her thick coat and a warming charm kept the worst of the cold away. It wasn't exactly the best time for fishing, but she preferred to give it a try without using magic, anyway. She needed time to think, and there was hardly another activity that invited quiet meditation like fishing did. Hermione liked fishing; she had often gone fishing with her parents, back in the seemingly carefree times of summer holidays past, when her only worry had been running out of books to read before the holidays were over. Those days seemed so long ago, almost as if they had happened during a different lifetime.

Hermione could simply have Summoned the fish she wanted, but she thought that that would be unfair and unsporting. Fishing was like hunting: you had to outwit your prey; you had to wait patiently for it to make a mistake and then strike. That way, the prey had a good chance of escape. If you merely Summoned them all out of the water, there'd soon be no fish left to catch. It was an unspoken rule among the Underground to not needlessly deplete the resources in the area around their refuges.

A careful jiggle of her rod from time to time was all that was needed at this time of the year: that, and endless patience. Fishing was an excellent stress reliever; it gave you time to communicate with yourself, to focus on the important things in your life without having to rush from one activity to the next. It was exactly what Hermione needed at the moment.

She was in love with Severus Snape.

Hermione closed her eyes and ground her teeth, trying to push that thought, that feeling, out of her mind, out of her heart. How could this happen? When did this happen? And why did she have to find out about her feelings when it was too late...when the man was about to get married to someone else? She grimaced. She would have to be present at that wedding, smile at her friend Emmeline, smile at Severus Snape, with whom she had wanted to be friends but now realised that she had wanted so much more. It was time to stop lying to herself.

Too late now. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, she could do about it. She certainly wouldn't disrupt the ceremony. Not only would she ruin Emmeline's happiness, but there was nothing she could gain by it. Snape wouldn't appreciate it...to the contrary. He had made it clear, several weeks ago, that he wasn't interested in children, and Hermione was afraid that, to him, she was still a child. If she interfered, he'd hate her. He'd put her in her place mercilessly, taunt her, make her feel like an idiot... and she would lose any privileges of going on missions and of accomplishing anything in the Underground. It would be routine tasks for her in the future, and he would never trust her again. He didn't suffer idiots gladly. It was one of the things they had in common, one of the reasons why she loved him, she supposed.

Why, exactly, did she love him? Was it really wise to pursue this thought? Was she confusing a crush with love? No, she didn't think so. She had never had a crush on him but had admired him for some time now, and his role in the Underground had filled her with even more admiration than before. It had also filled her with joy to see him accepted, acknowledged and valued. That was something he clearly hadn't been granted at Hogwarts, but it was something he deserved. She knew that she could rely on him and trust him with her life. She loved how he treated her as someone to be taken seriously. Ever since she had joined the Underground, he had treated her with understanding, patience and respect, even though that was often concealed under his sarcasm. Was that reason enough to love someone? She couldn't tell. All she was aware of was that he was dear to her, that she wanted to be with him, that she felt happy in his company. She wanted the best for him; she wanted him to be happy and safe.

Safety couldn't be found in their situation, but perhaps some kind of happiness could. And he had found this happiness with Emmeline Vance. If she really loved him as much as she thought, shouldn't she step back and be glad for him? Wasn't there an old saying that if you really loved somebody, you have to let him or her go?

Hermione shook her head. She had never quite agreed with that phrase. She was of the opinion that if you loved someone, you'd have to give them room to breathe, but that didn't mean that you shouldn't fight for what you wanted if there was the slightest indication that the affection would be returned. But in this case... she'd just make a fool out of herself, nothing more. She'd have to learn to accept it with dignity.

When her wandering thoughts had reached that point, she took the fishing rod out of the water and headed back to the cave, oblivious to the fact that she hadn't caught one single fish.

It was late afternoon. People were excitedly buzzing about and making preparations for the evening. Couples were hiding in the corridors, kissing, cuddling and whispering to each other. Hermione had forgotten that it was Valentine's Day. She hurried to get past all the happy couples to her own quarters and let herself fall on the bed, eyes closed. Perhaps she could just stay here? Perhaps that way, she wouldn't have to watch him getting married.

Hermione screwed her eyes firmly shut. She would not cry. It was silly to be so unhappy. She hadn't been this unhappy when she'd seen Ron fooling around with Lavender Brown. So why should she be so very miserable now? Certainly, Snape marrying Emmeline was quite different from Ron snogging Lavender, but it wasn't as if she hadn't been aware of the affair. Was it because she now realised that she was in love with a man and wasn't just having a crush on a boy? No, that would be unfair. Ron had grown up, and there had been a time when she had honestly thought that her feelings for Ron had been more than the love for a friend...and much more than a crush.

It couldn't be rationalised; she had to accept this. All she could do was accept the fact and try to get over it. Preferably, without anyone noticing how unhappy she was. She would get over this. And she would go out there, watch the ceremony, smile, congratulate, and stay for the party, even if it killed her.

That thought made her jump up. She needed a shower, and then she would carefully dress and apply some make-up. Just because, or maybe even though she was

feeling horrible, she wanted to look her best. She would dance and flirt and smile. And later, at night, there would be enough time to cry and not think about what the newlyweds would be doing.

Oh no, Hermione. You will not follow those thoughts to their conclusion. You'd better get very drunk tonight.

An hour later, as ready as she ever would be, Hermione left her quarters and entered the Central Cavern. The decorations for Valentine's Day hadn't been taken down, but a lot of red roses had been added. She walked to a far corner, as far away from the top table as possible. She nodded a greeting at the few people who were sitting there already and settled in to wait.

A few minutes later, Minerva McGonagall arrived.

"I will perform the ceremony for them. Being the leader of the Order and Headmistress of Hogwarts, I'm the only semi-official person around," she explained to Hermione. "Of course, this isn't an official ceremony, but my status among the group, and the witnesses, should make it binding. But I have to go. I'll speak to you later, Hermione!" Excitedly, Minerva scuttled off.

Hermione took the closest carafe of red wine, filled her glass and downed it with one gulp. She refilled it and was just about to down it, too, when she heard a voice drawl in her ear, "Isn't it a bit early to get pissed, Granger?"

Malfoy. Just what she needed. As if the day hadn't been miserable enough already. He flopped down on a chair beside her. She downed her wine. That was better; a warm feeling was starting to spread out from her stomach. One or two more, and she'd be relaxed just enough to get through this evening.

"You have no class, but what can one expect?" Malfoy sneered. "You don't pour good wine down your throat like cheap beer; you savour it. Mind you, this..." he studied the wine in his own glass disdainfully, "...this isn't really a great wine. But it's a fairly decent vintage, and it deserves to be treated with a bit more respect. Even a mediocre wine can improve when you know how to treat it."

"I don't care, Malfoy. You can aerate and slurp and chew all you want. Just shut up." She had emptied her third glass. Draco raised his eyebrows but didn't comment.

When all the inhabitants of the cave had assembled at the large tables, Minerva McGonagall stood up and addressed them. "There's been a change of plan. We're going to have the ceremony first and dinner afterwards, followed by the party. That way, you'll all be free to come and go as you wish." She smiled at them. "We will start in a moment."

Minerva walked to the top table, which was close to the cave entrance, faced the tables and the crowd, smiled and waited. Suddenly, soft music started to play; Hermione recognised it as coming from the sheet music they usually used for dancing. Someone had chosen a slow waltz for the ceremony.

Hermione saw Florean Fortescue and Carlotta Pinkstone, both festively dressed, walk up to Minerva and wait. Finally, the door to Emmeline's quarters opened, and Emmeline walked out, escorted by Snape. They walked past the large tables, Emmeline smiling, Snape without his usual scowl. Hermione looked at her hands. Emmeline looked radiant. She wore a newly Transfigured dress robe in a light blue silk that was exactly the colour of her eyes.

Emmeline looked nice enough, but Snape took Hermione's breath away. He simply looked stunning in his dark grey dress robes with silver and black trimmings. Hermione had seldom seen him in anything other than black. Even the jeans and t-shirts he wore on missions when they used Muggle transport were black. His hair was tied back in a ponytail, and his sharp profile with the beaky nose stood out prominently among the normal, but boring features of the other men. Hermione's heart hammered against her ribs. She couldn't understand how she could ever have found him ugly. A tiny part in her mind whispered that love made you blind, but she silenced it quickly.

Snape led Emmeline to the front, and then Minerva started to speak.

"We are gathered here to witness the vows of matrimony between a witch and wizard who wish to spend the rest of their lives together, through the good times and the bad.

"Emmeline and Florean, I will let you speak your vows to each other. Carlotta and Severus will be your witnesses, and I will sanction your vows. You may proceed."

Hermione's head snapped up. What did Minerva just say? Staring wide-eyed at the people in front, she was hardly able to hear the words the man, Florean Fortescue, was saying because of all the humming and buzzing in her head and ears.

"I, Florean Fortescue, take thee, Emmeline Vance, to be my beloved wife..." And Severus Snape was standing at the couple's side and smiling.

Hermione was glad that she was sitting down. All the blood had drained from her head, and she felt like she was on a fast-moving roundabout. The world was spinning around her like crazy, and she had to blink repeatedly to hold the dizziness in check.

When she was able to see clearly again, the ceremony was over. The bride was kissing the groom. Emmeline was kissing Florean Fortescue. And Severus Snape and Carlotta Pinkstone were signing a document in front of Minerva McGonagall. Emmeline Vance was married but not to Severus Snape. Snape wasn't married.

Snape wasn't married. Snape wasn't even with his lover any longer. Severus Snape was free.

Tears were forming in Hermione's eyes. She felt like shouting, laughing, crying and screaming, but of course, she did none of those things. She just sat, staring at the people at the head of the table, a smile slowly spreading over her features. With an impatient gesture, she wiped a few stray tears from her cheeks.

"Why do women always have to bawl at weddings?" Malfoy asked.

"Because their emotional range isn't limited to that of a teaspoon," Hermione snapped.

"If you say so," Malfoy drawled and helped himself to the soup that had been served by Dobby and Alouette.

Hermione ate mechanically, pretending to listen to the speeches, sometimes exchanging small talk with the other people at the table, but in reality her thoughts were elsewhere. Her head was still spinning. They had switched from wine to champagne, and each of the speeches had ended with a toast. If she didn't slow down, she'd be drunk very soon. And now she didn't really have a reason for getting pissed any longer, did she?

That thought made her smile, and she lifted her head, her eyes seeking out the man who had caused her so much emotional turmoil in just one single day. She saw him across from her but much further up the head of the table where the newlyweds were sitting and chatting with Minerva. Snape seemed to feel her glance; he turned his head and looked back at her. A smirk, and he raised his glass. She raised hers back and gave him her most radiant smile. Severus Snape had better watch out; Hermione Granger had plans for him.

"When you're not moping or bossing Potter and Weasley around, you don't look half bad," Draco suddenly drawled at her side. "Come on, Granger. Let's dance." Soft dance music had started playing, and Hermione let herself be dragged to the dance floor, half-reluctant, half-amused.

"You're a good dancer," she admitted when they were on their second round. "I suppose there's something good in everyone, then." She smirked.

"Don't get ideas, Granger," Draco sneered. "Although..." He stared at her thoughtfully. "A wizard could do worse."

Hermione blinked. "You're not hitting on me, are you? Have you lost your mind?"

Draco stared at her with a strange gleam in his eyes. "And if I am? I could do worse. It could be beneficial to be associated with a well-known M... Muggle-born witch like yourself." He smirked at her stunned expression. "Certainly good politics for my family, if the war ends like we all here want it to end. And you," he looked her up and down,

"you do have potential. You'd profit from an old name like mine. And you have good hips for child-bearing."

Hermione's mouth fell open. She stepped away from him and stared. "Of all the impertinent... You're so close to being slapped..."

"Catching flies, Granger? Good expression for an adoring wife, actually." His body shook from barely suppressed laughter.

"You... you..." Hermione fumed. The git was making fun of her. "In your dreams, you git. How dare you?"

Draco couldn't hold it in any longer and started to snort.

"You... you... you can't be serious." Her eyes were wide; she couldn't believe what was happening here.

"Come to think of it, I suppose I can't be," he drawled, smirked and howled with laughter when he saw Hermione's face. And then he ran.

"You idiot!" she screeched. "Wait 'til I get hold of you. I'll teach you to make fun of me." She ran after him, threatening him with her wand, enraged and laughing. They were both stopped by a smooth voice.

"How delightful to see the two of you getting along so well," Snape said and smirked.

Hermione found that she could look at him normally again without acting like a lovesick teenager, although her heart was beating frantically once more. She smiled. "Not all hope is lost for him. Mind you, we'll make an honourable Gryffindor out of him yet."

"Over my dead body," Draco exclaimed, looking horrified.

"Since you're officially dead already, that should be easy," Hermione said, glancing meaningfully at the wand in her hand until all three of them laughed.

"If you feel threatened, maybe I can help you out by taking Miss Granger away from your presence, Draco? I'd like to dance with her, if she is so inclined."

"I'd love to," Hermione said, and beamed up at him again.

If she had thought that she'd found her calm around Snape, she was quickly disabused from that notion by dancing with him and feeling his body so close to hers. All of her senses seemed to be enhanced when he was near. She couldn't remember ever being aware of so many details when she had been interested in a man in the past.

She enjoyed the confident and secure way with which he led her across the dance floor. She had known that he was a good dancer, but now she was aware of every movement. Each time his body brushed against hers while changing steps or while turning made a jolt of desire shoot through her. Being so close to him made her very aware of his scent: a clean, masculine fragrance that went to her head and made her want to lean her face against his chest and just stay there, breathing in every molecule. She did breathe in deeply, barely able to keep herself from leaning closer into his arms.

His warm hand on her back seemed to burn a hole through the fabric of her dress; his other hand holding hers felt strong and competent. She wondered what those hands felt like when they-- No! She would not go into that. For now, she would enjoy what she had: dancing with the man she loved. All she had to do was convince him of the fact that it was good for him to be in love with her, too. And there were other things to consider, important things. Her feelings could not be the first priority, not in their circumstances.

"Nundu, if you don't mind, I'd like to talk to you in private sometime soon," she said.

That earned her a raised eyebrow. "You would? Well, doesn't your watch start at midnight? I can come to the Watch Cave and talk to you then."

"All right," she said, and smiled up at him. He didn't notice, however. The newlyweds had just danced by, and he stared at them with a wistful expression on his face.

Hermione felt a chill run down her spine. Was he unhappy? He had just witnessed his former lover marrying another man, after all. Shouldn't he have reacted with anger, jealously, Snape-like? Why was he friendly, understanding and slightly sad instead? Had he wanted to marry Emmeline himself? Did he feel rejected? All of a sudden, her elated, triumphant feeling collapsed into a vacuum, and Hermione realised that there was still a fair way to go and a careful route to choose, if she ever wanted Severus Snape to walk in the same direction as her, to walk alongside her. And, most of all, she'd need patience. So she didn't speak any more and tried to memorize his smell, the feel of him, every detail of him. She could preserve these memories and revisit them as often as she wanted to when she was alone.

They danced another dance together, then Snape went off to dance with Minerva McGonagall, and Hermione went to the buffet, got a glass of water and watched the dancers, feeling half-confused, half-elated. She didn't quite know what to think or feel, but she knew that she would have to tread very carefully around him. She'd have to be encouraging but not pushy; open, but still guarded. And of course, she had to make him realise that she was just the right witch for him. She wondered what could work in her favour.

Snape trusted her, almost unconditionally. He had said so when she was initiated into the Underground. She still felt elated and very honoured by his trust. She had gained it unknowingly, and that meant that he could be certain that there was no attempted conceit involved. She knew him well enough to know how suspicious towards any blatant declarations of admiration and respect he would be. But since she had made her feelings known to him without knowing that it was him she was talking to, any attempt at conceit from her side would be out of the question.

Hermione smiled to herself. Severus Snape was an enigma; he was like a puzzle. And she loved to solve puzzles. So she would go about this like she would tackle a difficult Arithmancy problem: relying on her capacity for logical thinking, on observations that had to be confirmed before they could become fact.

They were observations of the kind that a man who trusted a woman might develop deeper feelings for her when he was gently encouraged. She could, for instance, hypothesize that Severus Snape might be attracted to her if she made him see her as a person who had things in common with him, who enjoyed his company, who would love to give as much as she would love to receive. Then she could proceed to construct the theory that attraction and common ground between one Severus Snape and one Hermione Granger could lead to deep love and considerable passion. That thought made her shudder in anticipation. She'd never had a research project that promised so much... pleasure.

Now, if that wasn't a goal worth working for, Hermione didn't know what was. She smiled, permitting herself to imagine the ecstasy such a fulfilment of her plan would achieve. But there was a long way to go yet, and Hermione knew very well that love couldn't be forced. And she'd be damned and stripped of all her magical faculties if she even so much as considered the use of a love potion. No, Severus Snape would have to find out for himself that a future with her was exactly what he wanted and needed. She could help him find the clues, but he'd have to make the conclusions all by himself. And in-between, he'd have to deal with leading and coordinating the activities of the Underground, of protecting the people under his care, of staying in the good graces of his insane overlord, of helping the boy-he-loathed to defeat said overlord, and with winning this war.

Hermione took a deep breath. Maybe she should focus on helping him with these goals and keep her little Arithmantic research project on the back-burner? Fighting the Dark Lord would certainly have to be first priority, but why shouldn't she combine the two tasks? This thought brightened her mood, and she went to find the happy couple because she wanted to dance with the groom. That was supposed to grant you a happy love life.

Hermione was sitting in the watch cave, absentmindedly scratching Crookshanks' belly and looking out at the sky. The cold spell that had hit the area during the last two weeks had driven the ever-present fog out of their valley, and for once, a brilliantly clear night sky could be seen, together with a moon that had been full two days ago and hardly showed signs of waning yet.

She sighed. It was a very romantic view. She'd have to be careful not to get carried away when Severus...no, better not get used to calling him that...when Nundu (that was

better) came to talk to her. She wanted to talk to him about Parvati; that should keep her from becoming sentimental. Even though she would like nothing better than to jump into his lap and snog him until he was cross-eyed.

Stop it, Hermione, she thought. This is the teenager speaking. You're going to show him that you're an adult. None of this spontaneous snogging. For once, let someone else take the lead. He's like a shy beast; you'll have to be patient for him to attach himself to you. And better yet, give up any idea of wanting to tame him. He's far too intelligent to put up with any attempt at manipulation. Trying to manipulate a man like Severus Snape might work for someone like Dumbledore, but would not be constructive for gaining his respect and affection. She sighed and looked at the moon, remembering how good his arms had felt around her while they were dancing.

"No werewolves around; the full moon has passed," the voice of the man who had constantly been on her mind all day interrupted her musings.

Hermione turned and smiled at him. "It's a beautiful sight, so romantic. Just right for a wedding." She paused and looked at him, a slight frown wrinkling her forehead.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, sitting down opposite her.

"If you don't mind, and as you were so concerned about me in a similar situation...are you very disappointed? Do you want to talk about it?" She stopped, uncertain how to proceed and gave him a questioning look.

His eyebrows had shot up and moved down again, settling in a frown. He stared at her pensively for a moment. Hermione clasped her hands firmly in her lap, trying not to show how nervous she was about asking such a personal question.

"I see how you can draw the parallel, but be assured that there isn't one, really." He kept staring at her through narrowed eyes. "Emmeline and I haven't been lovers for a very long time. But we've been friends. And we gave each other comfort. A comfort we both needed. There wasn't any deep emotion involved. She has now found someone who really loves her and whom she loves in return. That makes me rather glad since I could never have given her that."

Hermione looked at him wide-eyed and decided not to say anything. She didn't want to reveal quite how naïve she still was, although she suspected that he knew, anyway. The thought of sex (and she was certain that this was what he was talking about) merely for comfort, without emotional attachment, seemed empty, unfulfilling. But that was probably only her overly romantic world-view.

Snape smirked when he saw her expression. "Do not worry about me, Nightshade. I'm neither sad, nor jealous, nor devastated."

"But you looked so sad when you were watching them," Hermione blurted out, not able to keep herself in check.

Snape's eyebrows shot up again. "Quite observant, aren't you? And tenacious like a terrier." He smiled wistfully. "Very well. Maybe I was jealous. Not of Emmeline's affection going elsewhere, but rather of the affection they share..."

Hermione thought he wanted to say something else, but he stopped, and his smile looked as if it would turn into a sneer rather soon, so she chose to let the matter rest.

"I'm very glad that you're not unhappy, Nundu." She gave him the most charming smile she could muster. His eyes lit up in amusement. That was better; she wanted him to laugh with her, not be sad or miss the comfort of another woman.

"And since this is such a happy day then, for everyone (smiling brightly at him again and thinking, you have no idea how happy), I have more good news. It's about Parvati."

His eyes widened, and his relaxed pose became rigid. "What of her?"

"We talked two days ago, and I found that she's coping very well. She's mourning and isn't holding back her grief. The adoration she has for you doesn't seem to be anything to worry about. It's a rather honest and healthy expression of her gratitude and admiration. She made me see how much we, or at least I, take for granted...how much I owe you. How much I have to thank you for. And I am grateful, even if I don't say it often enough." She sighed deeply and looked at him uncertainly.

Snape looked completely puzzled, albeit slightly smug. "You don't owe me anything. You're doing your work here, quite efficiently. I appreciate your thoughts, but remember: all the work here is a joint effort. I thought I had made that clear to you when I introduced you?"

"You did. But you deserve a thank you, nonetheless. Just understand that I am aware of what you do for us. I won't smother you with gushing admiration from now on, never fear."

"That's... a relief." He breathed deeply. "So, maybe now we can get to the real reason why you wanted to talk to me?"

"Well, that was part of it, actually." Hermione squirmed, feeling embarrassed. "I think that Parvati is stable. She wants revenge, but there isn't any of the fanaticism I feared was driving her. She honestly admires you, but there is nothing of the blind adulation we were talking about the other day. She will do what is needed. I think you could consider her for the mission you had in mind."

Snape frowned, deep in thought. "That would be, ah, very advantageous. I shall talk to her to see for myself."

"What exactly is it you want her to do?"

"Thus, to take a long and circuitous route, after enticing the enemy out of the way, and though starting after him, to contrive to reach the goal before him, shows knowledge of the artifice of deviation," he said, and she started to laugh.

"Tell me, Nundu, do you quote Sun Tzu to everyone? I hope He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named isn't aware of the book. It's not a challenge I'd like to face." Her laughter had faded quickly, and she stared at him worriedly.

"Do you take me for a fool?" he spat angrily. "Sun Tzu is part of the training I gave you and your friends as Price, if you care to remember, to prepare you for what is to come. We've continued your training here, and I expect you to know the book by heart, forward and backwards." Snape glared at her but quickly looked away again, studying the night sky. "With that quote and the clues I gave you, you should be able to guess, or better, deduct for yourself what the essence of my plan would be."

"Oh..." Hermione bit her lip, angry with herself. This was a puzzle of another kind than the one she'd been mulling over earlier. "I wasn't aware that I'm supposed to be the know-it-all here, too. But if you insist." Her sideways glare was met by narrowed black eyes, glittering impatiently. "It'd be faster if you just answered my question, but if it pleases you..." She sniffed, thinking frantically. "All right, we're speaking about Parvati. And you want to confuse, to distract You-Know-Who from his plans to attack Hogwarts soon. From what I know about him, he believes in fate. Uhm..." She frowned, deep in thought, rubbing her forehead while Snape's grim expression had relaxed, and he looked at her encouragingly.

"When we discussed Parvati shortly after her rescue, you asked me about her connection to Trelawney. Trelawney, who has made all the relevant prophecies regarding Harry and this war."

"Go on."

She now had his full attention: his glare had vanished; his lips were slightly twitching. Always a good sign.

"The one thing all three have in common would be the belief in prophecies, in Divination." She stared at him through narrowed eyes. "You want Parvati to pose as Trelawney and somehow convince V... the Dark Lord that it would be going against fate if he attacked now, don't you?"

He gave her one of his rare relaxed smiles while he exhaled. "Precisely. The know-it-all part of you is still there. It's a reliable part of you. That's good to know."

Had his eyes just twinkled? Hermione couldn't believe it and simply stared at him.

The smile was gone, a smirk in its stead. "I do indeed think that Miss Patil could pose as Sibyll Trelawney and speak a fake prophecy which will cause the Dark Lord to delay any major activities for some time. This could give your friend Potter time to achieve his mission. Perhaps half a year...I don't think we can delay the attack any longer."

Hermione nodded. "That's actually bloody brilliant, Nundu. Parvati knows exactly how Trelawney speaks and acts. She's always been very interested in Divination, and she's been a protégée of Trelawney's."

"Yes," Snape continued. "But to truly deceive the Dark Lord, she'd have to pose as Trelawney, act, interact, and even teach in her stead. And Trelawney is a target; it would be a rather dangerous mission."

"Would V... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named really want to kill her? Wouldn't he rather want to kidnap her?"

"Possibly. But make no mistake. One wrong word, one wrong gesture, one morsel of doubt on the Dark Lord's side, and Miss Patil would be dead. To prevent a kidnapping, we would have to protect her constantly, but I have an idea how that could be achieved..." His voice trailed off, his eyes staring at a point far away.

Hermione was very excited about the plan. "Price!" she exclaimed. "You... or he, were flirting with Trelawney. This would be the perfect excuse for Price to be close to her, to watch over her. Maybe they should act as if they were lovers?"

Snape nodded, still deep in thought. "Sibyll Trelawney couldn't be trusted with something like this, but maybe Miss Patil can step in for her. And I agree; I was thinking of Perry to protect her. That would mean that he'd have to take up all of the teaching at Hogwarts, but I think I have taught your friend Potter everything I could ever teach him, anyway. Perry knows my Slytherins well enough by now that he can be trusted to look after them, and he is a competent DADA teacher."

Hermione nodded. "He is. So what, exactly, do you want to tell You-Know-Who?"

"I'd have to make up a prophecy that tells him to wait for a certain time to be victorious. Everything else would lead to defeat.

"How would he know about the prophecy?"

"It didn't take long for the Dark Lord to learn about the last one, and it wasn't me who told him about it. If it is public knowledge at that school, it will be relayed to the Dark Lord, one way or the other."

"Oh. Does he know about that other prophecy, too? The one Trelawney made on our first day at the castle last summer, about the Shadow Man and the Dead Woman?"

"He does, indeed. And it's working in our favour, for the time being." The expression in his eyes had changed. There was less of the excited glitter, more concern, Hermione thought.

"How so?" she asked.

"Well, he knows that I am the Shadow Man." He smirked at Hermione's surprised reaction.

"Uh. We did have an idea that it might be you. But how can you be certain?"

"Did you now? I wonder..." He stared at her through narrowed eyes. "Be that as it may, it used to be a nickname given to me by Sibyll Trelawney's predecessor. Professor Vablatsky constantly called me the Shadow, much to the delight of my classmates. She imagined that I'd draw them to me; she used to comment on my appearance and my movements. You know that I don't like direct sunlight; I prefer sitting in the shade...to her, that was enough to draw the conclusion that I'd be attracting the shadows to me...this being an analogy for the dead, as you undoubtedly know?"

Hermione shook her head, wide-eyed.

Snape looked at her in disbelief. "The shadows beyond the veil. That means the dead people in the afterlife. Not ghosts, not the Undead, but the souls who moved on. Needless to say, I didn't take Divination for very long."

"Neither did I," Hermione choked out, fascinated and slightly amused.

Snape nodded. "I didn't think you'd be the type for Divination. It's a discipline that requires a high amount of imagination and an affinity to the required tools. People with an analytical, logical mind, like you...or me...usually don't meet those requirements. Logic always interferes with Divination. And yet, when the talent is there, it can be a highly useful magical tool." Shaking his head at Hermione's derisive snort, he continued, "Have you never noticed how accurate Trelawney's Tarot readings and crystal gazings really are? Of course, people don't take her seriously...with her sherry addiction, her eccentric mannerisms and all, but she really has the true sight; she has the talent. And the Dark Lord knows it."

Hermione slowly shook her head. "I'd never have thought that you... She's a fraud. She makes things up on the spot. All that nonsense..." She stared at Snape uncertainly. "Doesn't she?"

"Didn't Trelawney give a warning with her Tarot cards before I killed the Headmaster on the Astronomy Tower? She was pushing those readings into everyone's face, but no one believed her. Didn't your friend Potter tell you?"

"So he did. But how did you know?"

"Albus told me before he went away that evening, warning me to be prepared. Before..." He closed his eyes, pain flickering over his features once again.

"All right," Hermione whispered. "That's Trelawney. But Cassandra Vablatsky? How do you know that she had the true sight as well?"

"Am I not the Dark Man who gathers the dead people around him?"

Hermione gaped. "But... I mean... they usually phrase their predictions in a way that you can interpret them any way you want to, but do you really think she meant us, the living dead, the new DA?"

"She certainly didn't, but it's how it turned out, nonetheless." He smirked. "And we can use it to our advantage, now."

"I still don't understand..."

"The Dark Lord knows about my nickname. My, ah, loving housemates made certain that he did. He also knows about the prophecy from the summer. And this, for me, is life insurance."

Hermione's eyes went even wider. "Oh! He thinks the Dead Woman is... Lily Potter? And as long as you live..."

"As long as I live, I cannot unite with her, and that means he will not be vanquished. It is in his best interest to keep me alive...at least until Potter is defeated." He smiled a smile that would have scared Hermione only weeks ago, but which now worried her.

"Of course, this is all utter nonsense," Snape said matter-of-factly. "If you let yourself be driven by prophecies, you'll paralyse yourself by being more worried about finding the correct interpretation than about doing what is necessary to stay alive, or thrive, or meet your goals."

"But, You-Know-Who..."

Snape nodded. "Yes. He is so convinced that it is fated that he'll take over the wizarding world that he lets himself be directed by prophecies and omens. And if we can give him one in a believable manner, we will be able to delay him just a bit longer. This will give your friend Potter time to fulfil his task, and it gives us a bit more time to prepare, to come up with a trap. Because, as soon as Potter is ready, we will act."

Hermione nodded. "And so Parvati takes Modified Polyjuice Potion and poses as Trelawney?"

"Yes, if she agrees. She can teach Divination, I'm certain, so she could stay at Hogwarts in Trelawney's stead, constantly protected by Perry Price. Hogwarts is one of the best-protected places around, and Perry is very capable. Miss Patil will be as safe as she can be, and she can work towards getting her revenge."

"But isn't that even more of a risk than me wanting to pose as a random Order member? What if she is captured?"

"Miss Patil will not go to Hogwarts before she is well prepared. When you wanted to go to Hogsmeade, your defences weren't good enough. Your Occlumency was strong already but not strong enough for the Dark Lord...Miss Patil will have to learn Occlumency fast. She will have to spin a web of falsehoods if the Dark Lord ever invades her mind. If she resists, and he breaks into her mind, the magical contract will come into effect, and she will be Petrified."

"Which would be a dead giveaway that she isn't who she appears to be."

"Precisely."

"I understand," Hermione murmured. "I've been rather careless, haven't I?"

"Rash as usual." Snape smirked.

"And what will happen to the real Sibyll Trelawney?"

"She shall have to live with the Underground."

Hermione looked at him in horror. "You can't be serious."

"Am I prone to joking, Nightshade? What else would you have us do with her? Kill her?"

"Of course not. But to live here... or in any of the other refuges... She'll drive everyone crazy."

"We've been through worse."

Hermione bit her lip. "She could never go on missions. She'll just get on everyone's nerves."

"We cannot let personal preferences be the judge of who to save and include in the Underground and who not," Snape snarled at her. "I thought I had told you that already, Nightshade."

Hermione hung her head and sighed. "You did, and you're right. I'm sorry. It's just... you'll probably want her here, teaching Divination, won't you?"

"That thought had crossed my mind, yes."

Hermione closed her eyes, nodding. "I was afraid you'd say that. I'm not looking forward to it."

"Believe me, Miss Granger, before all this is over, a lot of things that you don't like will happen. Or I, or the next person, for that matter. We're at war; we're an army, and we fight. Personal preferences have to stand back for this."

"All right. I understand, sir. But I thought no officially living person could live in the Underground?"

"We will have to make an exception, just as we did for Perry Price. Our safety procedures are there for a reason, but they are not set in stone. We will have to keep her here unless you can come up with a better idea?" His sneer was not pleasant.

Hermione frowned, a thought surfacing in the back of her head but not quite ready to grasp yet. "As a matter of fact, I'll try to do just that," she muttered, "but I'll have to think about it some more. But to get back to the main point, what should the prophecy be about?"

Snape stared at her thoughtfully, stroking his upper lip with his index finger. Finally, he spoke, "We need to make it plausible; it needs to sound like Trelawney. She speaks with this rough croak when she is in a trance. We can show that to Miss Patil in the Pensieve, and she can practice. The wording needs to be authentic, too. Sometimes she speaks in rhymes, but not always."

"That's right, but it's always repetitive, sometimes switching words within the sentence but still basically repeating an earlier sentence."

"Correct. So, if we want the Dark Lord delayed until at least... Let's see... six months... That would be August. What would a prophecy say, do you think?"

"It should be the end of July. That's not quite six months but more meaningful because Harry's birthday is on the thirty-first. That would be when the seventh month dies. It draws a full circle with the first prophecy."

"Very good. So we have the Chosen One. We have the seventh month, and we have the Dark Lord. She's referred to him as the Dark Lord in two prophecies, so we should call him that again."

"Yes. Or we contrast him to the Chosen One. Doesn't he believe that seven is the most powerful number?" Hermione bit her lip. She didn't want to give the secret of the Horcruxes away just yet, although she suspected that she couldn't keep it a secret for much longer, and maybe it wasn't even wise to do so.

"Very perceptive. The One, the Seven, and when the seventh month dies. Let's see..."

When the Chosen One meets the Powerful Seven

When the seventh month dies

But not before..."

"Hm," Hermione mumbled. "Not bad."

Then one or the other

Shall be victorious

But not before

For neither can live while the other survives."

Snape's gaze burnt into her eyes. She'd never seen him so approving of something she'd said ever before. The corners of his mouth were slightly lifted.

"And to finish it off, we'll repeat again:

When Seven meets One

When the seventh month dies."

"Sounds pretty good," Hermione said, her heart fluttering from the way he was looking at her. Damn, if that was how he approved of people, she'd burst into flames if he ever so much as looked at her with passion.

"Let's repeat the whole thing then," he purred in his smoothest voice.

"When the Chosen One meets the Powerful Seven

When the seventh month dies

But not before

Then one or the other

Shall be victorious

But not before

For neither can live while the other survives

When Seven meets One

When the seventh month dies."

Hermione could have melted away. If Divination sounded so good spoken with Severus'...no...Nundu's voice, then maybe Divination did have its merits, after all. She smiled.

"That's settled, then. I'll leave you to the rest of your watch, Nightshade, and try to catch some sleep myself." He gave her a brief nod, another one of these disconcerting looks of approval, and walked away with brisk, long strides.

Hermione breathed deeply, feeling elated and hopeful. That had been wonderful...the way he had told her about his nickname, the way they had developed the fake prophecy together. And Harry, Ron and herself had been right: he was the Shadow Man. And Harry's mother was the Dead Woman. And that would mean that S... that Nundu was safe, that Voldemort would keep him safe.

She stared at the moon that had risen high in the sky. And suddenly her mood switched from elated to very worried, and an icy chill ran down her spine. Someone as cunning as Severus...yes, blast it, that was his name. Someone as cunning as Severus, someone as determined, as devoted to the cause as him, might just turn matters around and seek his own death to upset Voldemort's little bubble of security, believing that a frightened Voldemort would be easy prey for a determined force against him.

By the time she had come to that conclusion, tears had started to trickle down her face. That wouldn't do. That could not be allowed. She had to get it into Severus Snape's head that Lily Potter was not the Dead Woman who would ensure victory. It could just as well be one of the women in the Underground; they were officially dead, after all, and part of Snape's own Vablatsky interpretation. And he should get together with that Dead Woman while Voldemort still believed that the dead woman was Lily Potter. That way, the prophecy could be fulfilled without Severus getting ideas about self-sacrifice, and revealed at the right time, the secret of the Underground's existence would sufficiently unsettle and frighten Voldemort.

Who was the Dead Woman, then? It must be a Gryffindor because of the fire references. She was a Gryffindor. So maybe the Dead Woman was her? The hopeful shine in her eyes upon that realisation didn't last long. The Dead Woman might just as well be Parvati Patil.

Variation in Tactics

Chapter 18 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader, Maggie, and my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who both are always encouraging, helpful, and thorough.

This chapter is dedicated to excessivelyperky, who always inspires me with her reviews.

Chapter 17 – Variation in Tactics

8.10. Reduce the hostile chiefs by inflicting damage on them; and make trouble for them, and keep them constantly engaged; hold out specious allurements, and make them rush to any given point.

8.11. The art of war teaches us to rely not on the likelihood of the enemy's not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him; not on the chance of his not attacking, but rather on the fact that we have made our position unassailable.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, VIII. Variation in Tactics)

A week later, Hermione was on her way to the Office Cave for another Occlumency lesson with Snape. She was looking forward to it very much. Her feelings hadn't changed since the wedding, but the few times she had seen him that week had only been briefly during meals.

Hermione knew that Snape had been watching Parvati. He had talked to Parvati privately several times, consulted Cassia Fenwick, and watched Parvati some more. Parvati reacted to all the scrutiny with stoic acceptance. She confided in Hermione that she was aware of being evaluated, and that she hoped she would measure up to expectations. Hermione wasn't allowed to tell her about the plan yet, but she was able to encourage Parvati by confirming that she would indeed get an important mission very soon—if she was up to the task.

In the meantime, Hermione had mulled over her idea on how to spare the Underground the presence of Sibyll Trelawney without putting the Divination mistress, or the Underground, in too much danger. Whenever she'd had some leisure time between her tasks, Hermione had taken a small stone out of her pocket and stared at it pensively. Sabrina, Dudley Dursley's girlfriend, had given the small Aquamarine to her months ago.

"This stone will make your speech clear and convincing," Sabrina had said to Hermione. "Your wisdom and intelligence is concealed under your façade of book-learning, and it takes a lot of convincing to make others see this. This will help you with it."

That prediction had been spot-on. Hermione did have to speak convincingly; otherwise, Snape would never have believed the urgency of Hermione's outside missions, her need for the searches in the libraries and archives, and for the questioning of Aberforth Dumbledore in the Hog's Head. She had also, unknowingly at the time, convinced him of her admiration for him. That had gained her his trust, and maybe Sabrina's stone had helped her with that, too. And maybe Sabrina, who believed in magic, talked about auras and thought that she was a witch, could help her with her new dilemma as well.

There was only the tiny difficulty left of telling Nundu about her idea. Hermione glared at the small crystal, grumbled, "You'd better know what's good for you," knocked on the office door and went in.

Snape was sitting behind a huge desk working his way through stacks of paperwork. Who would have thought that a group of pseudo-dead people could cause such a need for administration? But accounts had to be balanced; their pseudo businesses had to keep up appearances. Taxes had to be paid and funds redirected to sources the Underground could use. It was no small feat.

Snape looked up when Hermione came into the office and greeted her with a nod. And once again, just from looking at him, her breath caught. *No matter what he does, he just has an incredible presence*, she thought. Smiling a greeting, she sat down, pushing her treacherous thoughts and emotions out of her conscious mind. It wouldn't do for Snape to see how deeply she felt for him during their lessons. She didn't want to be dismissed as a silly girl.

Snape closed the file he had been working on and took his wand out of his pocket. While Hermione watched him, she went through her breathing routine and felt coldness spread out from her heart through her whole body. She knew that she was turning pale; her fingers and toes started to feel icy, and an unnatural calmness was cloaking every emotion, every desire. She was ready for her lesson.

Without speaking a word, Snape attacked. He rounded the desk, stared into her eyes and tried to invade her mind. Hermione had expected it and showed him what she had learned. Stray thoughts of everyday activities—Muggle and magical—were allowed to float to the forefront of her consciousness. These were the images she wanted Snape to see; everything else was concealed as if it were unimportant or simply not there.

"Good," Snape said after a while, retreating from her mind. "There isn't much more that I could teach you about Occlumency. All you need now is constant practice."

"Oh." Hermione was disappointed. "No more lessons?"

Fast as a striking adder, Snape attacked again. Hermione would have laughed, but her reflexes were well trained by now. Amusement had immediately been pushed into that icy vault together with all her other feelings. What she allowed Snape to see was a mild disappointment in not being able to continue the lessons she enjoyed. She showed him how much she liked those lessons and even allowed some vague feelings about how much she enjoyed his company and enjoyed learning from him to float through her mind. Hermione saw no reason why he shouldn't be aware of that.

"Rather impressive," Snape murmured. "If Potter had your dedication for learning, we'd have fewer problems. And now it's time to turn things around."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, puzzled.

"It's time for you to learn Legilimency. Knowledge of Legilimency will help you to perfect your Occlumency. Only when you're capable of invading someone else's mind will you learn the difference between how a wide-open mind and an Occluded mind feels. This will help you with the spinning of falsehoods or the showing of selective thoughts. You will be able to present more precise 'thoughts' as compared to the rather ambiguous mixture of thought-fragments."

"Oh," Hermione said. "Well, yes, I'd like to learn that. How do I start?"

"Get your wand out, look into my eyes, focus on what you want to achieve and say 'Legilimens'. I shall only use my basic level of Occlumency."

Hermione raised her wand. As soon as she spoke the incantation, a black flash and some vague impressions of landscapes and people appeared in her mind until she bounced against a wall. She was thrown back violently and crashed to the floor. A few books from a nearby bookshelf fell on top of her, hitting her head.

"Ow! Was that necessary?"

"You need to be more careful, Nightshade. Mind Magic isn't child's play." Snape crouched at her side, grabbed her chin and turned her face towards him. His fingertips brushed over the developing bruise on her forehead, and Hermione's breath caught once again. Snape cast a Healing Charm on the bruise and checked for other injuries. Hermione was trembling, partly because of his touch, but mostly because her muscles were cramping.

"I can't breathe," she gasped. "My sides... It's like stitches... after running..."

Snape supported her back with one hand and put the other hand under her ribcage, over her diaphragm, applying slight pressure in a slow and steady rhythm, as he had done many times before when he'd taught her the breathing exercises necessary for achieving best results at Occlumency. Hermione shuddered again. His touch now was rather counterproductive to calming her down, but she couldn't possibly tell him that. It wouldn't hurt to make an effort, though. She tried to forget that it was Snape who was touching her and focused on breathing in a steady rhythm.

"There. That's better. Try to calm down." He let go of her, and Hermione scrambled to her feet.

"What was that? Why did you throw me out so violently?"

"I didn't throw you out; you did that yourself. Beginners usually have trouble focussing, but you entered my mind so forcefully that you virtually bounced against my barriers. Mind Magic can affect your nervous system when it isn't performed with precision. It's among the most difficult and dangerous disciplines of magic—never to be performed lightly. All those botched Memory Charms you know about should have given you some idea already. I'm surprised that you are surprised." He smirked at her.

Hermione shook her head and gave him a twisted smile. "I suppose I just assumed that all basic Legilimency would work like Harry's unintentional invasion of your mind during his Occlumency lessons. He did invade your mind, didn't he?"

Snape grimaced. "He did. But those were special circumstances. At that time, I wasn't using Occlumency constantly; I was more reliant on leaving dangerous memories in a Pensieve. I still do, on occasion, and I wonder if that might be an option for Miss Patil as well? We will have to teach her Occlumency, but I doubt that we can proceed

much further than a solid concealment of her thoughts."

"We?"

"I trust that you can teach her the basics. You will have to practice with her every day. I will monitor her progress whenever I am here; Perry will do the same. In the meantime, you will learn Legilimency; that will enable you to teach her beyond the initial steps. It will also come in useful for future missions with me."

"Oh," was all Hermione could say. She was thrilled that Snape was planning to take her on special missions again. But she shouldn't really be surprised: that was why she had received special treatment, after all. It had nothing to do with his personal preferences and everything to do with justified trust and practicality. Slightly disillusioned, she pushed the tiny glimmer of hope back into her mind vault and cleared her throat.

"How will Legilimency help us on our missions?"

"Didn't you see how I communicated with Dumbledore before I..." Snape swallowed. "Before I killed him." He ground his teeth. "We communicated through Legilimency and..."

"That's how you did it?" Hermione interrupted excitedly. "I was wondering why I could see his command in your memories. How is that done? That's fantastic! It's such a great way to..."

"Silence!" Snape hissed. "As delightful as it may be that you're taking such an interest in the topic, your incessant babbling won't get us anywhere. If you could kindly resort to listening, you might actually learn something."

Hermione scowled but kept her peace and merely nodded her assent.

"Very well, then." His eyes glittered, and his lips curled.

Annoyed, Hermione realised that he was laughing at her. She crossed her arms and stared at him defiantly. "And?"

"If two Legilimens cast the spell at the same time—and allow the other to enter—they can see the thoughts they are supposed to see. At the same time, they push their questions, thoughts or replies to the forefront of their minds. That way, with a lot of practice, rather complex conversations can be held without anyone else noticing. I'll leave it to you to estimate the value of such a skill."

Despite her earlier annoyance, Hermione got excited again, and her eyes shone. "I can't wait to learn it."

"That's why you are here," he murmured, going to stand in front of her again. "I shall now cast Legilimency on you, and you will show me what you had for dinner. We will have a simple conversation where I ask questions and you answer."

"I thought both sides needed to cast Legilimency for that?"

"For complex conversations, yes. In that case, both participants would want to read each other's ideas. For a simple exchange, I can push my thoughts into your mind since you'll be open to my intrusion and expecting it." He hesitated and looked at her critically before he continued, "That way, you might get a feeling for the strength necessary for a mild invasion before you try it again. Ready?"

Hermione swallowed and nodded. "Go ahead."

"Legilimens."

Hermione hardly felt his intrusion into her mind this time. This was very different from the sudden and mostly violent attacks with which he normally challenged her Occlumency. This contact was gentle, polite, and rather pleasant. Too pleasant to follow *that* train of thought any further. She pushed the image of pea soup to the front of her mind. Snape's confused frown showed her that he had probably caught some of her earlier thoughts, but that couldn't be helped.

"Just pea soup?" The question was suddenly there, and it hadn't originated in her own brain. Instead of the image, she tried to silently vocalize the reply, *And pudding.*

"Now I'm hungry. Is there some pudding left, do you think?"

Hermione thought about a group of always-hungry children fighting over the pudding until nothing was left. That produced a strange sensation in her head; a soft vibration was travelling through her mind and seemed to be massaging her brain from the inside. It took a while for her to understand that this was Snape chuckling.

"And there was me thinking that the brain wasn't capable of feeling anything," she thought. *"How wrong I was. My brain seems to be ticklish."* That brought her another chuckle.

The mental smile lingered briefly in her mind before Snape gently closed the connection between them. "Now it's your turn to try again. Don't try so hard this time; you know that you can do it without much effort. Just cast the spell and imagine that you're floating into my mind."

Hermione nodded and raised her wand. *"Legilimens."* Once again, she saw a black flash, but instead of being thrown out by that flash, it seemed to suck her in, and she was confronted with a jumble of disconnected thoughts. Hermione was utterly fascinated. It was one thing to have her own mind invaded, unwillingly or with permission, but it was completely different to be the one who was doing the invading.

She was in the mind of someone else. This was Severus Snape's mind. And if they cast the spell simultaneously, he'd be in her mind, too. They'd be in each other's mind. That was a very exciting thought. How much more intimate could two people get, apart from having sex? And how would it be if two people who were making love cast the spell? No, better not think about that. He might pick up a stray thought, Hermione mused. Instead, she focused on what he wanted to show her.

"All right?" The words seemed to ring through her ears and appear in front of her eyes. Snape had been right when he had told Harry that 'reading the mind' was a simplified Muggle-type explanation for a complex procedure. The sensations of being in someone else's mind and of actively communicating were so intricate; they couldn't be summed up in just a few words.

"I'm fine. This is incredible," she thought back, wondering how he would perceive her answer.

"The same way you do, as a conglomerate of impressions."

"You heard that, huh?" Hermione wondered if he could see or feel her embarrassed grin.

"You pushed it right at me. We'd better stop that now; you can practice the hiding and revealing of your thought snippets on your own. Carefully retreat, now. I won't push."

Hermione imagined gathering her strands of thought like a coach driver collecting the horses' reins. Slowly and gently pulling those strands towards her, she mentally stepped back from him, and gradually his face came into focus again. His eyes were huge—like black tunnels—with long black lashes, but not as cold as she had always thought. Those tunnels held something inviting, something welcoming. And those lashes... But she had to leave those eyes, now. A final tug on the 'reins', and she was outside, seeing Snape's eyes in proportion to the rest of his face again.

"Next time, we'll cast the spell at the same time," he said. "You'll notice that the communication will be more intense and a lot easier."

"I'm looking forward to it," Hermione said, feeling exhausted but also elated. Snape studied her for a moment.

"After today's session, it is possible that you'll get a headache later this evening. It is advisable not to take a headache potion. Better to lie down and get some sleep. Your mind has to get used to this kind of activity; this is rather different from Occluding."

Hermione nodded and rubbed her forehead, blinking a few times to clear her vision. That was when Snape attacked a third time. Hermione stumbled and nearly fell, but he seemed to have expected that and steadied her with one hand. But his presence in her mind had nothing of the pleasantness of the earlier Legilimency experience.

Hermione allowed herself to hurl her thoughts of annoyance and anger towards Snape, but she didn't push him out of her head. An attack as aggressive as this one, when performed by an enemy, wouldn't come secretly, and the normal responses of a non-Occlumens would be shock, fear and anger. Her Occlumency barrier was well hidden under her anger, and she allowed herself to let some more of the annoyance show. Snape had taught her that anger was always a good method to cloak the mind; it was about the only emotion that didn't have to be suppressed.

After a while, Snape left her thoughts. His hand was still on her arm, and he looked at her apologetically. "I trust that you know that was necessary?"

"Of course," Hermione murmured, trying to smile but not quite succeeding.

Snape seemed to remember that he was still touching her and let her go abruptly, stepping back.

"That's enough for today. It pains me to boost your ego, but you did extremely well, Nightshade. Now go and get some rest."

Hermione grinned. "Better be careful, Nundu. I'd quite enjoy giving you that kind of pain—yes, yes, I know. Less of the cheek." She chuckled at his mock scowl. "I'll leave you in a minute, but there was actually something else I wanted to talk to you about." She swallowed, wondering how he would react to her idea.

"Now she tells me," he growled. "What is it?"

"Er, you remember, we were talking about Sibyll Trelawney, last week, after the wedding? About what to do with her...?"

"Yes," he interrupted impatiently. "Go on."

"I haven't come up with any details yet, but, er, Harry's cousin's girlfriend is a Muggle, who thinks she's a witch who can do magic. The kind of magic Muggles dream up, you know. She does Tarot readings, claims to see auras, and reads palms. She also does a bit of crystal gazing. She may even have some residual talent for Divination. I wouldn't know, but seeing as you insist on Divination being a valuable tool..." She grinned.

"Get on with it," he said, but instead of being impatient, he seemed to be interested.

"Sabrina wants to open a Wellness studio together with Dudley as soon as he leaves school. A wellness studio is something Muggles use for..."

"I know what wellness is, Nightshade. Continue."

"Oh. Right. Anyway, she has a kind of Divination studio already; she got the money from her father and seems to be doing well enough with it. I thought that Professor Trelawney could perhaps work for Sabrina. She'd be hidden in plain sight; none of the Death Eaters would suspect her to be hiding amongst Muggles, would they?"

"There's no reason why they should. Not with Miss Patil posing as Trelawney at Hogwarts... Hmm. And how do you think that contact could be made? You can't just walk up to that... Sabrina... and ask her to provide employment for Sibyll Trelawney. You're dead to the world."

"Yes, that's the tricky part, isn't it?" Hermione was relieved that he hadn't rejected her idea outright. "We'd just have to chance it and send Trelawney to apply for the job. Once those two are in the same room together, I don't think there will be any problems. Sabrina will be intrigued, and Trelawney always enjoys an admiring audience. They'll take to each other like ducks to water."

"Interesting," Snape said, staring at her thoughtfully. "Aren't you concerned about Sabrina's safety, though? There is some risk involved as you undoubtedly realise."

"Of course I'm concerned." Hermione bit her lip. "But I know that if Sabrina knew the truth, she'd want to help us. And I didn't think that the risk for Sabrina would be any higher than the risk for Paulie was... You never even mentioned the risk you put him under."

"You're right. The risks are about the same. The Dark Lord isn't interested in Muggles. If they are in his way, he kills them. He doesn't consider them worthy of further thought. He'd never expect a pure-blooded witch like Trelawney to live amidst Muggles voluntarily. And Paulie—the Dark Lord knows that I keep in contact with my Muggle relatives. He is aware of the advantage; I am able to hide amongst Muggles, to blend in completely. This was advantageous after I, ah, left Hogwarts. As long as the Dark Lord needs me to move around freely, he needs my Muggle relatives to keep up my Muggle persona. In a sense, he protects them. So you see, being seen with Paulie is never suspicious, and if Paulie knew the truth, he'd want to help, too, I know that. So no, I'm not overly concerned about him."

Hermione nodded, grimacing. "I suppose that the Underground has to go by the same ethical principles as any other army. Risking collateral damage, the end justifying the means and all that. I can't say that I like it, but I understand it. I think."

Snape raised an eyebrow and stared. "That's a bit rich coming from you."

"What do you mean?" Hermione was surprised.

"I remember more than one occasion when you were rather creative in the treatment of your antagonists. Your Sneak spell on one of your DA friends was the talk of the staffroom for months, as was your treatment of Umbridge—not that I'd blame you for the latter. But the girl, last thing I heard, is disfigured for life. So I'm sorry if I can't quite understand your scruples when we use, ah, unorthodox methods to solve our problems."

Hermione stared at him nonplussed. "... She betrayed us. She didn't need to betray us. Just staying away and telling her mother that she didn't know anything would have been enough—Marietta Edgecombe, I mean. And that Umbridge... She's creepy."

"Yes, she is. And that is sufficient justification for disfiguring one and harming the other?"

Hermione blushed crimson. "... I didn't really think about it. When I read about the spell, I thought it was perfect for protecting the DA, so I used it. Uhm—yeah, I suppose it might have been wrong to use such a strong spell without having the counter-spell."

They stared at each other with narrowed eyes. Hermione swallowed, scowled and continued, "Look, I am sorry about Marietta, but I needed a strong spell to protect the DA. We had such difficulties with Filch and Umbridge..."

As she said that, a thought occurred to her. She smirked slightly and quoted, "Sun Tzu says *If, on the other hand, in the midst of difficulties we are always ready to seize an advantage, we may extricate ourselves from misfortune.*"

Snape glared at her, but his lips twitched. Hermione took that as encouragement.

"I'm not sorry about Umbridge, at all. She sent Dementors after Harry. Dementors! Did you know that they almost kissed his cousin? She's dangerous, that one. You could almost suspect that she's in league with You-Know-Who."

"Not that I know of... And yes, I was aware that she had sent the Dementors. I hope you are aware, too, that you have two dangerous personal enemies now, Nightshade?"

"Uhm—"

"General enemies are difficult enough, but when it gets personal, it often only ends when one of the combatants is killed."

Hermione paled. "I just wanted to stop her... I was so angry... you know?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, I know only too well where personal vendettas can lead you. Try to avoid them in the future."

"Uh— uhm, I..."

Snape's eyes widened. "There's another one? How many more? Who? Out with it."

"Er, only one, I think. It's Skeeter. Do you know that she's an unregistered Animagus? A beetle? I caught her after she spread all those lies about Harry in our fourth year. And I blackmailed her..."

"Lovely," Snape said nastily. "Isn't it just lovely to see, again and again, how the saintly members of Gryffindor House present themselves as stellar examples for ethics and morals? And they are always so thoughtful about the consequences of their actions."

Hermione's anger flared. "Is there a point in regurgitating past sins? Should I now start adding up everything that's been done by Slytherins?" She was almost angry enough to ask him about his own bullying of Neville Longbottom, but she was afraid of angering Snape too much. She'd reserve that for a day when they were both in a friendlier mood. *Hurling accusations and insults at him may not be the best method to get him to fall in love with me* she thought, and had to suppress a giggle. At the moment, she was feeling anything but romantic, but at least her humour was coming back.

Snape glowered but nodded. "We have a decision to make about your plan to hide Sibyll Trelawney with that Muggle woman. If your, ah, ethical questions about the Underground's methods are answered now, then maybe we could proceed with the topic at hand?"

Hermione swallowed and nodded. "So, will you consider it?"

"I'll think about it. It could work. Trelawney need never know about the Underground. If she should get captured after all, she cannot betray what she doesn't know."

"I'm glad," Hermione said. "And now I'd better go before you learn about even more of my sins." She flashed him a grin. "Goodnight, Nundu."

He raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Better had. That would take all evening. Goodnight."

When Parvati learned about the plan to pose as Sibyll Trelawney, she was excited and very keen to start. Hermione's efforts to teach her Occlumency when Snape or Price didn't have time proved to be very efficient. Parvati wanted to learn and had already shown, after the murder of her family, that she was capable of pushing her emotions to the side and acting cold-bloodedly if needed. This capacity helped her build an Occlumency vault where she could hide her true thoughts. Thinking about Divination was a very efficient way to confuse any potential intruder. Hermione always left the lessons with a headache. While her Legilimency lessons with Snape were proceeding well, she was still unprepared to deal with such an onslaught of foggy clairvoyance. When the words "and the fool shall lie on the tower, but death shall lie upside down, and the cup will be one, and the wand is to be found, and the queen will triumph, and the lovers prevail," resounded again and again in Parvati's head, Hermione wondered if Voldemort wouldn't actually enjoy invading the fake Trelawney's mind if he ever got hold of her. He would be most interested in those thoughts.

Hermione voiced her concerns to Snape, but he reassured her that this would be precisely the effect they wanted to achieve. Voldemort should be distracted from any suspicion—not even getting close to the idea that Parvati-Trelawney wasn't who she appeared to be. Thoughts about prophecies and the vague foretelling of mysterious but important sounding events would achieve just that.

"Do not make the mistake of thinking that the Dark Lord is a harmless fool who is easily distracted," Snape snarled when he saw Hermione's amused and Parvati's relieved face after he told them that. "The tiniest suspicion, and he will invade mercilessly. And he won't be as gentle as I usually am, either." He glared at Hermione, who shuddered. If his regular practice attacks on her mind were considered gentle, then she didn't want to know what mercilessly really meant in that context.

"When I attack, I take care not to damage my 'victim's' mind, and that means knowing exactly how to detect barriers, and how far I can go. The Dark Lord, however, has no such scruples. When he has the slightest suspicion, he won't rest until he's broken all your barriers and revealed everything you want to hide. He won't care if you have a mind left afterwards or not. The only way around this is to either appear so foolishly harmless that he won't suspect Occlumency or to present one or two fake, weaker barriers that are meant to be broken."

"What do you think I should do, Nundu?" Parvati asked, her eyes shining. "I suppose you want me to look foolishly harmless?"

"Not necessarily. No one would suspect from Sibyll Trelawney that she knows Occlumency, but many witches and wizards put up some natural barriers in their minds. It's something most rather strong-willed people possess, mostly without being aware of it. It would not be unusual for someone like Sibyll Trelawney to have that barrier. On the outside, there should be harmless everyday thoughts: annoyed, pleased, things about teaching and Divination. Behind the barrier should be emotions of being lonely, of feeling slighted, or in your case, thoughts about Perry Price and Trelawney's delight to be his love-interest, to have finally found someone who seems to care for her. You can spin endless imaginary tales around those emotions alone. But it's better if you practice them on us first."

Parvati nodded. "So. I spin several levels of fake barriers and still try to appear foolish?"

"Not foolish, but that cloud of vague fortune-telling you spun earlier will be quite efficient as a surface layer. It can be confused, whimsical or eccentric, or all of it. Make it as rich and authentic as you can. And let's hope that you'll never actually need to use it."

"So you don't think that he'll want to kidnap me?"

"We may have to make him kidnap you to have a constant source of fake prophecies for him at the right time. However, this should be a last resort, and he should not be able to get close enough to you to kidnap you without our knowledge. But you must be prepared for everything; things can go very wrong."

"I know," Parvati said and looked hard and determined again.

After the second week of March, Snape and Price declared Parvati's Occlumency skills sound enough to make the switch with Sibyll Trelawney. She would continue her training with Price at Hogwarts.

As a baptism of fire, the Polyjuiced Parvati, together with Price, went to Sabrina's Divination Studio to get a reading and to use the opportunity to make a few predictions of her own. Hermione was certain that, once acquainted, Sabrina would be thrilled to recruit Trelawney for her studio. Sabrina didn't disappoint; she invited the fake Trelawney to dinner and would have taken her on immediately if Price hadn't stopped her and negotiated a salary first.

And now, in the middle of March, the switch could be made and the prophecy spoken. Hermione and Snape accompanied Parvati, who had already taken the modified Polyjuice Potion with a hair of Sibyll Trelawney in it. Hermione felt odd in her company; Parvati imitated Trelawney so perfectly that Hermione could barely suppress her long-standing hostility towards the Divination teacher.

They had Apparated to the Forbidden Forest and were now waiting for Price to bring Trelawney and take Parvati to the castle. Hermione was in her usual disguise of a

curly-haired, brown-eyed girl that otherwise bore no resemblance to her. Snape, as usual, came without disguise.

Parvati was pacing impatiently, clutching the phial with the Polyjuice Potion Trelawney would have to drink before she could be brought to her new flat close to Sabrina's Studio. It was the same potion Parvati had used when she'd met Sabrina; it contained the hair of an average-looking Muggle woman. After a while, sounds in the forest indicated that someone was approaching. They all hoped it would be Price with Trelawney.

Snape and Hermione both had their wands out, listening intently. While the Forbidden Forest seemed the perfect place for secret actions, the centaurs and other Forest dwellers were watchful and could show up at unexpected times. During the switch, Hermione would stand guard and Confund anyone or anything that came too close.

A moment later, however, Hermione felt the locket around her neck getting warm, and when she opened it, a voice whispered, "Perry is coming".

"Thank you, Ethel," Hermione whispered back, smiling at the three witches in her portrait, who were waving at her merrily. Every member of the DA had such a locket containing the portrait of a group of wizards and witches pretending to be a family group. Only, these family portraits never remained quite the same since the painted people were constantly wandering from one portrait to the next, visiting, gossiping, and relaying messages for the Underground. The messages were safe: only the portraits in the lockets were connected to each other; the inhabitants of said portraits had agreed to be confined for however long it was necessary for them to play messengers.

Hermione nodded at Snape and Parvati, who hid behind a tree. A moment later, Price and Sibyll Trelawney appeared in the small clearing. Without a word, Trelawney walked towards Snape and stood in front of him, waiting. Snape motioned to Parvati, who came out of hiding and offered the phial.

"Drink this," Snape ordered, and Trelawney obeyed.

Hermione was surprised. She knew that Price was supposed to cast a mild Memory Charm on Trelawney to make her forget who she was, but she didn't know that the charm would make her so docile. It was almost as if Sibyll were under the Imperius Curse. But they wouldn't cast a Dark Curse, would they? Hermione stared at Snape with suspicion in her eyes. He caught her glance and frowned.

In the meantime, Price and Parvati-as-Trelawney had made their way back to the castle. Price would see to it that Parvati was safe in Trelawney's quarters where Minerva McGonagall was already waiting to help Parvati settle in. Price would then return to take Sibyll to Sabrina.

As soon as Price came back, he ordered Trelawney to follow him and Disapparated with her to a place close to Sabrina's studio. Hermione turned to Snape.

"That was an odd Memory Charm. She acted almost as if she were under the Imperius Curse."

"She was under the Imperius Curse."

"But, it's an Unforgivable!" Hermione cried, worried and outraged.

"Compose yourself, Nightshade," Snape hissed.

"But an Unforgivable?" Hermione whispered. "This is horrible."

"It was necessary, and I'll thank you to let the matter rest, now. Minerva knows about it and has approved, if that makes you feel better. Or would you prefer if we'd asked Ministry Aurors to cast the curse? It's not as if there was much of a choice. Sibyll Trelawney must not remember who and what she is, and she must act in a way not to raise suspicion. Must I remind you that this whole charade was your idea? We could not risk a lesser charm. It could be broken too easily."

"But..."

"Hush!" Snape had raised a hand, pointing north. Hermione had heard it, too. There had been a long high-pitched wail not too far away. And now someone, a woman, was softly singing a lamentation, accompanied by the babbling and sputtering of male voices. A glance at Snape, a nonverbal "*Legilimens*," and the command '*Investigate!*' appeared in her mind.

Very carefully, they navigated their way around the old trees towards the place where the sounds were originating. Hermione wondered whether the sounds were coming from students who were out for a bit of mischief in the Forbidden Forest, or if anyone was hurt. Wondering if she should cast a Disillusionment Charm on them both, she scrambled through the undergrowth, following Snape's lead.

They had walked for ten minutes with the voices constantly getting louder when Snape suddenly stopped, drawing a sharp breath. Hermione walked up to his side and stopped in her tracks, eyes bulging from the sight before her.

A small clearing opened up in front of them, and in the middle of it, three people were dancing in a circle, holding each other's hands. The three people were Luna, Ron and Harry. Luna was singing the sad song, and Harry and Ron were muttering and mumbling while they danced.

Suddenly Ron broke free from the circle, yelling, "I'm Babbitty Rabbitty, I hoppety-hop like the hopping pot." Then he dropped to the ground, rolled on his back, waved his arms and legs in the air and howled.

Harry watched Ron's impersonation of a dying fly with a dazed expression, and then he ran up to Ron, yelling, "Professor Dumbledore, I'm so sorry that I never asked you where you learned to speak Mermish. Can you forgive me?" He shook Ron's shoulder.

Luna, in the meantime, continued dancing, her arms raised. She was still dancing in a circle around something that was lying on the ground.

Hermione frowned, looked at Snape and asked mentally, "*What's up with them? What do we do?*"

"*We watch. They don't seem to realise that we're here.*"

Snape was wrong. Luna suddenly stopped her dance, fixed her gaze on Snape and smiled brightly. "Ooooh," she whispered.

"Professor Dumbledore, can you forgive me for yelling at you?" Harry whined, having seen Snape as well and stumbled towards him, arm outstretched. Ron had got up and followed Harry but approached Hermione instead of Snape and yelled at the top of his voice, "Are you Hermione? Can you forgive me? I love Luna. I love Looney. Loopy, loony Luna, Lalala..." and he danced in a circle around Snape and Hermione.

Hermione had had about enough and raised her wand, but Snape stilled her hand with his. Harry and Ron had taken each other by the hand now, singing, "Sorry, so sorry..."

"Hush!" Luna had come close and was staring at Snape. "Be quiet, boys. He's a shy beast. Don't scare him away." She smiled raptly and whispered. "Who'd have thought that they live in the Forbidden Forest? Father will be ecstatic; finally, there's proof. Here's a Crumpled-horned Snorcrack!" She started to stroke Snape's nose. He jerked away from her and looked scandalized.

Hermione almost lost it. The look on Snape's face when Luna had stroked his nose had been hysterical. She suppressed her laughter with all her might, caught his angry gaze and asked mentally, "*Shouldn't we Stun them or something?*"

"*Clearly, they've been cursed. I'd rather not risk using a spell on them without knowing how it will interact with the curse. It seems to be some kind of strong Babbling Curse mixed with a Confundus Charm and who knows what else.*"

"It seems rather harmless, though, doesn't it?"

"Look again," Snape's thoughts were urgent. He had raised his wand now and conjured his Patronus, whispering to the silver doe.

Hermione looked at her three friends. Ron had picked up the thing that was lying on the ground, and Hermione recognised it as the locket they had bought from Aberforth Dumbledore. Ron put it around his neck, blinked once, and then attacked Harry, hammering his fists into Harry's face in an unerring rhythm. Harry covered his head with his arms and sank to his knees, but he didn't fight back. Luna was sitting on the ground, singing again.

Hermione had had enough. She ran towards Ron and tried to restrain him, getting the odd blow to her face and arms while she did so. Snape hurried to her side and pulled the locket from Ron's neck. Ron immediately froze and sank to the ground, looking dazed. While Snape stared suspiciously at the locket, Hermione heard a soft popping sound. She whirled towards the noise, wand raised, but relaxed when she saw Fawkes appear in a scarlet-golden flash. Fawkes looked at Harry, Ron and Luna and then settled on Snape's shoulder, listening to Snape, who whispered a few words to the bird. Fawkes flew to a nearby tree and started to sing.

The song was soothing and uplifting, as always. Hermione felt that all her troubles would be solved somehow and that the day was too beautiful to worry. And indeed, the setting sun transformed the Forbidden Forest into a fairytale forest with shimmering lichens hanging from the old trees like mysterious veils. Fingers of light found their way through the dense wood and bathed patches of grass and undergrowth in a golden light.

Harry, Ron and Luna were dancing again, quietly this time and with dreamy smiles on their faces. As Fawkes' song progressed, one after the other they sank to the ground and fell asleep.

A different kind of sound shook Hermione out of her contented, dreamy state. The sound was caused by Minerva McGonagall, who was swishing past the trees on her broom. A quick glance at Snape told Hermione that he had also felt the calming influence of the Phoenix song; the ghost of a smile brightened his features, and he gallantly helped Minerva off her broom. Snape quickly told her what had happened, and she agreed to take the three confused friends to the school and let them be checked over by Poppy Pomfrey.

Hermione wondered how Minerva would deal with the three of them on her own, and so was relieved when she saw Fawkes approaching Harry, his talons grabbing Harry's robes. Fawkes could easily carry and Apparate all three friends to the hospital wing at once. She suspected that Snape had told him to stay around and help, but she didn't have time to watch because Snape had taken her arm and dragged her away from the scene, signalling for her to Disapparate.

"The Office Cave, right away," Snape snarled when they finally returned to Nan Guthan. His silence during the broom ride and the walk from the Watch Cave to their living quarters had been unpleasant. Something unspoken was looming over them like a threat. Hermione knew what was coming, and she steeled herself for the onslaught of Snape's anger.

"You will now tell me what this is all about." His nose almost touched hers as he confronted her, pointing one long, pale finger at the locket that lay on the desk, right where he had hurled it after slamming the door shut. Hermione held his gaze and didn't budge.

Snape's eyes narrowed, and he breathed heavily. His face was flushed; an angry grimace twisted his features, and yet, Hermione felt nothing of the fear and distress she had felt as a student when she was the target of his ire. She knew that he had every right to be angry. And he would be even angrier after he'd heard the whole story. She would tell him what he wanted to know; she really saw no point in keeping it a secret any longer. However, if she told him, she wanted to do it quietly without being yelled at. Thus, she waited until he'd calmed down a bit.

Snape was clearly making an effort to control himself. He inhaled and exhaled in a slow rhythm, and Hermione could see how his features, his posture, how the whole man turned cold and unmoving, just as she did when she opened the Occlumency vault in her mind to hide all her private thoughts and emotions.

"It's the Horcrux, isn't it?" Snape asked calmly, his voice brittle like ice.

Hermione's eyes widened. "The Horcrux? You know about...?"

"How else would a man who was hit by the Killing Curse manage to come back from the dead? Apart from what's fantasized about in fairy tales and old legends, there is only one known way to evade certain death, and that method is so evil that it is better to not think, let alone talk, about it. The Dark Lord has repeatedly alluded to the measures he took to preserve his miserable life. I— In fact, everyone who knows where to look can make the connection. It had to be a Horcrux."

"I see." Hermione whispered. "I didn't think that he told..."

"He didn't. But I can guess. If you want to defend yourself against the Dark Arts, Nightshade, then you need to know what they are, what they can achieve. And that's how I know. And now I know what Potter's task was..."

Hermione swallowed and closed her eyes. "Only a small part of it," she whispered.

"What was that?"

Hermione flinched. "This is very likely **one** of the Horcruxes. Professor Dumbledore suspected that there were six Horcruxes. With the part that resides in the body, that would mean that the soul was ripped into seven pieces—seven being the number You-Know-Who..."

"SEVEN?"

"That's what Professor Dumbledore thought, yes. From the way You-Know-Who's human traits vanished more and more and transformed him into the... thing... he is now, Professor Dumbledore surmised that his soul must have been split many times." She swallowed and stared desperately into Snape's eyes. The coldness had disappeared, and all she could see now was horror and hopelessness.

"May all the gods be merciful," he croaked hoarsely. "And Potter has to...? The three of you...? No one else knows?"

"Luna must have been told, after my, er, death, from the looks of it. And now you. No one else, no."

"The curse—Albus was trying to destroy a Horcrux when he obtained that injury, wasn't he?"

"We think so, yes. He told Harry that he'd destroyed the Peverell ring. We also think that the diary from the Chamber of Secrets was a Horcrux."

Snape looked stunned. "Lucius..."

"Yes. We think that several of the Death Eaters were each given a Horcrux for safekeeping without knowing what they were."

Snape went very pale. "That's what you think? How many have you found?"

Hermione looked at him, concerned. "Are you all right, Nundu?"

"What do you expect? I should have known... He didn't want me to know. I cannot betray what I don't know."

"Yes." Hermione took a deep breath. "Professor Dumbledore wanted to protect you. I'm certain."

"He wanted to protect the secret. It's vital that the Dark Lord doesn't know what Potter is after. Potter..." A cruel sneer replaced the hopeless look he'd shown earlier. "To entrust something so crucial to an idiot like Potter, who can't keep his most basic emotions in check." He shook his head and rubbed his temples. "How many did you find?"

Hermione's knees had gone weak; she sank down on the chair nearest to her. "Not many," she whispered. "Number one; that was the diary. Harry destroyed it. Number two was the Peverell ring; it belonged to the Gaunts, Riddle's relatives, the last descendants of Salazar Slytherin. Riddle wore the ring for some time, and then he hid it. Professor Dumbledore found it and destroyed it. Third would be the locket, but the one Professor Dumbledore thought was the Horcrux was a fake. It was hidden by Regulus Black, which cost him his life.

"Regulus? That's what he did? I should have known. I could have helped..." Snape was shaking now. He sank onto a chair opposite Hermione.

"So, now this locket here, it has to be the real one. And apparently it is protected by that crazy curse. The ring was also protected by a curse. And we have no idea how to destroy a Horcrux. From the looks of it, Harry and Ron still don't know."

Snape shook his head. "Neither do I. But we shall find out how."

"We thought that cutting or splitting the vessel would destroy the Horcrux. We don't know what exactly Professor Dumbledore did to the ring, but it was split, cracked, as if hit by a flash of lightning."

"Lightning... I wonder..." Snape looked at her in a very odd way. "And Albus... Albus must have tried to cut the ring with Gryffindor's sword. That's a very powerful weapon, and it might just have succeeded in destroying the Horcrux. But it couldn't get rid of the curse. Albus must have overlooked something; the curse on the ring nearly killed him. If I hadn't been there at the time..." He looked at the floor, swallowing.

Hermione studied him thoughtfully. She was moved by Snape's loyalty towards Dumbledore. "Wasn't Fawkes able to help?"

"Oh, yes, Fawkes came, but not even Fawkes' tears managed to counteract the curse that was spreading through Albus' body."

"Has Fawkes adopted you as his new human now? He seems to look to you for guidance."

Snape shook his head. "Fawkes is his own agent. But I'm glad that he always seems to be around when he is needed."

"Just like you are," Hermione said, smiling, and not able to completely suppress the admiration in her voice.

Snape raised an eyebrow and smirked. But his mood switched again when his glance returned to the locket on the desk. He glared at Hermione. "So you found three Horcruxes? The diary, the ring, the locket. What else do you know?"

"Riddle seems to like important artefacts. Things that once belonged to the founders. The locket was Slytherin's, too, once. And Riddle killed Hepzibah Smith, who owned Helga Hufflepuff's cup. I haven't the slightest idea where the cup could be hidden, but we suspect that it is the fourth Horcrux."

Snape nodded. He buried his head in his hands and rubbed his face. When he looked up again, Hermione saw how exhausted he looked. "That day in the Forbidden Forest... The tiara you tried to destroy..."

"It's Rowena Ravenclaw's tiara. To this day, we aren't certain if it is a Horcrux or not. We learned some spells from Bill Weasley, and the tiara didn't show anything malicious, but..."

"At least you learned something useful there..." Snape croaked. "The tiara couldn't have been a Horcrux. I saw it, as you will remember. I checked it; there were powerful protective spells on it but no Dark Magic."

"Maybe that's a disguise?"

"No. The mere concept of a Horcrux is pure evil; it would have shown. Forget the tiara. What else?"

"Nagini. From the way V... Tom Riddle always keeps that snake close to him, Professor Dumbledore suspected that Nagini is another Horcrux."

"So you still need to find..."

"Something from Ravenclaw or Gryffindor and Hufflepuff's cup. And we... I... I ran out of ideas. I have no idea where to look anymore."

Snape had closed his eyes and was breathing deeply. Slowly, he opened them again. They were glittering.

"In that case, I may be of assistance. I know where the Ravenclaw artefact is. I'm the one who was entrusted with the safekeeping of Rowena Ravenclaw's wand."

A/N: The story was completely plotted before DH was published. I'm sticking to it, regardless of the canon Horcruxes.

The Army on the March

Chapter 19 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who transfers my babble into language, sorts my random punctuation and is a good friend.

9.41. He who exercises no forethought but makes light

of his opponents is sure to be captured by them.

9.45. If a general shows confidence in his men but always

insists on his orders being obeyed, the gain will be mutual.

(Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, IX. *The Army on the March*)

"Rowena Ravenclaw's wand? **You** have Rowena Ravenclaw's wand?" Hermione asked, completely flabbergasted.

Snape stared at her with an unreadable expression. "That's what I just said."

"Merlin!" Hermione exclaimed, rolling her eyes. "There I was, all self-important and pompously guarding my big secret when it would have been much better for all of us if you had known all along." She had risen from her chair and started to pace agitatedly. "I feel like such an idiot. If only Professor Dumbledore had told you... Damn!" She looked at Snape apologetically. "I'm sorry..."

"Indeed," he said calmly. "But as touching as your little display of remorse is, Nightshade, there is a reason why Professor Dumbledore didn't tell me."

"He wanted to protect you...not just the secret." Hermione stared at him. "Bloody Hell! I shouldn't have... but then..." She looked at him miserably, not knowing what to say. "What have I done? I can't... And if you're summoned... Oh, no!"

"Stop being so silly. Do you really think that this secret would be harder to keep than that of the Underground? And don't, for a moment, think that the Underground is less important than the Horcruxes. Potter cannot fight alone, and even with the Order of the Phoenix, there won't be enough fighters to have a chance against the army of Death Eaters and Dark Creatures the Dark Lord is gathering. The Underground army is needed desperately."

"But you're in so much danger, already." Hermione was close to tears, now; her heart was hurting for him. "And now this added burden..." She shivered and sank down on the chair again, staring at the floor and hugging herself.

Snape didn't say anything, and when she looked up, she saw him looking back at her, oddly. They stared at each other, and he slowly shook his head. Hermione felt embarrassment colouring her cheeks. She'd made a fool of herself; what would he think of her now?

"There really is no need to get so agitated," Snape finally broke the awkward silence. "I shall protect this secret just like all the others," he said softly.

Hermione swallowed and tried to calm herself. Being forcefully reminded of the magnitude of the danger he was in had shaken her. She took a deep breath. "I... I'm sorry," she stammered. "It's just..." She took another deep breath. "It's just that I worry."

He shook his head and scowled. "Have you forgotten how much danger you all face when you go on missions? What's the matter with you, Nightshade?" He waved his arm in a circle. "All this here isn't some entertaining adventure or a fancy camping trip. We are soldiers who are fighting a war. I thought you understood that."

Hermione blinked and nodded. "I do..."

"Then you should be aware that our chances of surviving this whole mess are not exactly good, but we can make the difference between victory and defeat. That's what we're fighting for, and that's what makes it worthwhile."

Hermione berated herself for her emotional outburst. She wasn't afraid for herself, but now she feared for him. And her heart wanted him to survive, to be safe, and to be with her. But she knew she'd better bury these demands deeply and focus on the problems ahead. Another quivering breath cleared her head, and when she thought she could act normally again, she gave him a tentative smile.

"I'm very sorry, Nundu, but your news about the wand came a bit as a shock. What are your plans now? Where is it? Will you go and get it? How will we destroy it?"

"We shall retrieve it from its hiding place. We'll have to go to Durmstrang for that."

"We?" she asked hopefully.

"Of course, we." His lips twitched. "You don't think I'd endure your chatter and train you and then do all the work myself? I need you to come along and help. The wand is well protected. It will need two people to retrieve it safely."

"All right. When do we go?" She beamed at him.

He shook his head at her swift change of mood. "The wand is in a safe place not far from Durmstrang. It would be unwise to go there during term-time. We shall go during the Easter break. In the meantime, there is a prophecy to be spoken, and, if I'm not mistaken, another Horcrux to be found."

"Right," Hermione said. "The prophecy will buy us time because I have no idea where Helga Hufflepuff's cup could be hidden."

"We shall find out," Snape said and dismissed her.

The following Sunday, Minerva McGonagall visited Nan Guthan again. She brought news from Parvati, who had settled in perfectly and spoken the prophecy. She had done it during a Divination lesson with Slytherins and Hufflepuffs...an audience perfectly suited to spread the news far and wide.

Hermione asked after Harry, Ron and Luna and was relieved to hear that they were on the way to a complete recovery.

"Harry is very angry, though," Minerva said. "He is shouting and swearing, and he's insisting that he must go back to the forest. It's almost as if his life depended on it."

Hermione bit her lip and cast a quick glance at Snape, who frowned.

"He lost something in the forest," Hermione said. "He won't rest until he finds it. We must do something. He'll go mental if he thinks he's lost it permanently."

"Very well." Snape tapped the desk with his wand repeatedly. A heretofore unseen door opened, and a hidden drawer produced the locket. Snape took a quill from the desk and handed it to Minerva. "Can you Transfigure this into a copy of the locket?"

She raised an eyebrow, looking curious, and pursed her lips. After studying the locket from all sides, she tapped the quill with her wand a few times. An identical copy of the locket lay in front of her, only missing the fragment of Voldemort's soul, thankfully.

"Give that to Potter and ask him what it is," Snape told Minerva. "Tell him that you found it in the forest make something up he'll believe you. He won't tell you what the locket is but keep asking. Give him a hard time. That way, he won't suspect anything." He cast an amused glance towards Hermione, who scowled. She didn't like it when he spoke of Harry as if he was an irrational idiot, but she had to admit that some deception was in order, and that Harry had to believe that he had got the locket back.

"And what is the big secret behind Slytherin's locket?" Minerva asked, looking intrigued.

Snape looked at Hermione; all traces of mirth had disappeared from his eyes. He asked a silent question, got a silent answer and frowned, looking back at Minerva. "It is of utmost importance to keep it a secret, Minerva. We can't tell you. We'll take care of the real locket."

Minerva McGonagall's eyes narrowed, and she regarded them both thoughtfully. "I see," she finally grumbled. "You two of you have become quite a team, haven't you?"

She shook her head and sighed. "I'm glad that you've allowed someone to help you, Severus. I trust that you'll do what has to be done." Then she immediately changed the topic, reporting on the goings-on in the outside world.

"We have a bit of a problem with the Ministry," she said. "The three young people's condition couldn't be kept a secret...not with so many parents coming and going, Aurors protecting the school and all that. Word got out to Scrimgeour, and he sent Percy Weasley as a 'security supervisor'. I am sad to say that Mr. Weasley has lost nothing of his, ah, self-importance."

"He's still a pompous arse, you mean," Hermione muttered under her breath, which brought her a wide-eyed glare from Snape and an amused snort from Minerva.

"I'd have thought he'd have learned a thing or two after his mother's murder," Hermione muttered. "I can't understand how he can still act as the Minister's lackey."

"To be fair, he came to me and assured me that he'd do anything to help keeping the school open, but I'm not sure if I can trust him. Anyway, with Percy snooping around, we need to be extra careful with Order meetings, and I'd advise you to come in disguise when you enter Hogwarts' grounds from now on, Severus."

He nodded, and she continued with her report. Apparently, Sibyll Trelawney was such a success in the Muggle world, Sabrina was thinking of expanding her studio, already. Sibyll Trelawney was on her way to becoming a very rich woman. A small part of these unexpected riches flowed to the Underground since Sibyll was listed as a member of a charitable organization that was making fictitious transactions for it.

"There is more news," Minerva said and smiled. "Perry and Parvati are in love, and I'm happy for them."

Snape flinched. "That could complicate things."

"Why?" Hermione was surprised.

"Because Perry would have a very hard time should it really become necessary to have Miss Patil kidnapped. And he'll be a target because the Dark Lord can blackmail the fake Trelawney with him just like you were a target, Nightshade, incidentally."

"What do you mean?"

Snape frowned. "You mean you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"You were to be killed because the Dark Lord was under the impression that you were Potter's love interest. Bellatrix and Wormtail professed that they were certain about your attachment after they, ah, met you at the Malfoy residence. You must have been quite impressive for Bellatrix to notice you."

"Oh," was all Hermione could think of to say.

"Yes," Snape said and smirked. "And your death should have been devastating for Potter. The Dark Lord sees grief for a loved one as a weakness and plans to use that grief against Potter. Your Weasley friends are watched closely by the Order and the Underground; they are in grave danger because of this."

"Oh," Hermione said again.

"However, you're not really dead nor were you Potter's girlfriend, were you?" Snape's glance was calculating.

"No, never. We are more like siblings, like family. We've never been attracted to each other romantically."

Snape's eyes glittered, but he didn't say anything and merely nodded as a reply.

Minerva McGonagall looked from one to the other with an amused twinkle in her eyes that was oddly reminiscent of Albus Dumbledore.

During the next three weeks, life in the Underground progressed at its usual pace. Snape had been gone for an entire week once again. When he came back, he looked pale and strained. Parvati's prophecy had been relayed, and Snape's steadfast advice at being patient and not rushing into things had been rewarded and praised by Voldemort. This praise, however, brought on challenge after challenge from Bellatrix Lestrange, who kept pushing for action. As she'd been watching Snape's every move, he hadn't dared return to the Underground, especially since Wormtail had taken to toadying to Lestrange as of late.

Hermione was relieved when Snape returned safely. She found it harder and harder to conceal her worries, although Snape seemed to be pleased with her progress in Occlumency and Legilimency. They often spoke to each other through Legilimency, now, and had found an efficient way of communicating with their thoughts alone.

The search for the next Horcrux had not progressed, however. Hermione and Snape had discussed Horcrux theories several times but still didn't have a clue where Helga Hufflepuff's cup could be hidden and which Death Eater was guarding it.

In the meantime, spring had arrived, and Easter was just around the corner. Snape was about to go to Durmstrang with Voldemort's approval, claiming he wanted to visit his old Potions master and get a look at some of the ancient Dark Potions texts in the old man's possession. With Bellatrix and Wormtail snooping, he didn't want to risk being seen travelling with Hermione, even in her Polyjuiced disguise; hence, they would travel independently.

Hermione took a plane to Oslo and then used a Portkey and Apparition to get to Bodø where she stayed in a Muggle hotel. Snape would pick her up there after having ensured that the passage to the wand's hiding place was safe.

When he finally arrived, Hermione was bored and irritable. Although the calendar told her that it was spring, here in Norway's Nordland it was still quite cold. Hermione cast warming charm after warming charm and still felt the cold seeping under her clothes, right to her bones.

"When you said to me you see no difference, what were you referring to?" she asked. They had not agreed on a password or pass phrase; instead, Snape had suggested she ask him a question about their time together at school...something a random Death Eater intruder wasn't likely to know.

"Your teeth," Snape's smooth voice drawled from the other side of the door.

Relieved, Hermione opened the door a crack and looked into his eyes, casting a nonverbal *Legilimens*. In an instant, she opened the door wide. This was Snape, all right. There was no disguise that could mask or mimic that particular mind structure. For someone who had been in Snape's mind as often as she had, there was no mistaking his identity. This was something Death Eaters wouldn't know. When another mind was only ever entered forcefully and with the intention to invade and spy or force the thoughts out of the victim, those distinct identifying traces wouldn't become discernible. Only with peaceful, amiable and tolerated contact was it possible to get to know someone else's mind so intimately.

"I'm glad you made it. Let's get that bloody wand, and then I'm out of here," Hermione growled.

Snape's eyes gleamed. "And there was me thinking you'd be thrilled to get the chance of seeing Durmstrang," he said silkily.

"In summer, perhaps," she grouched.

"The climate in the Swartisen area is rather mild for the latitude. It gets worse before it gets better," he said mysteriously. But before she could ask what he meant, he had taken her hand and Disapparated.

"You want me to go in there?" Hermione was bewildered. They were standing in a small, ice-filled valley between two glaciers. One of the glaciers had a large overhang looming over the valley, and just underneath the icy roof, a small opening appeared and disappeared at regular intervals. She would never have seen it if Snape hadn't shown her what it was. The whole area around Durmstrang was under Muggle-Repelling Charms, but in this valley, a few Broom-barrier and concealment spells had been added for good measure.

"Watch your step; the ice is slippery," Snape murmured as he levitated Hermione up to the small opening. She turned to float him up as well but stopped in her tracks, looked around and gasped. Her elevated position gave her a clear view over the second glacier. The glacier looked like a mountain of glass with a small castle on top. Hermione stood mesmerized. It looked as if it had come straight out of a fairy tale, but then, the whole magical world seemed straight out of a fairy tale. And Durmstrang had to be the origin of the many tales about castles on glass or ice mountains. It looked unapproachable and mysterious. The ice was shimmering in a bright turquoise blue, casting an eerie light on the school, almost as if it were submerged in the ocean.

"Nightshade, what are you waiting for?" Snape called from below.

Hermione shook herself back to reality. "I'm sorry," she said while she levitated him up. "You didn't prepare me for that sight." She motioned towards the castle.

"Rather dramatic, I agree," Snape murmured and took the view in for a moment. "But we have work to do. Let's go," he urged. Taking Hermione's arm, he drew her towards the opening, which turned out to be a large cave entrance and not the narrow gap it had seemed to be from below.

Hesitantly, Hermione let herself be led inside the cave, carefully watching her step. "And now?"

"Now we follow that tunnel over there," Snape said, waving his wand and revealing another opening.

"I see that you have an affinity for Underground settings," Hermione quipped. "This almost looks familiar."

"Doesn't it just?" Snape sounded amused and led her on.

They followed the tunnel for what seemed like an endless amount of time to Hermione. The air around them was very cold; her breath formed a steamy cloud in front of her. The light inside the glacier was clear and blue, getting deeper and more mysterious the further in they moved. Despite the cold, Hermione felt completely at ease. The whole atmosphere was one of deep and impenetrable tranquillity and peace. As if by an unspoken agreement, Snape and Hermione didn't talk loudly; the little communication that was necessary was either done in a whisper or through Legilimency.

Finally, they arrived at another entrance, which led into a wide cavern. Hermione wondered if that was still part of the glacier or if they were now in a real cave in the mountains. After looking around, she decided that it had to be a rock cave since stalagmites were growing towards huge stalactites hanging from the roof, which in some cases were forming glistening pillars of wet limestone. The light, however, was still blue. The centre of the cave seemed to contain a frozen lake; the surface was smooth, slippery and shiny as if polished. In the middle of the frozen lake was a large rock, just a bit too small to be called an island. The icy floor was glittering and sparkling in various shades of blue and purple. The rock in the middle was bathed in the blue light.

"Bloody hell, I'd forgotten how sickeningly romantic this cave is," Snape muttered, looking around. Puffs of condensated breath were coming from his mouth as he spoke.

"A bit cold for a tête-à-tête but otherwiseno bad," Hermione said.

"Believe me, Nightshade, the witch who comes here for a 'tête-à-tête' with me won't be complaining about the cold."

Hermione blushed. "Hm, too bad, then, that you haven't found her yet, isn't it?"

"Who says that I haven't?"

Hermione's face fell. "Touché," she muttered.

Snape smirked, his eyes glittering. "We shall have to fly to that rock. That's where the wand is," he murmured silkily.

Hermione breathed deeply. She should leave the flirting to people who knew how to do it. She had things to do and problems to solve. She blinked a few times, suppressed her blush, and finally looked at Snape questioningly and slightly embarrassedly. "Why don't we simply Summon the wand?"

"It's hidden in that rock. Forceful retrieval would destroy it," Snape said.

Hermione swallowed. "All right, then. Let's get going."

"Please take care not to touch the surface," Snape warned. "There are Dementors under the ice..." He pointed at some shadows under the ice...shadows that Hermione had taken for a random play of light and colours. But when she looked closely, she saw the unmistakable shapes of Dementors, lying motionless under the smooth and cold surface.

"They are sleeping, in suspension. It is too cold here, even for Dementors," Snape explained. "But touching the surface will wake them up."

"Great," Hermione murmured. "Couldn't you have chosen a simpler protection for that bloody wand?"

"It wasn't in my hands to do it," Snape murmured. "The Dark Lord gave me precise instructions on how to protect the wand."

"Is he checking on these things?" Hermione asked. That thought had suddenly appeared and terrified her greatly.

"Not to my knowledge. The Death Eaters would know if he were aware of the missing Horcruxes; he'd be furious, completely unhinged. But just to be on the safe side, we'll leave a duplicate."

"Thank Merlin for small favours," Hermione sighed. "What do you want me to do?"

Snape took two shrunken brooms out of his pocket and enlarged them by dropping a few drops of a potion on them. He handed one broom to Hermione.

"We fly. The Broom-barrier spells don't reach this far in. Are you ready?"

"Sure." Gathering her courage, Hermione mounted her broom and followed Snape out over the frozen lake to the small island in the middle. Snape was already standing there, offering her a hand. There was barely enough room to stand. Snape half-leaned over a rock outcrop, steadying Hermione with one hand, while she dismounted.

"Take out your wand; you'll need to cast a warming charm on both of us from time to time," he whispered. "It'll take all my attention to retrieve the wand." He let go of her, giving her room to reach into her pocket. Hermione felt an icy chill rising from the ground up into her feet and legs, like an icy hand gripping at her ankles.

"All right," she said and cast the charm. She felt the cold retreat from her legs but didn't really feel any warmth from the spell, just the absence of the cold.

"Do not cast the spell until it is strictly necessary. Too much change in temperature can wake the Dementors."

"What happens if I don't cast the spell?" Hermione asked and shivered.

"We'll be slowly Petrified, from the feet up. When the cold reaches your wand arm, there'll be no release until someone finds you."

"I see... That's just like it was with that lake where the locket was...or should have been. And that someone... that would be You-Know-Who, wouldn't it? He'd want to see who'd tried to steal his treasures and then punish them, wouldn't he?"

"Yes," Snape confirmed in a low voice and took a phial and a small knife out of his pocket. He poured a few drops of the contents of the phial onto a small indentation in the rock in front of him. With a loud and menacing hiss, green mist rose up from the spot.

A quick stroke with the knife produced a small cut on his left middle finger. Squeezing, he pressed three drops of blood out of the wound and onto the potion. The hissing increased, turning to a gurgle and sputter that resembled a menacing snarl.

The mist was now surrounding both of them and had turned a dark burgundy red. A softly murmured incantation finally turned the hissing and gurgling into a rasping and grinding sound, and slowly, slowly, something emerged from the stone. An elongated shape, surrounded by a bronze-coloured glow was now floating three inches above the rock outcrop. It was Rowena Ravenclaw's wand, and in all likelihood a Horcrux.

Hermione watched in fascination, almost forgetting to cast the warming spell. Only after she felt the cold reaching towards her heart did she renew it.

Snape took the wand in both hands and continued to chant his incantation. When the glow faded, he looked up and presented the wand to Hermione, who took it.

"That's that," he said. "Now for the replacement."

Hermione reached into her pocket and took out a spare wand. She studied the Ravenclaw wand thoroughly and then Transfigured the spare wand into an identical replica.

Snape inserted the duplicate wand into the hole in the rock and reversed the retrieval procedure by first singing the enchantment backwards, then adding some more of his blood and finally closing the stone with a drop of the potion from his phial. A final hiss, and the multicoloured mists vanished. The rock outcrop lay before them unblemished, as if nothing had happened.

With chattering teeth, Hermione followed Snape back to the stalactite ring and the cave entrance. The Ravenclaw wand was safely stashed away in a small pouch with Muggle-Repelling Charms on it. Hermione would keep the wand, and on her flight back, that pouch would be completely ignored during the luggage check. Her own wand was usually explained as being a gift for a relative: a handcrafted, conductor's baton.

Three days later, they met in the office cave of Nan Guthan again.

"I give up. I'm out of ideas. I don't have the slightest idea where the cup could be hidden." Hermione looked defeated.

"Neither does Potter, from the looks of it. Perry says that he is restless and looking for fights with the Slytherins again. He's teamed him up with Pansy Parkinson in the Defence sessions."

"That doesn't sound very promising."

"Both Pansy and Potter work together grudgingly. They may even learn to respect each other, who knows?"

"Really?"

"It seems to be working rather well, although Potter remains restless."

"But what do we do, short of going straight to You-Know-Who and asking where he hid the blasted thing?"

"We'll go over what we know again. And again, and again until we find a clue."

"But we've done that, already, and more than once..."

"If you have a better suggestion....?"

"You know damn well that I don't." Hermione rolled her eyes and glared at Snape, who was sitting opposite her in the office cave.

Snape shrugged and pinched the bridge of his nose. "The ring was in the ruins of the Gaunt House in Little Hangleton...the town where the Dark Lord was conceived and where his father lived.

"The locket was hidden in a cave he found as a young boy while living in the orphanage.

"The diary was hidden with Lucius Malfoy, one of his Death Eaters.

"The wand was hidden with me, one of his Death Eaters.

"The snake isn't hidden, but it is always close to him, and it used to nurture him; it is part of his new body.

"Where does the cup fit in?"

"It could either be hidden with yet another of the Death Eaters or in some place of significance from his past, or both." Hermione suggested, not for the first time.

"He gave me the wand for safekeeping as a reward for killing Albus Dumbledore." Snape swallowed. His voice broke as it always did at the mention of the old wizard. "He gave Lucius the diary as a reward for the many financial transactions Lucius conducted with the Ministry in the Dark Lord's favour."

"Are you absolutely certain about that?" Hermione asked, "Because it does show a kind of pattern."

"I am as certain as I can be about my own, ah, reward. And Lucius proudly told me all the details after the Basilisk incident. He didn't quite expect the punishment he received when the Dark Lord found out that he was responsible for the diary's destruction."

"I see." Hermione nodded. "The locket was with Regulus Black, but he wasn't supposed to hide it in his house; it was meant to be kept in that cave with the Inferi."

"Regulus appeared to be a very devout young follower. More importantly, he was from a very old pure-blood family...from a very rich and influential family. Another Black. Maybe that's why he was, ah, honoured."

"Malfoy, Black, Snape: three of his trusted followers, or so he thinks. What about Barty Crouch and Bellatrix Lestrange? What about Wormtail? Wouldn't Wormtail have deserved a reward for bringing him back?"

"Wormtail was rewarded with his new silver hand and with the rank he now has. He is always very close to the Dark Lord. Barty Crouch... possible. Bellatrix... just as possible. Neither of them ever renounced him, not even in Azkaban. He must have given the cup to one of them."

Snape paused and looked stricken all of a sudden.

"It has to be Bellatrix. I should have realised that earlier. She mentioned something...just a fragment...when she came to my house with her sister. When I made the Unbreakable Vow, you know?"

Hermione nodded. Snape had told her the tale after she'd inquired about the Malfoys being in the Underground.

"Bellatrix said... 'The Dark Lord has, in the past, entrusted me with his most precious'... that has to be it!"

Hermione was all excited, now. "Yes. Absolutely. But where does she keep it? How did you choose where to hide the wand?"

"The Dark Lord suggested I find somewhere in Durmstrang. The school has great significance for him. When he was travelling, in his early years, he spent a lot of time there, studying everything about Dark Arts their library could offer. He told me as much when he sent me there to apprentice with Master Dahlgren."

"Didn't Professor Dumbledore know that? He never told Harry any of this."

"I don't think it ever came up when I gave him my reports. And since I didn't know about the significance..."

"All right, then. We have a pretty good idea about who safeguards the cup. The 'where' would have been determined by You-Know-Who, wouldn't it?"

"Possibly. Lucius wasn't told to hide the diary somewhere specific, not to my knowledge."

"Perhaps the Malfoys may have an idea about Bellatrix' hiding place?"

Snape shot her a surprised glance. "Feasible, quite feasible. That may actually lead to something. Narcissa and Bellatrix were never very close, but Bellatrix might have been tempted to boast..."

"So we go and ask the Malfoys?"

"Without revealing what we really want to know, yes. We'll go as soon as possible. Be ready, Nightshade. You're going to see the Creswell Crag caves; they are the most beautiful of all the Underground's dwellings."

A week later, they were on their way to the northeast border of Derbyshire to a group of caves situated in deep ravines. The ravines called 'Creswell Craggs' are a popular place for Muggles and were, at the same time, a perfect hiding place for the Underground. Hermione had read all about the place; it was not only outstandingly picturesque and beautiful but contained artefacts from the earliest human settlements in Britain and was saturated with ancient magic. The caves inhabited by the Underground were hidden from Muggle explorers, and the ancient magic in the area made the tracing of residual magic impossible.

The books didn't give the place credit, Hermione thought when they slowly made their way through the cave called Robin Hood Cave. There was a group of Muggle visitors in the cave, and Hermione and Snape blended in effortlessly, appearing as a pair of Muggle tourists.

"Death Eaters would avoid this place, wouldn't they?" Hermione asked while she marvelled at the beauty of the cave.

"The Dark Lord isn't interested in Muggles, and he doesn't seek out places where they congregate, unless he wants to kill them," Snape murmured while he led Hermione to the other end of the large cave.

They entered a corridor leading to a group of several half-hidden, smaller chambers and waited until there were no Muggles present.

It took a while before they were completely alone; the Muggles were shown something in another section of the cave by the guide. It was eerily silent, and Hermione could hear her heartbeat...and there was a popping and cracking sound in her ears, almost as if someone had Apparated.

She heard Snape draw a sharp breath. He had heard it, too. Someone had indeed Apparated in the vicinity. They quickly Disillusioned each other. Carefully peeking around the corner of the chamber down the corridor, Hermione saw two figures zooming out of a Disillusionment Charm, wands in hand, staring around in confusion.

"Muggles," the female figure hissed. "We've arrived in an anthill crawling with stinking Muggles." She slowly lowered her wand. Hermione had recognized her immediately. The woman was Bellatrix Lestrangle.

"He has to be around here somewhere, Bella," the man who was scuttling around her wheedled.

Hermione knew the man, too. It was Peter Pettigrew.

Snape's hand touched Hermione's arm, and she felt his breath on her face. His nose briefly touched her cheek, then he seemed to find what he was looking for and whispered in her ear, "Stay here, under the charm. Don't let yourself be seen. I shall take care of this. Wait until I return here."

"You and your idiotic ideas," Lestrangle had continued with her rant. "A map to trace Snape's wand...and he could be anywhere from Sheffield to Manchester! That's how precise that map of yours is."

"But, Bella," the man whimpered, "I know how to make these maps, and I traced the use of our Lord's other names to Snape's dot on the map. That should allow us to close in..."

"That is your trace, you nitwit? Sending us to a Muggle dunghill and no Snape in sight? Not much use, that trace, is it?"

"But I am certain that my trace works, Bella. I just need to link it to something else he says often, something more Snape-specific. Just be patient, and we'll find out what he is doing when he isn't with the others."

"I shall take these matters into my own hands from now on," Lestrangle screeched. "A Muggle heaps if any self-respecting..." Lestrangle stopped talking. A very thoughtful look had spread over her face. "Wait a minute," she murmured and cast a spell. Nothing happened. She murmured a few words and touched the cave's walls with both hands as if she were searching for something.

"What are you doing, Bella?" Wormtail simpered.

"What does it look like, idiot? I'm trying to find traces of magic, of course. But there's so much residual ancient magic, here... Cunning, quite cunning. He's hiding his tracks, the sly bastard."

"You're not talking about me, are you? My parents were married," a silky voice drawled, and Bellatrix turned with a jump and a low shriek.

Snape was standing just behind her, arms crossed, glaring down at her and Wormtail. "My, my, aren't you two a cosy couple? Tired of Rodolphus after all these years, Bellatrix? And Wormtail, of all people, is your new paramour? How very odd..."

Bellatrix looked furious and tried to get her composure back. "Don't try to distract me, Snape. What are you doing here?"

"That is a question only the Dark Lord has a right to ask me. I might add that he will be less than pleased to hear that you two have been checking up on me, jeopardizing my work."

"What work?" Wormtail threw in. "We've been watching you jump around randomly until we could finally pinpoint you here."

"I see that you've tried to copy the invention of your old, ah, friends, Wormtail. The ones you betrayed so lovingly." Snape's voice was dangerously soft. "The Dark Lord will be very interested in your achievement. It begs the question: why are you not using it for something more useful than following me around?"

With a shriek, Wormtail gaped as the map flew out of his hands, having silently been Summoned by Snape. "I shall keep this," Snape sneered.

"I don't trust you, Snape," Bellatrix said shrilly. "Someone has to watch you."

"Then I suggest you ask the Dark Lord to accompany me on my tasks. I take it you can blend in effortlessly with Muggles?"

Bellatrix made a face as if she wanted to throw up.

"No? Well, then you won't be of much use to me. When I gather information for the Dark Lord, I have to travel in many different disguises, and my half-Muggle background is of great advantage to him. Or how else did you think I managed to hide myself from the Ministry and the Order of the Phoenix and still continue my work for our Master?"

"I didn't think..."

"Indeed, you didn't think," Snape hissed, now looking very dangerous. "Apparating around the country, following me into Muggle territory, risking attracting attention, risking recognition. Two of the most wanted Death Eaters just going on a wild goose chase. No, the Dark Lord won't be pleased, Bellatrix. I'm certain of that."

Wormtail looked mutinous and opened his mouth to talk, but Bellatrix, who was still glowering at Snape, raised a hand. "I admit that you have a point, Snape. But there's no need to inform the Dark Lord. I'll do that myself." She smirked. "And he'd better confirm what you've just told me, otherwise there'll be a few questions asked by the one who has the right to ask you."

"Do that, Bellatrix, and now get out of here before the Muggles see you and your, ah, companion. Your attire isn't exactly current Muggle fashion."

"Just don't forget that I'm watching you, Snape," LeStrange hissed before she Disapparated, being followed by Wormtail a second later.

When Snape returned to her hiding place, Hermione let out a long, shivering breath. "Damn, that could have gone very wrong."

"Indeed," Snape said, ending her Disillusionment. "We have to warn the Underground immediately. The Creswell Craggs caves have to be evacuated. Every trace of wizards and witches having lived here has to vanish completely. And we have to get out of here. Now."

Posing as Muggle tourists again, they crossed the large entrance cave and stepped out into the ravine. "North, we have to go North, and we will have to walk most of the time," Snape said, and with a frown, Hermione followed him.

Once again, she was touched by the beauty of the gorge. Vertical cliffs were rising high on either side of them. The cliffs were overhung with ivy and presented a luxurious growth of hazel, ash, maple and stunted oak trees. They followed the river and the artificial lake that filled the bottom of the ravine until they reached an area away from the main attractions. Snape pulled Hermione into a grove of young ash trees and took his wand out. At the same time, he let out the low whistle with which he usually called Fierce Lady Mouse Hunter.

Hermione watched him with a worried frown. "Can we be certain that they aren't around still, hiding somewhere?"

"Quite certain," Snape replied. "Bellatrix will go to the Dark Lord immediately, I'm sure, and Wormtail will follow suit. That doesn't mean that they won't return; that's why we had to get away from there so quickly."

Hermione nodded. "They can't see where you are without the map, but the trace on that name will still be active, won't it?"

Snape sighed and looked annoyed. "Yes, I shall have to avoid speaking that name. And there should be as little magic as possible outside the ancient area."

"Right," Hermione said. "But an evacuation of the whole area, is that really necessary? Won't people be terribly upset to have to give up the caves?"

"They will do as they are ordered," Snape said and held out his arm for his owl.

"And if they don't?"

"They will. Believe me, they will. I have full confidence in them. They know the routine. They have learned the necessary discipline, and they will obey their orders." He whispered something to Lady Mouse and sent her on her way again. Then he pulled his portrait-locket out of his shirt and whispered an order to its inhabitants.

He glanced sideways at Hermione while he tucked the locket away again and murmured, *"Therefore soldiers must be treated in the first instance with humanity, but kept under control by means of iron discipline. This is a certain road to victory."*

Hermione sighed and nodded. No point in arguing with Sun Tzu, was there?

"Please cast your Patronus, Nightshade, and send it to Bee with a message. She can inform the other caves and prepare emergency shelter for the Creswell Craggs group. She knows the details."

"All right," Hermione said and took out her wand. Quickly glancing around to ensure that they were still alone, she summoned a happy memory and cast the Patronus Charm.

It didn't work. There was a silvery mist, and then her otter appeared but only in a very instable and translucent form. Almost immediately, it transformed into something else and then vanished completely.

"Sorry, no idea why that's acting up..." Hermione muttered, wondering about Snape's scowl. She'd have to think about a happier memory. With all her might, she remembered dancing with Snape.

"Expecto Patronum!" The mist was much stronger this time, but the otter still wavered and transformed. It changed into something with antlers? A buck? Hermione started and almost lost her wand. The silvery animal solidified for a brief moment but then changed back into the otter. This time, the Patronus remained stable, and Hermione could give it her orders.

"I really don't know..." she began explaining but stopped when she saw Snape's face. He sneered menacingly, his brows knotted and his eyes piercing hers.

"My, my, you should have told me that you're in love with Potter, after all," he snarled. "That can complicate things."

Hermione blushed furiously. Of all the idiotic things to happen. Her Patronus had to choose this time and place to adapt its shape to her heart's desire. She sighed. There was no way around it. If the truth had to be revealed, so be it. She blushed some more and closed her eyes. "I'm not in love with Harry," she ground out.

"But your Patronus... I saw a stag..."

"It was a buck, not a stag."

"There is no one but... Bloody hell!"

So, *that's that*, Hermione thought, flinched and carefully peered at Snape through slitted eyes. He stared at her, unbelieving and astonished. Slowly his lips formed an 'O', then his expression became cold and unreadable again.

"Are you meaning to say that you care about me?"

"And if I do?" Hermione raised her chin defiantly and swallowed. "Go ahead, laugh. Call me a silly girl. Send me back to the cave."

She closed her eyes not wanting to see his surprise turn into scorn. Startled, she opened them again when he grabbed her upper arms and slightly shook her. He looked into her eyes, searchingly, questioningly.

She just stared back, swallowing a few times; fear, embarrassment and trust were chasing each other on her face.

His eyes widened, and he slightly shook his head.

"I cannot spout sweet nothings, Nightshade," he said. ****"But you know what I am. You hear nothing but the truth from me. I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman would have borne it.*** I haven't seen you as a silly girl or a child for quite some time, now."

They stared into each other's eyes and suddenly their lips met; Hermione couldn't have said who started the kiss. For one glorious moment, Severus kissed her with all the intensity and passion she knew he'd possess. But just before she thought her heart would burst with happiness and excitement, he stopped abruptly. Lips pressed together, he ended the kiss tenderly, but chastely.

"I can't do this," he whispered.

She looked at him, confused and hurt. His eyes were cold again, like bottomless black tunnels.

"I see," she choked, forcing her tears back. "I am sorry..." She hung her head. "I shouldn't have..." A bright scarlet flushed her face; she didn't know where to look in her embarrassment. "It won't happen again. I'm really, really..."

"Stop it," Severus said very softly, lifting her chin with two fingers. "You seem to be misunderstanding something here..."

"What's there to misunderstand..." She flushed even more. "I made an idiot of myself, and you brought me back to reality."

"That's not the reason." A faint sparkle shone in his eyes. "I can't do it because I don't dare get involved..."

"With me? But you were involved with Bee..." Her eyes flashed in anger and confusion.

"What Bee and I had together was comfort, a release of tension, you know that. Neither of us wanted more, or expected more. This is different..."

"It is?" she asked breathlessly, a faint spark of hope in her heart. "Why can't I help you release the tension, then?"

He looked at her for a long time, his fingers still on her face, softly caressing her skin. "Are you certain? Is that really what you want?"

She nodded, eyes shining. He briefly closed his eyes.

"You must be deluded," he said hoarsely before his lips caught hers again.

This time there was no hesitation. The kiss progressed rapidly from the gentle and tender pressure of lips on lips to the cautious nibbling of his teeth on her lower lip to a thorough entwining and exploring of tongues and mouths.

Hermione felt his grip tighten. Her own arms had found their way around his neck, and one of her hands was buried in his hair, massaging his scalp softly. Being so close to him made her feel dizzy. She had filled her senses with his touch and smell once already, weeks ago, when they had danced, but kissing him was so much better than that. She leaned into the embrace, pressing herself closer to him.

He was gently sucking on her lower lip; his hands had wandered from her waist to her hips, and he pulled her firmly against him. She felt his erection, hard and insistent between them, and instinctively ground her hips against him. He sighed softly into her mouth, which made her shudder. She wanted to touch his skin right *now*. Her hands roamed and tugged at the collar of his shirt, trying to find a place where she could sneak her hand under the fabric.

He caught her hand and pressed it to his chest. Hermione noticed with surprise and no little satisfaction that his heart was beating the same rapid beat as hers. She was having such an effect on him? She ground her hips more firmly against him and raised a leg, half-straddling his thigh and rocking against it. Closer, she wanted to get closer. He shuddered and broke the kiss but did not let her go.

They stared at each other, both breathing hard. "As much as I would like to continue, right here and now, we can't. We have to get going," he whispered huskily. He cupped her cheeks, looked into her eyes and gently entered her mind. Hermione cast Legilimency on him, too, and felt, or rather, saw, two entwined bodies. The emotions she felt emanating from him were trust, warmth and overwhelming passion. He was more open and vulnerable than she had ever felt him before in her mind, but she could sense that he was still holding something back.

Nodding and sighing disappointedly, Hermione kissed him again, deeply, but not quite as passionately as before. Then she reluctantly stepped away from his arms. "You are right," she whispered. "We have to go."

Severus looked at her with a half-smile, his eyes glittering daringly and dangerously. "Understand that this is only postponed, not abandoned."

She swallowed and smiled dazedly. "Understood."

"Do you have your emergency gear?"

"Of course."

Each of them took a tiny, shrunken backpack out of their pockets, enlarged it with a drop of a potion and checked its contents. They shouldered their packs; Severus took Hermione's hand, and they started their hike north.

Naturally, Severus didn't hold Hermione's hand during all the time they walked, nor did she expect him to. Severus Snape publicly holding hands was an idea so foreign, so outlandish, that it didn't even occur to Hermione that he could do such a thing. Nevertheless, he touched her often. There were little touches on her elbows, shoulders or lower back while they walked. There were smirks, small smiles, raised eyebrows and stealthy glances. Hermione noticed all this, but she was still so excited and elated from his kisses that she walked at his side in a daze. She would have liked to ask a million questions and talk about a million things, but she couldn't. Everything was still so very unreal.

"Where, exactly, are we going?" she asked after a while when her head had become a bit clearer, and she was taking in her surroundings again. They were walking on a well-trodden hiking trail, following the lake at the bottom of the gorge. The trail led them east and later Northeast. The surrounding landscape was stunningly beautiful with

the gorge's white limestone cliffs and the overhanging roots and branches. The fragrance of flowering trees and shrubs, the smell of warm sunshine on dry earth and the acoustic racket made by the many songbirds in the area conveyed a sense of completeness and harmony Hermione had seldom experienced in the past. Nothing mattered but the moment. The warmth emanated by the man who was walking closely at her side, and who was touching her from time to time, made her feel completely at peace with the world, yet, at the same time, alert and tense like a spring waiting to be released. At this moment in time, Hermione was completely happy.

"This is the Robin Hood trail," Severus murmured softly. "We'll follow it through the gorge and over the fields all the way to Worksop. There's an Underground safe house there from where the evacuation will be organized. But until we get there, we'll have to avoid using magic. No foolish wand-waving." He smirked.

Hermione smiled and nodded absentmindedly. She could have listened to his voice for hours and still not get enough of it. The low, silky sound seemed to vibrate in her skull and to caress her from the inside. She felt like she was in a dream.

They walked for three hours, mostly in silence, when a large crossroads and a cluster of buildings in the distance indicated the proximity of a city or town. The dream-like, wondrous hike would end very soon, much too soon for Hermione's taste. She didn't want to go back to reality; she wanted to have Severus to herself just for a little while longer. As soon as they were back among people, the Underground and the evacuation of the Creswell Crag group would need all his attention, and Hermione wasn't certain if there would be any time left for her, then...left for them, together. She slowed down, looking around hesitantly.

"What is it?"

"Could we take a short break, over there, in that wood?" Hermione pointed towards a small stand of birch trees.

"We can spare a few minutes," Severus agreed and followed her into the shade of the trees.

Once out of sight of the trail, Hermione looked at him insecurely and asked, "May I kiss you again?"

Severus' eyebrows shot up to his hairline, and he stared at her in surprise for a brief moment. Then a low chuckle started to rumble in his chest, and his eyes sparkled. "That's not something you need to ask permission for, you know?" He raised both hands to her face and cupped her cheeks. She leaned into the touch, watching him through half-closed eyes. His lips descended on hers in a slow and tender kiss.

Hermione sighed, opened her mouth and licked his lips gently. The taste and feel of him, the way his warm hands felt on her hot face, his scent...a clean, soapy smell mixed with a bit of sweat from a brisk walk on a warm day all of it threatened to overwhelm her, just as it had when they had kissed for the first time.

A tendril of Severus' hair was tickling her nose; Severus' lips parted, and his tongue welcomed hers and sucked it into his own mouth. This elicited a low groan from her and a soft growl from him. Hermione could have lost herself in his kisses, but in the back of her mind a voice nagged, "No time!" Reluctantly, Hermione pulled away and broke the kiss before it could become too passionate.

"Thank you. I just wanted to be certain that this is real and not a dream," she whispered breathlessly while she looked at him, still insecure.

He exhaled sharply and drew her closer, hugging her tightly. "This is as real as we can make it, Nightshade. It's as real as the Underground, as real as our pledged lives." He kissed her temples and softly rubbed her back.

Hermione had her head pressed to his chest and was listening to the steady rhythm of his heart while he rocked her gently. As real as their pledged lives. That didn't sound as if he expected to live beyond the war. And that's why he agreed to get involved, she thought. Under different circumstances, he'd never have lowered his barriers enough to let her get close. Not for the first time, Hermione was glad that the Underground existed and that she had managed to gain Severus' trust. She sighed. She would have to give him time to understand that her idea of the future might be slightly different from his. In the meantime, she'd better help make certain that their pledged lives were bought back completely and fight for a life beyond the war for both of them. Her arms tightened around him, and she felt, more than heard, how he sighed.

"At least, I hope it's not a dream, you know," Severus murmured into her hair. "Because otherwise, one of these days while I'm kissing you, you might wake up and realise that you're snogging the Greasy Git."

Hermione laughed in surprise. "Will not!"

They grinned at each other and went on their way.

A/N: A last apology to Jane Austen. I'm done with the Emma quotes (between asterisks).

Thanks to the insanejournal community, snapedom, for helping me pinpoint where Durmstrang has to be. Here is the discussion, in case you're interested: <http://asylums.insanejournal.com/snapedom/117372.html>

Terrain

Chapter 20 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who transfers my babble into language, sorts my random punctuation and is a good friend.

This chapter is dedicated to Firestormpwr, aka Lonewolf, and each and every one of my readers and reviewers who've waited patiently for 'interaction'. I hope you'll be satisfied. Pun intended.

For those of you who don't like to read a bit of gratuitous smut, skip everything that comes past *Now*, the thought thrummed through Hermione's head...—you won't miss anything plot-related.

Chapter 20 – Terrain

10.21. The natural formation of the country is the soldier's best ally; but a power of estimating the adversary, of controlling the forces of victory, and of shrewdly calculating

difficulties, dangers and distances, constitutes the test of a great general.

10.25. Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look upon them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, X. Terrain)

The romantic, dream-like walk with Severus hadn't stopped Hermione's feet from hurting by the time they'd finally reached their destination: a small house in Shireoaks, a suburb west of Worksop. After knocking several times in vain, Severus took his portrait locket out from under his robes and pulled on a clasp. The locket opened, but instead of the expected family portrait, it revealed a hidden compartment containing a key.

"A false bottom? Muggle tricks?" Hermione asked, astonished.

Severus nodded and took out the key to open the door. Curiously, Hermione followed him into the house, but there was nothing to be seen. No one was there; the house was empty. Softly swearing under his breath, Severus went to the garage and uttered even more expletives.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked.

"I wanted to take the caravan that is normally stationed here, but they must have used it to evacuate. They've started already, which is good, but we need to know where Lucius and Narcissa are." He looked at her pensively for a moment and then pulled her towards him and into another breath-stealing kiss.

When they broke apart, gasping, he murmured, "And that's a part of the reason why we can't stay here and take care of our unfinished business."

Hermione couldn't think straight; she just stared at him and smiled dazedly.

Severus grinned and hugged her once more. "Are you up to a bit of crawling through tunnels? If so, we'd better get into our swimsuits."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "You expect me to behave with you parading around in front of me half-naked?"

His eyes narrowed. "We have work to do. This isn't a pleasure trip. As much as I would regret it." The last part was mumbled under his breath, but Hermione had heard it, anyway. She sighed and went to the bathroom to change.

When she came out again, he was standing there in his trunks, the knapsack in one hand, his body just as sinewy, thin and pale as it had been when he had first taken her to the Underground. It was begging to be touched.

"Oh, Merlin," she whispered and ran towards him.

His eyes widened, and he dropped the bag to catch her in his arms. They kissed again frantically, and Hermione rejoiced in the feeling of skin on skin for the first time, in feeling his body so very close to hers. But not close enough yet. Her hands had started to wander all over his body, wanting to touch every inch of exposed skin at once. She relished the feel of his skin under her hands. It was surprisingly soft and very smooth.

He caught her hands and broke the kiss. "Soon," he whispered into her ear. "Have patience."

"I know," Hermione whispered, "but it's not easy."

Severus sighed. "Nightshade, one of the reasons why I'm asking you to have patience is because I want to see *you*. The real you."

"Oh." Hermione had forgotten that the woman's body he was holding and kissing wasn't really hers; it was the Polyjuiced body of an unknown Muggle girl, a stranger. "Yes. Merlin, yes. I want you to see *me* and no one else."

He smiled and kissed her again. "Let's go."

Hermione swallowed and tried to compose herself. Breathing deeply, she managed some semblance of control. "All right."

Severus shouldered his knapsack and led her to the basement. In the furthest corner, he stopped and studied the wall critically. Then he walked right through it.

Hermione stood and gaped. Shaking her head and chuckling to herself, she broke into a bit of a run and passed through the wall as well.

The other side wasn't platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross but yet another small, dark room where Severus was waiting for her with a smirk on his lips.

"You could have warned me, you know?"

"Are you a witch or aren't you?"

Hermione harrumphed and mock-scowled. Then she grinned. "That was rather dramatic. And now?"

"Now we crawl," he said and pointed towards a dark area in a corner. That area turned out to be another door, which his key opened as well. After Hermione had passed through it and entered the tunnel, he closed and locked the door behind him.

For a couple of yards, the ceiling was high, and they could walk upright. After a few bends, though, the tunnel became narrower and the roof lower. Severus went ahead of Hermione and got down on his hands and knees. "This won't be easy," he warned. "Tap my foot if you want to slow down."

"All right." Hermione stooped down and began to crawl after him. He was right; it wasn't easy. Crawling on hands and knees might be the preferred way of getting around for a toddler, but not for fully-grown people. It didn't take very long before her knees and wrists began to hurt, but she followed Severus dutifully downward, deeper and deeper. The air became slightly sticky and very warm. She was sweating all over and now understood why they were crawling in swimsuits. The dust and mud from the tunnel walls was sticking to her sweat, and she felt incredibly grimy. The idea of a cold shower seemed like paradise.

From time to time, they came across small chambers—areas where the roof was high enough to sit upright and wide enough to stretch their legs. Cracks and tubes leading to the surface provided the ventilation for the tunnel system. They paused for a few minutes in each of the chambers and relaxed their cramped muscles.

"Who made these tunnels?" Hermione asked. "And where do they lead? They're almost like the tunnels the Vietcong used... the Chu Chi tunnels. I read about that in an encyclopaedia in my parents' house, you know."

"That's where the idea came from, actually," Severus said. "We've been studying the methods of guerrilla warfare, of course. The original tunnels here were made by the Goblins. They connect the Muggle mining site to their own secret site where the dwarves work and who-knows-what-else. They extended their labyrinth a bit for us."

"The Goblins know about the Underground?" Hermione was flabbergasted.

"Yes." Severus gave her a dirty look. "I thought you would've guessed that by now. Did you think the Underground made all these tunnels?"

"I never really thought about it," Hermione admitted. "But isn't that awfully risky? Can the Goblins be trusted that much? They don't have much love for wizard kind."

"And with good reason. They weren't treated fairly in the past, but they expect to be treated better if and when their role in the war is known. Mind you, their optimism doesn't reach far enough to make these tunnels high enough for adult humans." He grimaced and crouched down again.

"I see," Hermione said, getting down on hands and knees as well.

After what seemed like an endless amount of time to Hermione but was actually less than an hour, they reached a much larger chamber with a pond in the middle, very similar to the one at the passage to Nan Guthan.

"We'll dive. There are handholds at the bottom. It will lead us via a short canal into the shipping area of one of the oldest shafts of the Shireoaks Colliery. It's invisible, has a Muggle-Repelling Charm on it and has been made Unplottable. The Muggles have forgotten it was ever there. It leads to the emergency shelter for the Creswell Craggs group."

"A coal mine?"

"Yes, but the pit's been closed since '91. No Death Eater would suspect that any self-respecting witch or wizard is hiding here."

"Hopefully, they have no reason to suspect there's a hidden group of people, anyway. Otherwise, wouldn't they consider this to be a good hiding place?" Hermione asked with a worried frown. "Bellatrix Lestrange seemed to think quickly enough, back at the Robin Hood cave. Wouldn't she make that connection?"

Severus shook his head. "She was tracking me and made a connection to a possible way that I could be evading her. She has no reason to suspect the existence of a group of hidden people. And we made certain that she won't find any, nor a trace of them, if she should get the idea to go back to that place and take a closer look." He sighed and shook his head. "It's the best we can do, Nightshade. Purebloods aren't exactly renowned for their logical thinking; they'd have to be told to look in a place like this. Nevertheless, we have to be extremely careful and very alert. *Hence the saying: If you know the enemy and know yourself, your victory will not stand in doubt.*"

Hermione nodded and followed him through the pond into the shaft, happy to wash off all the grime despite the water being rather cold. She clamped her jaws tight to prevent her teeth from chattering. As soon as they reached the surface on the other side of the canal, Severus climbed out of the water, went to the wall and skimmed it with his hands. He soon found the latch, opened a manhole and crawled out. Hermione was relieved to see that the shaft resembled a large corridor. At least they could walk normally again.

"Time to get dressed," Severus murmured. "We'll be there soon."

Hermione took her knapsack out of the plastic bag Severus had dragged behind him. A few minutes later, they were walking side by side through the dimly lit shaft until they reached a gate. Severus knocked in a certain rhythm, and the door opened a creak.

"Password?" A boyish voice asked.

"Arthur Weasley has a plug collection," Severus whispered.

"Come in, Nundu. Who have you brought along?"

"This is Nightshade. She is working with me." Severus smiled and pulled her through the door.

Hermione gaped at the young man who was welcoming them. It was Adrian Pucey, a former Slytherin student who had been a few years ahead of her at Hogwarts. She remembered vaguely that he was on the Slytherin Quidditch team.

"Surprised to see an evil Slytherin here, Nightshade?" Adrian smirked.

"A bit," she admitted and smiled. "But I'll get used to it, I suppose."

"My family refused to collaborate with the Death Eaters, and so we all 'died'," he explained while they walked, but Severus interrupted him.

"We have no time for this, Adder. How's the evacuation going? Where are the Malfoys? We need to speak to them."

"Oh," Adrian Pucey, aka Adder, replied. "They're gone. We sent them to the White Scar group. Considering that they were originally sent here from Appin, we didn't want to send them right back. Wasn't that correct?"

"It was," Severus reassured him, "but in that case, we have to leave right away. What about the others?"

"Most of them have left already. I'm rounding up the stragglers. Some of our group were sent to White Scar; some are going to Appin. The majority are going to Asynt; there's still plenty of room there. South Wales is too crowded already and so is South Devon."

"Good! Get them all out as quickly as possible and leave no trace here. And be extra wary! Two of the... err, my employer's staff tried to put a trace on me; that's why you had to evacuate in the first place. I shan't use my wand again until I'm at White Scar under the Secret Keeper protection."

"I understand," Adder said with a frown. "We shall be very careful. Want me to ask the Goblins to destroy the passageways?"

"Good idea." Severus nodded. "Do you have a Portkey left to White Scar?"

"Sorry, they're all in use. And you said yourself that..."

"Yes. We won't risk making any new ones outside a refuge... We'll go the Muggle way, then. Good luck!"

"It was good to see you, Nundu, Nightshade. Good luck!"

"Isn't it against Underground rules to use the same way out as in?" Hermione asked when they were crawling back to the Safe House again.

"It is, but we're in a bit of a hurry. I don't know when I'll be Summoned next; I can't travel around endlessly, as much as I might like to." The twisted smirk he gave her made Hermione all warm inside.

"We can take a shower in the house. We couldn't do that at the other exits. We'd better get cleaned up before we catch the train to Sheffield."

Hermione nodded although he couldn't see her. A shower would be wonderful. Sweat, grime and the wet hair from the dive through the pond didn't mix well, and she felt filthy.

Two hours later, they were sitting on the train from Worksop to Leeds. Washed, equipped with fresh clothes and Muggle money from the safe house, and totally exhausted.

They had bought some sandwiches at the train station and wolfed them down; neither had eaten since the early morning. Now they were sitting on a bench, huddled together. Hermione's head was on Severus' shoulder, and he rested his on top of hers. The gentle rattle of the train soon sent her to sleep.

"We'll have to stay the night here in Leeds," Severus said after they arrived.

Hermione looked at him hopefully. A whole night together at a Muggle hotel sounded very promising. Severus, however, shook his head and smiled regretfully. "No antidote outside a refuge. It's too risky. Patience, Nightshade."

He squeezed her shoulders when he saw Hermione's disappointed face.

"Maybe it's for the best," he murmured in her ear after they had stretched out on the bed in the hotel room. "We're both very tired." He kissed her softly. "I don't want to be too tired when..."

"Oh..." Hermione's heart skipped a beat. She was finding that her vocabulary had diminished greatly as of late. Severus Snape as a considerate, affectionate lover simply overwhelmed her, and she didn't quite know what to say. Severus didn't perform the often empty, more traditional mating rituals, but the things he said, the way he touched her and looked at her—they all went directly to her heart and shot a hot arrow of yearning right to her core. She found his resolve to only make love to her when she was in her real body incredibly romantic, and it heightened her anticipation until she couldn't think of anything else. At least he'd agreed to hold and kiss her. Snuggled up to him closely, she relished his warmth and fell asleep.

The one-hour train ride from Leeds to Settle was very scenic, and Hermione enjoyed every minute of it. She knew from their past missions that Severus was a good travel companion, but their new familiarity, the touching, the whispering—it all added an atmosphere of tension and longing to their journey. Hermione couldn't wait for it to end and didn't want it to end at the same time.

In Settle, they left the train and took the number 501 bus to Ingletton, a short ride that only lasted twenty minutes. Hermione loved the rugged beauty of the windswept landscape; she had only ever seen the Yorkshire Dales fly past from the Hogwarts Express and was thrilled to now be able to explore a part of the area more closely.

"From here, we walk," Severus said when they finally reached their destination.

"The White Scar Cave refuge security works very much like that of the Creswell Crags refuge," he told her in a low voice while they walked around the base of the Ingleborough, one of the Three Peaks. "That building over there..." He pointed towards a building in the distance, which displayed the word 'Caves' in big white letters on its roof. "That is the entrance to the show caves. It's frequented by Muggles throughout most of the year and has some spectacular sights. You'll see."

Still some distance away from the buildings, he stepped off the trail, out of sight of the car park at the entrance, and whistled softly. Like a stone, Fierce Lady Mouse Hunter dropped from the sky and landed smoothly on his outstretched arm. Severus whispered his message into his familiar's ear, and the owl took off again.

"She'll announce us. Same principle as in Nan Guthan, only their watch cave is at a greater distance from the familiar's gate than ours. So it'll take a while until they get the message, but we also have some way ahead of us."

"Will there be more crawling and diving?" Hermione asked, less than thrilled by the prospect.

Severus snorted. "Not here, no. There'll be a bit more walking through walls, but that's about it."

By now, they had reached the cave entrance, paid their fees and waited for the guided tour to start.

"When I give you the signal, you cast a 'Do-Not-Notice-Charm' on both of us."

Hermione nodded.

The cave's interior lived up to Severus' promise. Hermione had come to love caves. They were awe-inspiring and beautiful, and, as with the other refuges, flooded with ancient magic. Muggle and Wizard ancestors had lived in the area thousands of years before, and their shamans and priests had created a multitude of sacred grottos.

The path wound its way past cascading waterfalls, between massive banks of flowstone, and through galleries decorated with cream and carrot-coloured stalactites and stalagmites. Under the steel-grid walkways, Hermione saw a stream rushing and foaming on its way.

Where the show section ended, half a mile from the entrance and six-hundred feet below the surface, a barrier had been put across the passage. However, Hermione could see the cave continuing into the distance. Awed and with many exclamations of wonder, the Muggles passed by the barrier and looked into the passageway that led further down and deeply into the mountain. This was when Severus gave Hermione the signal and turned towards her to conceal her wand movements. She cast the charm, and they stepped back from the path, hiding behind some of the thick limestone columns.

None of the Muggles took any notice of them, and after the last Muggle was out of sight, Severus walked into the limestone column behind which they had been hiding. He disappeared. Hermione waited a moment and then followed.

Concealed from Muggle view and knowledge was an enormous cave system, and the rest of the approach to the refuge was very much like that to Nan Guthan—with tiny corridors and chambers where they had to drink Shrinking Solution and with more hidden gateways and tunnels. Finally, when Severus whispered "Gaping Gills" into her ear, she saw an enormous cavern push the rocks in front of her away. It contained thousands of stalactites, which hung from the roof in great clusters and formed curious formations.

In the centre of the cave was a small lake. In the bluish light of their Lumos spell, it very much reminded Hermione of the Durmstrang ice cave.

Severus led her into one of the many corridors leading away from the cavern and walked through another wall. A corridor with many side-chambers waited on the other side. He counted four chambers to the right and three to the left and entered the seventh chamber. He took his wand out of his pocket and looked at Hermione. "Do you have the antidote?"

"Yes." She looked at him questioningly. "Do you want me to take it?"

He nodded. "Take it now. Before we go in. I trust you have a set of Muggle hair with you?"

"Of course." Hermione huffed. A strand of the hair she needed for her Polyjuice transformation was twisted and concealed in a ring she always wore. She took a small phial out of her rucksack, dropped one of her own hairs—concealed in her locket—into the antidote and drank it. A brief period of intense pain and discomfort saw her through the transformation; then she shook herself, stretched and smiled.

Severus had watched her transformation with glittering eyes. Now he stepped towards her, cupped her cheek with one hand and caressed the outline of her face with the other. "Yes," he whispered before he kissed her with such fierce passion that Hermione's knees gave out under her. She stumbled and would have fallen if he hadn't held her up.

"This is just the beginning," he whispered while Hermione caught her breath. "There will be a lot more very soon." He took her arm, turned towards the left wall and tapped his wand in an accustomed rhythm while chanting the charm that would open the gate.

Just as in Nan Guthan, a spider web-like structure appeared on the surface, shimmered briefly, and finally revealed the entrance to the White Scar sanctuary.

"Nundu, how good to see you again!" A female voice greeted them from within.

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Skeeter?" she asked shrilly.

"Ah, the formidable Nightshade. Out and about with the most interesting and powerful man for far and wide once again, I see." Rita Skeeter smirked at Hermione's outraged expression. "You have a true talent there, girl."

"You insufferable... What is she doing here? You know what she is..."

"Keep your peace, you two. You're on the same side," Severus said with an amused glance at Hermione. "She is here for the same reasons most of the others are: opposition to the... other side and being officially dead. Rita was scheduled to be killed in mid-February. You should pay attention to your surroundings a bit more, Nightshade. It was all over the caves."

"I was a bit distracted, as you well know," Hermione hissed. "And why isn't she out spying? Why didn't she escape in her Animagus form, anyway? There was no need to bring her to the Underground. And you knew..."

"Tut, tut, and everyone says how intelligent you are," Skeeter drawled. "When I was supposed to be killed, it was still winter. Have you ever heard of a beetle surviving in winter out in the open? How could I possibly have escaped?"

"Oh." Hermione stared at the blonde woman. "I hadn't thought about that."

"Obviously not," Severus said, but he took the sting out of his words by putting an arm around her shoulders, which earned both of them another smirk from Skeeter. "Let's go in, now. You can proceed with your watch, Rita."

Skeeter nodded, and Severus led Hermione down another corridor until they reached the White Scar version of the Central Cavern. However, there was no enchanted ceiling here. Instead, thick limestone columns formed natural compartments in the cave, parts of which were used for private quarters; another part was used for dining, gathering, and as an office area.

Many friendly hails greeted Severus and Hermione as they walked into the cave. The leader of the refuge, a middle-aged man with a very kind face, thumped Severus on the back.

"Nightshade, meet Nectarius Flume."

"Flume? Aren't... Isn't that the name of the proprietors of Honeydukes?"

"That's my brother, Ambrosius. So you're Nightshade? I've heard a lot about you, young lady."

"Hopefully, only good things." Hermione smiled.

"Nick, we need to talk to the Malfoys. Where are they?" Severus interrupted.

"They should be here soon. They're being given the tour of the area right now, together with all the other newcomers. I'll arrange some quarters for you in the meantime. Surely, you'll stay a while?"

"We'll stay the night," Severus said. Hermione could barely suppress a gasp at the heated look he gave her.

"Space is a bit tight, right now. Your quarters are always waiting for you, of course, Nundu, but the young lady..." Nectarius Flume scratched his head.

"She'll stay with me," Severus stated matter-of-factly.

If Flume was surprised, he didn't show it. He merely nodded and led them to Severus' quarters.

"Make yourselves at home," he said. "I'll have lunch waiting for you in a few minutes."

After Flume had left them, Severus closed the door and threw his knapsack on the bed. Hermione watched him with a frown.

"Is something wrong?" he asked when he became aware of her puzzled stare.

"No, but I was wondering. I didn't really expect that you'd be so open about..." She waved her hand between the two of them. "...Us?"

"I'm not ashamed to be seen with you," he said softly. "Are you, with me?"

"Of course not," she huffed. "But..."

Hermione couldn't continue because Severus kissed the remaining words from her lips. "No buts. We'll have to go outside in a minute, and I want you to remember that I have plans involving you. For later."

He kissed her again, his hands wandering all over her body until he finally grabbed her hips and drew her close to him. Hermione gasped when he rubbed himself against her. His lips wandered from her mouth to her neck and all the way down to the hollow of her throat. She threw her head back and held onto him for dear life, knees weak from the onslaught of his passion. His lips wandered further down until his mouth found her breasts, and he gently bit down on one of her nipples, right through the fabric of her blouse and bra, which caused her to moan loudly.

"Remember," he whispered hoarsely. "Don't forget..."

Hermione felt electrified. She would have liked to answer but couldn't produce more than a croak. She felt incredibly hot and slightly dazed.

Severus broke his hypnotic stare and kissed her again, his hands now wandering down to her groin. Hermione moaned again and had started to hump his hand when he stopped. He caressed her face with one finger, smiled and said, "Perfect! Let's go."

"Like this?" Hermione choked out, still breathing heavily, and pointed at herself. She knew what she must look like, all hot and dishevelled.

"Yes, exactly like this. I'll explain later." He smirked and took her hand. Together, they left the room.

"Severus, old friend!" Lucius Malfoy's voice hailed from a table in the dining area where Kreacher was standing, serving lunch. Narcissa Malfoy sat at her husband's side and watched them approach. Her eyes widened when she saw Hermione's hand in Severus'. As usual, she was exceedingly elegant and made Hermione very self-conscious about her own plain clothes, wild hair and freckles. She was glad that Severus didn't look cool and composed for once but just as flushed and tousled as she did. Narcissa looked them both up and down before a disdainful sneer twisted her perfectly proportioned features.

Severus didn't take any notice of her but held a chair out for Hermione and waited until she'd sat down. Then he sat down at her side, his knee touching hers, and greeted the Malfoys.

Lucius looked at them both with a calculating expression. His hand stilled Narcissa's, which had started to play nervously with the cutlery.

"Narcissa, Lucius." Severus nodded at them both. "I need to ask you a few questions about Bellatrix."

That was subtle? Hermione was amused despite her usual discomfort in the Malfoys' presence.

"Bella? How could we tell you anything about her? We've been out of the loop for months," Narcissa uttered, still staring coldly at Hermione.

"She's giving me trouble, you know. She seems a bit jealous of me, but I cannot fathom why."

"You're still in the Dark Lord's good graces, aren't you?" Lucius asked and continued after Severus' affirming nod, "Bella is jealous of anyone who competes with her for the Dark Lord's attention. That's normal for her. You do know that, Severus."

"Certainly." Severus smiled.

Hermione knew that smile. He used to smile like that before deducting points from Gryffindor when he found a rule-breaker out after curfew. The Malfoys had better watch out, she thought.

"Bellatrix seems determined to find out what I do when I'm not with, err, the Head-Death Eater. It seems that Wormtail is helping her. They tried to put a trace on me, but so far it hasn't succeeded. I wonder what she's trying to achieve?"

"A trace?" Lucius asked, puzzled. "On what would she put that trace?"

"Apparently, on me using my wand. And Wormtail enchanted a map to show my location after I say a variation of a certain name." Severus had taken Hermione's hand and kissed it. Narcissa's eyes widened even more. "They almost had me at Creswell Crags. It was only dumb luck that got us out with them none the wiser. That's why you had to be evacuated." Not looking at Lucius or Narcissa, he stroked Hermione's knuckles.

Hermione watched the scene from under lowered lids. Narcissa became more and more agitated. Hermione wondered what Severus was playing at.

"Maybe Bella got a new..." Narcissa started but stopped herself.

Severus pushed a strand of hair out of Hermione's face and asked, "A new what?"

"Oh, you know. One of those... things..."

"Narcissa, it's not safe to speak about it..."

"He knows about them, Lucius. At least he should. Maybe he remembers when he's not parading his pet Mudblood in front of us."

"Narcissa!" Lucius chided.

Hermione, however, didn't bat an eyelid. She had caught on to Severus' tactics now and was smiling seductively while leaning forwards as if she wanted to kiss him, right there and then.

"What?" Severus murmured distractedly. "You mean like that diary your family was keeping for him, Narcissa? The one Lucius used to harm the Muggle-born students with? Is that it?"

"I was ill-advised, Severus. I thought we had left that behind us." Lucius bowed to Hermione. "I've learned my lesson, partly thanks to our talented Miss Granger here. Narcissa will adjust, too, won't you, darling?" He squeezed his wife's hand, possibly a bit firmer than needed because she flinched and jumped up from her chair.

"You'll excuse me." With a nod to Severus and a reluctant nod to Hermione, she stalked away.

"So, what is that thing with Bellatrix, then?" Severus had let go of Hermione's hand and finally faced Lucius. His other hand, however, had descended onto Hermione's thigh, stroking it gently. "What do you mean 'another one'? Do you mean to say that she has one already?"

"Do we have to talk about these things?" Lucius rolled his eyes and cast a meaningful glance at Hermione.

"Yes," Severus said. "Nightshade knows about them. We can talk freely. If this is why Bellatrix is up in arms against me, I need to know."

"Oh, Severus, don't play dumb. It doesn't become you," Lucius drawled. "You know as well as I do that one of those, ah, treasures has to be the Dark Lord's Horcrux. We just don't know which one it is. He's given us enough hints. How else would he have managed to survive the Killing Curse?"

"Is that so?" Severus murmured. "And why would that make her put a trace on me?"

"Maybe she found out that you have one of his... treasures, too? And you do, don't you?"

Severus didn't answer; he just stared.

"Well, knowing my sister-in-law as I do, I think she'd try to find out where you've hidden the one you have and prove to the Dark Lord that you can't keep it safe. She'll have figured out the purpose of one of those things by now, too, and be concerned for his safety. She really does care for him, you know."

Severus nodded. "She does. Fanatically so."

"So she'll prove to him that she cares for his safety and be rid of you in one move," Lucius continued. "That'd be just like her."

"But she'd know that the places where they are hidden are safe. Well, almost all of them. Your own..."

"Yes, yes," Lucius said impatiently. "You know that the diary was meant to be read; that's why I didn't have to find a good hiding place for it. But Bella was made responsible after Barty... You want to find hers and check if hers is the Horcrux, isn't that it? After all, with a Horcrux hidden somewhere, attacking the Dark Lord will always only be a skirmish. Am I right?"

Severus merely shrugged. "Do you know where she hid it, then?"

"I might," Lucius said. "And considering our present situation, it may even be wise to tell you where it is without bargaining first." Lucius grinned disarmingly at Severus, which made him look years younger, Hermione thought. When he grinned, he reminded her of Draco, and she had found that she now liked Draco quite well. *Liking a Malfoy. What was the world coming to?* She chuckled to herself.

"I'm listening," Severus said, returning the grin.

"The Dark Lord told her that it is to remain hidden in the secret vault of Borgin and Burkes. You knew that he worked for them when he was young?"

Severus had paled. "I'll be damned..." Then he shook himself and laughed. "Thank you, Lucius. I don't know if I can and will make use of this information, but it is good to have it. Now go and grovel to your wife. I think she's rather angry with you."

"Yes, she has quite a temper," Lucius said fondly and smiled. "You'll excuse me." He nodded and went away.

"Shrewd," Hermione said when they were alone at the table. "Using me as a bait. I could almost think that's the reason why..."

"No!" Severus cried, looking at her, shocked and... fearful? "I meant it. I mean it. Please..."

Hermione smiled and took his hand. "I was just teasing. Didn't you notice me playing right along?"

Severus sighed and looked relieved, but was unable to reply because he was almost suffocated by a hug from Lola LaFolle.

"Severus!" she cried. "How good to see you. And young Hermione. I've missed you all." Now it was Hermione's turn to be drowned in a hug. Lola had moved away from Nan Guthan when the caves had been rearranged for the Underground school. Not being willing to teach, she had left.

"Lola, are you friends with that girl?" Rita Skeeter had entered the cave; apparently her watch had ended.

"Oh yes, we're good friends," Lola said and squeezed Hermione some more.

"Oh, dear." Skeeter rolled her eyes, sighed theatrically and sat down. "We'll have to call a truce, then, and reconsider alliances. The things you do for love..." She took Lola's hand and drew her down at her side. Lola smiled at her affectionately.

"You two?" Hermione's eyes nearly popped out.

"You're not the only one who knows how to separate the wheat from the chaff. Do you have a problem with that, Granger?" Rita drawled.

"Er, no, of course not." Hermione's eyes darted from Rita to Lola and back. Dislike of the ruthless journalist and shame about her own spiteful behaviour were battling in her mind. Maybe this was the opportunity to put past mistakes to rest. "Ah, I may have been a bit... unscrupulous with my revenge. Uhm, well, I... I suppose I have to apologize for having kept you in a jar..." Hermione almost jumped because of the enthusiastic squeeze Severus gave her thigh.

Rita studied her through narrowed eyes. "A bit late... but better late than never. I may have misjudged you, too. A bit." They both smirked at each other, not willing to go further for the moment.

"Rita is working on a campaign to undermine... you know who I mean... You may not like her methods, but she has a rather good idea about what goes on in the Ministry and the Wizarding world, and she knows the dirty secrets of many who would like to pretend that they have a clean record."

"I see," Hermione said and asked a few more questions about the campaign, admitting that Rita did have a talent at reaching out to her readers and making them react. She had used that talent for revealing the Ministry's cover-up methods in her fifth year, after all. They all discussed the campaign in earnest but were often interrupted by the wizards and witches who came into the cave and wanted to greet Severus and Hermione.

The afternoon quickly turned into evening, and after dinner with the inhabitants of the White Scar Caves and some more talk, Hermione and Severus were finally able to retreat to their quarters.

Now. The thought thrummed through Hermione's head, through her veins, through every nerve and set her afire. *Now it's going to happen.* She could hardly breathe.

When they reached their quarters, Severus locked the door, cast a Sealing Spell and a Silencing Charm on the room, deliberately put his wand on the bedside table and finally turned to look at her. She stood in the middle of the room, waiting.

"Hermione." This was the first time he had said her first name. Her tongue slipped out and wet her parched lips. A few swift steps brought him before her, looming over her as he had loomed over her cauldron in Potions class. His eyes stared into hers, his face was unmoved. Hermione swallowed.

Finally lowering his head until his lips reached her ear, he whispered, "And now, my dear..."

Hermione gasped in anticipation. His voice sounded smooth and dangerous.

"Now I'm at your mercy. Do with me what you will."

She pounced.

Severus stumbled and took a few steps backwards before catching her in his arms. She had attached her mouth unceremoniously to his; her arms were encircling his neck in a death grip. Her legs wound around his waist, and he supported her weight with his hands on her arse. His hands felt heavenly there.

Severus spun them both around and slowly walked them to the bed, never breaking the kiss. When his shins bumped on the bed frame, he turned again and sat down, Hermione was now straddling his lap. She still hadn't released his mouth. *Snogging Severus senseless...* that was something she had dreamed about for some time now.

A long, long while later, Hermione broke the kiss and gasped for air. She saw Severus take a few deep breaths as well, his face flushed and his hair tousled. He smirked faintly, but his eyes were glazed over. And he remained completely passive.

Hermione's head was spinning. He'd obviously meant it when he'd said he was at her mercy. *Very well!* She stroked his face and tucked a few strands of his hair behind his ear, her lips following her fingers. Hands and mouth moved down his throat but soon were barred from contact by his shirt collar.

"Off," Hermione gasped, fumbling impatiently with the first button.

Severus smirked again and, with tantalizingly slow movements, unbuttoned his shirt and took it off.

Finally, she thought and attacked his bare chest with her mouth until she noticed that he was still sitting passively, his hands at his side.

"Make love to me, dammit," she growled and quickly shrugged out of her own blouse. And then she blushed violently at her own boldness.

"Your wish is my command," he whispered silkily, and before she could gather her wits, his hands were on her breasts, kneading softly and stroking just so. His fingers unerringly found her erect nipples through the fabric of her bra and tweaked. Desire shot through Hermione's centre and made her gasp. A moment later, his mouth was on her nipples, and he softly bit down, sneaking his hands around her back and opening the clasp.

With deft movements, he hid her of her bra and then stared at her breasts for a long moment. "Merlin, help me," he gasped and closed his eyes, breathing heavily.

Hermione felt a very hard lump pressing against her; she wriggled closer.

Severus sighed and kissed her again, fiercely this time, and aggressively. His tongue moved in and out of her mouth, and his hips rocked against her. His hands, in the meantime, were holding and slightly lifting her breasts, thumbs circling her nipples.

Hermione wiggled some more and then broke the kiss and stood up. "I want us naked, now." Her fingers had already opened the zip of her jeans, and she quickly pushed them down, together with her knickers.

Severus had stepped out of his trousers, socks and boxers as well and now they stood, facing each other, stark naked. Hermione was aware that Severus' eyes were all over her, and that knowledge sent a shiver down her spine and made goose pimples rise on her skin. She devoured him with her eyes as well, lingering on his cock, which was standing up proudly. *Beautiful,* she thought and moved closer.

Severus took her in his arms again, and they kissed some more, skin on skin now, no barriers left between them. Hermione had started to stroke Severus chest, tweaking his nipples and rubbing herself against him. She soon stopped because she became too distracted. Severus was touching her everywhere; his fingers were kneading and stroking. He seemed to know exactly where and what to touch to make her gasp, sigh and squirm.

Of course he would, Hermione thought, suddenly uneasy. He had so much more experience with this than she did. What if she didn't meet his expectations? Wouldn't he be used to skilled, experienced lovers? Would her insecure and unrefined fumbling satisfy a man like him? And although she wasn't a virgin, she had only very limited experience. Hermione tensed. She felt horribly inadequate all of a sudden.

Severus raised his head from her breasts. He had been sucking and licking both of them and had seemed to be completely immersed in that activity when he felt her tense. "What is it? Have I done something you don't like?" His voice was soft, his left hand stroking her flushed face while the other hand kept her pressed against him.

"Nothing. It's nothing," she choked out. "Don't mind me."

"Don't mind you?" He growled, nibbling her neck now. "If I didn't mind you, we wouldn't be here together. I mind you very much, and if I'm doing something you don't like, you must tell me. How else am I supposed to know?"

Hermione avoided his gaze and bit her lip, but he grasped her chin and turned her face back towards him, stroking her lip with one finger. "Hermione," he murmured, "what's wrong? I want to know." He stared at her but didn't use Legilimency.

"I... I..." She swallowed and tried again. "I feel so inexperienced. Dammit, *I am* inexperienced. And you are so... You know exactly... You'll be horribly disappointed." She stared at him wide-eyed, feeling very young and very foolish.

Severus closed his eyes and snorted. When he looked at her again, he was smiling. "My dear girl," he said. "Don't you realise what merely looking at you, what your touch, does to me? Come." He took her hand and led her over to the large mirror in the corner. "Look at yourself, Hermione. You are so lovely. And then look at me. Really look at me. Do you have any idea about my own worries that you'd burst out laughing once you saw me naked?" He glanced at her sideways.

Hermione did look, and she saw what he meant. She loved the sight of him, his lean, pale body with the sparse black hairs and the thin, but well-defined and wiry muscles. But as dear as the sight of him was to her, he didn't exactly meet the optical requirements of an Adonis. She had to admit that.

"I'm a scarecrow, Hermione. And a very randy scarecrow at that." He gave her a twisted smile and briefly flicked a finger at his penis, which bobbed up and down.

"I very much like what I see," she whispered and breathed deeply, relaxing a bit.

"Merlin, I could come just from looking at you." He sighed. "Let me make love to you—and guide me. Show me what you like, so I can learn. How else would I know?" he repeated.

Hermione had closed her eyes. His softly spoken words had wrapped around her like a comforting blanket. Their promise let the heat rise from deep within her again.

"All right," she whispered.

Severus smiled and led her back to the bed. Once again, they stood facing each other. "Nothing will interrupt us. We have all night."

Hermione swallowed and nodded.

"Now, the first thing we have to be aware of on a woman's body are her erogenous zones. I'm quite certain that you've read all about them. In any case, I have."

Hermione couldn't suppress a giggle. "Yes, I've read all about it, too."

"Then it's time that we apply theory to practice, don't you think?"

Merlin's balls! He knows how to use his voice She sighed, wondering what would be next.

"While each individual experiences things differently, there are some areas almost everybody likes to have stimulated. There are the lips, of course," he continued and kissed, licked and nibbled at her lips. "The chin would be next." His lips followed his words. "Ears are nice, too." He treated both ears with thorough and loving attention, softly stroking one, nibbling and kissing the other.

"The hollows under the ears..." Kiss. "...And then, of course, the nape of the neck." He lifted her hair and focussed his full attention on that spot.

Hermione had started to sigh and moan softly.

"That's right. Show me when you like something... Next would be the juncture between shoulders and neck." He kissed the spot and then bit down. Not very hard, but firmly.

Hermione squeaked with surprise and then moaned some more. That sensation had shot another jolt of excitement right to her groin, and she found herself getting very wet now.

"Liked that, didn't you?" he murmured. "Good to keep in mind then, for future reference."

Hermione laughed between gasps while he proceeded to the hollow at the base of her throat.

"Here's a place that needs very careful attention..."

"Stop," Hermione choked out, but gave him a challenging grin when he stopped immediately, a worried question in his eyes.

"Two can play at that game. I want to show off my knowledge, too, you know. Being a know-it-all and all that..."

"I understand." He smirked and waited.

"Let's see... A man's lips, especially the spot above the upper lip... Isn't that right?" She licked the spot and softly blew on it. "The side of the cheeks..." A kiss. "...and the throat—especially... *here*..." She nibbled at his Adam's apple. "...and the hollow at its base." When she licked the spot, she felt a shudder go through him.

"Good?" she asked.

"You're killing me," he rasped.

"Where were we? Ah, yes, *here*..." She paid some more attention to that spot, very much encouraged by his sighs. He had thrown his head back, his eyes closed. His long, black lashes cast shadows on his cheeks, and his five o'clock shadow made his cheekbones look even more prominent. At that moment, Hermione found him to be the handsomest man she'd ever seen.

She kissed her way downwards. "Surprisingly enough, at least for me, a man's nipples can be very sensitive." She tweaked one softly and sucked at the other one.

"Hermione," Severus groaned. "Let me..." He breathed deeply and then took both her breasts in his hands. "A lovely medium size, a perfect fit for my hands," he murmured and kept stroking. "It may be of interest to you that there are exactly the same number of nerve endings in all breasts, no matter their size. That's why small breasts often are very sensitive whereas larger breasts usually tolerate and want a bit more vigorous attention." He kneaded her breasts softly.

Hermione's knees wobbled. What he was doing with his hands was pure magic. "I didn't know that," she gasped out. "That should be mandatory teaching for every boy from fifth year up. Some of them go about it as if they were kneading bread dough."

Severus laughed. He had steadied her when she'd stumbled and now gently pushed her towards the bed until she sat down. Being face to face with his stomach, Hermione seized the opportunity.

"The area around a man's navel and his loins..." she kissed his belly and softly scraped her nails along his side, "...are lovely spots to work on, too." Following the thin trail of black hair that led the way, she licked her way from his navel downwards, despite Severus' mild protestations.

"The most sensitive area, of course, is the man's penis." She took it into her mouth.

He touched her head and tried to push her away. "Hermione, you don't have to..."

"Mumph?" Here, at least, was an activity where she had a bit more experience. She thought she was fairly skilful as well, if the grateful reaction of her former partners was anything to go by.

Severus' reaction was decidedly encouraging, and hence she licked and stroked, sucked and nibbled until he cried out, "I won't last if you don't stop now."

"I don't want you to last," she mumbled, licking his glans and then taking his cock into her mouth again as deeply as she could without gagging.

He neither pushed nor pulled but had his hands fisted at his sides, head thrown back again, and had started to breathe heavily. Hermione intensified her efforts, finding the sight of him extremely stimulating. He bucked once against her and cried, "Last chance to get away," but Hermione kept sucking and stroking until, a moment later, he came with a loud moan.

Hm, essence of Severus, Hermione thought and swallowed, feeling very smug.

Severus pulled her up and kissed her heatedly, lowering both of them onto the bed. "Merlin's pants, Hermione, this wasn't what I had planned." He was still gasping for breath. "Aren't you afraid that an old man like me won't be able to perform more than once?"

The spark of humour in his eyes together with his flushed face excited Hermione very much. She had to kiss him again. "You're not old; you're in your prime. And this isn't a competition, you know. Did you like it?"

"Do you have to ask?"

"Good!" She stroked his face. He looked pleased, excited, and something more, but before she could figure out what it was, he looked away, stroking her breasts again.

"Now it's your turn, and I won't tolerate any objections." He loomed over her and kissed and stroked his way from her breasts to her belly. All thought of lecturing was forgotten. Hermione was still very excited from having watched him come; her fears of being inadequate were gone completely.

Severus gently pushed her legs apart and kissed her thighs, slowly moving closer to her groin until he focussed in on the spot and gave her one long, searching stroke with his tongue.

Hermione cried out. Thus encouraged, he used fingers and lips to stroke and rub until Hermione squirmed under him. Probing and pumping with his fingers, licking and sucking firmly, she felt her heart pounding, and the heat rising from her groin all over her body. This felt so wonderful, but she wasn't quite there yet.

"Don't stop, don't stop," she gasped. "Yes, there, yes, yes, yes, more..." Her body tensed at the sensations his actions were causing, and encouraged by her cries, he kept stroking and sucking, faster and firmer until she felt it coming on, the sharp and inescapable sensation of impending orgasm.

"Almost, almost, now... YES!"

It was long and glorious. Breathing deeply, Hermione tried to calm down, but the excitement was still there, her arousal sated only partly. She wondered if he would be willing to keep going for a second...

Severus seemed to know exactly what she wanted. He looked at her with a self-satisfied grin and asked, "More?"

"Yes, please," Hermione gasped, and he continued with enthusiasm. It didn't take long until Hermione was squirming again, but Severus stopped and crawled up to face her, kissing her softly. She felt his renewed erection press against her thigh while his fingers kept her excitement going.

"Come to me," she whispered. "Inside me, please."

He kissed her again and then, carefully and slowly, entered her.

The filling, stretching sensation elicited a loud moan from Hermione, and then she stopped thinking all together. There was thrusting and kissing and wriggling. Both were moaning now.

"Yes, there, like that, more, yes..." Hermione felt herself close to completion again. "Yes, now," she cried and Severus kept going, moving in and out faster and harder until she came, shouting out his name. He only needed a few more thrusts until he climaxed, too.

Exhausted, he collapsed, trying to move away from her, but she held fast and kept him on top of her. "Stay for a bit."

His weight supported by his elbows, his face buried in her neck, they both lay quietly together for a long while, calming their breathing and steadying their wildly beating hearts.

When Severus finally slipped out, he stretched out at her side, keeping her in his arms. She snuggled up to him and was asleep a moment later.

The Nine Situations

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who transfers my babble into language, sorts my random punctuation and is a good friend.

Chapter 21 The Nine Situations

26. Prohibit the taking of omens, and do away with superstitious doubts. Then, until death itself comes, no calamity need be feared.

65. If the enemy leaves a door open, you must rush in.

66. Forestall your opponent by seizing what he holds dear, and subtly contrive to time his arrival on the ground.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, XI. The Nine Situations)

When Hermione and Severus were ready to face the world again the next morning, the time for breakfast had long since passed. Hermione felt ravenous and was relieved when Nectarius Flume offered them an early lunch instead.

"Are you going back to Nan Guthan?" he asked while they ate.

"Yes," Severus replied. "I shall have to report very soon to, ah, my employer and that could take a while with Bellatrix wanting to play interrogator again. Do you want us to take something back?"

"Several people who weren't at Bee's wedding would like to send a few things, all packed and shrunk, of course. And the Malfoys have a parcel for their son."

"All right, tell them to have everything ready in fifteen minutes. We'll have a cup of tea, and then we have to go," Severus said and looked at Hermione. His eyes were crinkled in the way that, as she knew, was hiding a smile.

"When are we going to get... you know?" she asked after Nectarius Flume had left them.

"When I get back from, ah, him. Hopefully, early tomorrow. We'll have to check our gear, and I want to get my spare wand for Underground work...one that can't be traced by Wormtail."

Hermione looked at him worriedly. "Do you think Bellatrix will make trouble?"

"It wouldn't be the first time she's tried. I'll manage." Severus stood up and took a bag from Flume, who had returned together with the Malfoys and Lola LaFolle.

Lola hugged Hermione and Severus; the Malfoys' goodbyes were more reserved. Flume took a cup from the table, cast a Portus spell on it, and after touching and activating it, Hermione and Severus were transported right to the Broom cave that led to Nan Guthan.

Before she could gather her wits, Severus had kissed her goodbye and left for the meeting with Voldemort. She grabbed one of the brooms and went to the caves.

The next few hours seemed to stretch like elastic as Hermione waited and worried. When Severus finally returned, he looked exhausted but smug; apparently, Voldemort had believed his story that he'd been tracking an Order member, which, technically, wasn't even a lie. Bellatrix had been furious, but that was to be expected, and overall, things had gone well. Severus had maintained his status as Voldemort's trusted advisor and could therefore continue counselling patience, as he always did.

They were lying on Hermione's bed; he had moved in with her as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Hermione hugged him tightly. It wouldn't do to tell him just how worried she'd been, but she wanted to reassure herself that he was really back and in one piece. When she tried to tell him how much she loved him, however, he silenced her with a kiss.

"Don't say it. You'll be glad you didn't when all this is over, and you're still alive and want to find somebody else."

"Oh, I see. So you think I'm using you as my bed warmer until I find someone better? And is that what you're planning, too? Dropping me for someone else?"

He stroked her cheek. "I'm not a complete fool, you know."

Hermione's snort was rather unladylike. She wasn't discouraged, nor was she worried or saddened by his diversionary tactic. She knew her own heart, and she was quite certain about Severus' feelings for her, although, she couldn't have explained why. Her insecurity had vanished; she knew that this wasn't some casual fling but went a lot deeper. Just how deep those feelings went didn't have to be explored right now. *He is right about that* she thought. *We have a war to win first.* Hermione would take from him whatever he was willing to give her, and she'd give him her heart in return. Later, they'd hopefully have time to sort everything out.

"Tomorrow, we shall search for the cup," Severus whispered after they had made love once more. "Tell me what you know about it."

Hermione lifted her head from his chest, looking into his eyes. "See for yourself,"

They cast Legilimens on each other, and Hermione showed him what she had learned from Harry about the cup, and what she'd found out through her research in the wizarding archives.

"Blimey," Severus muttered, "I know exactly where that bloody cup is hidden."

"So that means that we'll have them all very soon?" A shudder ran down Hermione's spine, and she felt goose pimples raise all over her skin. This was it. All the searching would come to an end, and they'd have to come up with an idea for getting rid of Voldemort once and for all. And then they had to tell Harry and Ron...

Severus looked at her thoughtfully while he twisted a strand of her hair around his fingers. "It would appear so, apart from the snake. It's never far from him."

"Nagini will be the last one to be dealt with. If we find out how to destroy a Horcrux..."

"Yes. But first we must get the cup."

"How do we get into Borgin and Burkes unnoticed? Do you have a plan?"

"I do have a plan, but now we must get some sleep." He kissed her passionately, and Hermione felt the heat rise within her once again. She was delighted that Severus seemed to want her just as much as she wanted him.

"Maybe we can delay the sleeping for a bit," she whispered while he kissed the nape of her neck.

"Agreed."

"This is your house?"

"Technically, it's my mother's house, but she hasn't been here in years."

"I see." Hermione had to bite her tongue not to ask all the questions suddenly surfacing in her mind. She'd never thought about his parents; she'd just assumed that they were both dead. Apparently, she'd been wrong, and she wanted to know more.

Severus' lips twisted, obviously aware of her curiosity.

Of course he would be she thought. He knew her too well.

"There's a Vanishing Cabinet in the cellar. It is connected to Borgin and Burke's."

"And we waltz right in, just like that?" Hermione asked incredulously.

Severus gave her a dirty look. "Yes."

Hermione took a deep breath. "All right, give. Obviously, I'm lacking some essential information, here."

"My gran Prince's uncle was Caractacus Burke, the founder of the shop. His son, Caradoc, runs it now, together with Mr. Borgin. I went there often, as a child."

"I see. That's why...?"

"Yes, that's why. That's also how I know my way around the alarms and traps. In fact, I've been helping Uncle Caradoc to set some new alarms up. They are quite efficient against all kinds of intruders, legal or otherwise."

"Doesn't that mean they'd register us, too? Are you're sure we won't be found out? I mean, he may be your great-uncle, but..."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Trust me. Uncle Caradoc knows about my, ah, association even if he pretends not to. He isn't really all that interested in my comings and goings."

Hermione nodded. "Makes sense." She breathed deeply and followed him into the Vanishing Cabinet. Going through the cabinet was an odd feeling, something of a mixture between Apparition and Floo travel. She felt slightly nauseated by the time Severus beckoned her to step out.

The room they arrived in was dark. Severus had been right when he'd told her that, late at night, no one would be in the shop; it was just an ordinary shop in Knockturn Alley, after all.

After crossing the room (one of the storerooms, judging from the many shelves with books and artifacts), he tapped his wand on the door. It opened without a sound. A few whispered spells revealed a three-dimensional cage of shining lines in the next room. "A conventional anti-theft trap," Severus murmured.

"All right," Hermione whispered while she carefully followed Severus' steps along a safe pathway that wound its way through the maze of shimmering lines.

He stopped in front of another door and opened that one just as effortlessly as the first. There were stairs behind the door leading down to a lower level *Hopefully, not the Borgin and Burke's version of the dungeons*, Hermione thought. They arrived in a large room with more shelves, clearly another, even larger, storage area. Severus touched a board on one of the shelves with his wand, murmured a spell, and it moved aside. After they'd stepped through the door that had been revealed, the shelf closed behind them.

"This is the outer chamber of the vault. Follow closely," Severus said. He pointed at the centre of the beautiful Roman mosaic on the floor, carefully stepped on it and vanished.

Hermione swallowed, worried briefly if that hidden door would let her pass as well and stepped onto the design. With a low shriek, she fell down a hole that hadn't been there a moment before and slipped down a steep slide. With an oomph, she landed on a heap of carpets, placed strategically to break the fall.

"Having fun?" Severus asked and smirked. He was standing in front of what looked like a dolls' house in a room that could only be described as a treasure chamber. There were glittering rings and necklaces, piles of Galleons, crystal goblets, gemstones, oriental carpets and a lot more. Hermione blinked.

"This is the secret vault." Severus smiled when he saw her astonished look. "And we have to shrink ourselves once again." He handed her the potion, and after they'd reduced their sizes, they used their equally shrunken brooms to fly to the entrance of the dolls' house.

"This was my favourite hiding place as a child," Severus told her. "Shrinking Solution was one of the first potions I learned to brew...long before I went to Hogwarts."

"This is amazing..." Hermione was overwhelmed. The dolls' house was a perfect miniature palace; every room was furnished with tiny antique furniture and held precious treasures in shrunken form. They passed through a few of the rooms until Severus stopped in something that looked like a dining room. He opened one of the tiny but perfectly functional cupboards and took something out.

"Here's the cup." He handed it to Hermione.

"I can't believe it," she whispered. She was holding Helga Hufflepuff's cup in her hands, a beautiful golden cup, decorated with the image of a badger. She shuddered when she thought how something so beautiful could be desecrated and transformed into something as evil as a Horcrux. She put the cup into her knapsack and followed Severus out of the dolls' house.

"We'd better get back to Appin as soon as possible," Severus told her while they carefully navigated the traps and secret doors again. "But we'll not return to Spinner's End. It's too risky. The Aurors are still keeping an eye on it, even though they aren't all that attentive, as you've noticed."

"Can't we Apparate from here?" Hermione asked.

"We could, but the noise could alert someone. We don't want anyone to suspect that someone has been here," he murmured. "We'll Disillusion ourselves, walk to the next Apparition point in Diagon Alley and then Apparate to the front of Grimmauld Place."

"Grimmauld Place? Isn't that rather dangerous?"

"Shouldn't be," Severus said while he cast the charm on her. "The Order doesn't use it any longer because I know of its existence, and the Fidelius Charm is still intact."

Hermione was very tired when they eventually arrived back in Nan Guthan, late at night, via a circuitous route. They had indeed found Grimmauld Place uninhabited. Lighting a fire, they had first travelled by Floo to the private rooms of Aberforth Dumbledore in Hogsmeade. From there, they had Apparated to the Broom Cave at the Fidelius Charm-protected border of Nan Guthan. A short broom ride later, they'd finally been greeted by Hannah Abbott in the watch cave.

Severus seemed to be just as tired as her since he barely managed to step out of his shoes and socks and to shrug off his clothes. He fell onto the bed and was instantly asleep. Grinning, Hermione went through the most basic of her evening hygiene routine, snuggled up to him and covered both of them with a blanket. He was already snoring softly when she fell asleep as well.

Waking up next to Severus was something she'd never take for granted, Hermione thought, when she woke up the next morning and found his arms wrapped around her. He was looking at her with a thoughtful expression but chuckled when she yawned.

"We'll have to decide how to proceed," he said when she had settled back in his arms, her head on his chest; this was quickly becoming her favourite place to rest while they talked.

"We'll have to tell Harry and Ron that we now have all the Horcruxes except for the snake. That means, we'll have to tell them about the Underground," Hermione said.

Severus flinched. "I'm not convinced that that would be a wise choice. Potter will lose the little sanity he possesses when he sees you alive...and with me, no less. He'll rant and rave and make everything impossibly difficult. He can't be relied upon; he's irrational and unstable. He's..."

"Stop it, Severus, please!" Hermione had expected something like this. Severus' attitude towards Harry would not make things any easier. It would be difficult enough to convince Harry that she was really alive, and Severus wasn't following some sinister plot. "Harry has to know. He has to face You-Know-Who. Riddle will see to that because of that darn prophecy, even if Harry were to try to avoid a direct confrontation. He can use his energy for better things than searching for Horcruxes, now. We must all find a way to destroy the things."

Severus glared at her. "Potter won't help us with it. We found the Horcruxes without him; we'll find a way to destroy them without him."

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. But we'll have to tell him; he has to know. And if you really want to lead Riddle into a trap, we'd better start planning..." She looked pensive. "But how can we tell them? Can they be bound by the same contract we are? Should we recruit them to the Underground? Otherwise, wouldn't we be Petrified because of our own contract?"

"I didn't sign the contract." Severus smirked at her in that way that made her heart beat faster.

"You didn't? But why...?"

"Think. If I were bound by the same contract as you are, even a half-truth about the Underground would Petrify me. That'd not be very advantageous while I'm *in* his presence."

"Oh... I understand. No, that would be far too risky... But that means that you could tell them, even if I cannot. Perhaps they don't need to sign a magical contract then, after all. I doubt that they'd agree to that, anyway..."

Severus sighed. "How do you plan on going about it? Would you have me Petrify Potter first?"

Hermione giggled. "That may not be the worst idea... Perhaps you should pose as Perry once again and lead them to Perry's office? Once there, with silencing and protection spells in place, you can tell them what's going on. All three of them: Harry, Ron and Luna, I mean. Think we can manage three of them between us?"

"Petrify all three of them?" he asked, giving her a hopeful look and getting rewarded with a slight slap on his arm.

"Very well, then. I bow to your logic and better understanding of your friends. We shall do as you wish, but I don't like it." Severus flinched and lay back, staring at the ceiling. Hermione stroked his face, loving the feel of his stubble under her hands, and kissed his chin. "You know, Harry isn't really that bad. He isn't stupid, either. Neither is Ron. And Lunashe'll be the first to understand what my being alive means. They'll all understand, eventually. They'll come around. But what worries me more..." She paused and frowned, pulling her lower lip between her teeth.

"What is it?" Severus looked alarmed.

Hermione grimaced. "If Ron learns about the Underground..." She sighed deeply. "He'll be devastated that so many people could be saved, but his mother had to die." She frowned worriedly, her eyes glittering treacherously.

Severus put his arms around her again and pulled her close. "I see. It will be very difficult for the whole family; they're all in the Order. The Order will have to be part of the army, and thus they have to know about the Underground."

"Right." Hermione nodded and swallowed down her tears. "Maybe we should ask Parvati to come, too. Ron can relate to her; she's lost all of her family..."

"Good idea." Severus nodded, still holding her close. "We'll talk to Minerva and arrange a meeting, then. The sooner the better. We have to get things moving. That will give us the element of surprise. *If the enemy leaves a door open, you must rush in.*"

Hermione smiled. "Right. And we'll proceed like this: *At first, then, exhibit the coyness of a maiden, until the enemy gives you an opening; afterwards emulate the rapidity of a running hare, and it will be too late for the enemy to oppose you.*"

Severus' chuckle vibrated up from his chest. Hermione felt it move from his body to hers and shake her slightly. This was better. Severus in a good mood was less likely to hex Harry into next week when he encountered stubborn antagonism, something they could be certain to get from her friend.

After consulting Minervawithout telling her about the Horcruxesthey decided to talk to Harry, Ron and Luna in the Order's new headquarters, the Chamber of Secrets. Disguised as Perry Price and the unknown Muggle girl, Severus and Hermione went to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom (Moaning Myrtle had been sworn to secrecy; she had been made a member of the Order before school started, which had made her extraordinarily proud). They opened the password-protected door to the secret passageway, slid down the long slide in the pipes and waited, Disillusioned, for the real Perry Price to bring Hermione's friends to the chamber.

It didn't take long before Perry came down the same way with Harry, Ron and Luna in tow. After he led them to the chamber, Price retreated. "I'll be back in a moment," he said and closed the door. "Now, I'll go and fetch Sibyll," he said to no one in particular, but Severus and Hermione knew that this was their cue.

Ending their respective Disillusionment Charms, they entered the Chamber of Secrets. Severus went in first, closely followed by Hermione.

Ron and Harry leaned against one of the tables in the room, looking at Severus-as-Price expectantly. Luna was studying the statue of Salazar Slytherin attentively.

"Who's this, and what's this about?" Harry asked, pointing at Hermione.

Hermione saw Severus breathe deeply and briefly close his eyes.

"We cannot enter into alliance with neighbouring princes until we are acquainted with their designs. We are not fit to lead an army on the march unless we are familiar with the face of the country--its mountains and forests, its pitfalls and precipices, its marshes and swamps. We shall be unable to turn natural advantages to account unless we make use of local guides."

Hermione watched as Harry frowned and Ron shook his head. Luna turned around and smiled at them.

"What does that tell you, Mr. Weasley?"

"Err..." Ron said, surprised. "Ah, that's from the *Nine Situations*. Are we supposed to enter into an alliance? With who? And who's that?" He pointed at Hermione. "The local guide?"

Hermione giggled. Ron was a sharp cookie. He had soaked up *The Art of War* as if it had been written for him.

"Not bad, Weasley," Severus admitted. "But you have to be acquainted with the designs of your allies, and that's why you are here. There are certain things you need to know."

"Like what?" Harry threw in angrily. "Can't you skip the introduction and get to the point? We've had enough quoting. Either give us our lesson or let us go."

"Tut, tut, Potter. Still the angry hothead. All those lessons, and nothing has changed." Severus cast a quick glance at Hermione, who swallowed and nodded. He frowned, took a deep breath and started his explanation.

"There are some things you need to know, but they have to remain a secret for a while longer. Only very few people know about this, and if it were up to me, you wouldn't be told. But since I was persuaded, I have to tell you."

Luna's smile froze on her lips, and both Ron and Harry were frowning. Hermione thought that Severus should finally get to the point; it was not like him to beat around the bush like that. She smiled reassuringly at her friends.

"There is a group of people associated with the Order of the Phoenix. This group is a well-kept secret, and its members are all under a magical contract not to reveal the existence of the group and its whereabouts. That's why I'm the one telling you this, and not the young woman over there. He gestured towards Hermione. "She is a member of the group that is called the Underground, or Dumbledore's Army."

"What?" Harry cried. "Why wasn't I told?"

Hermione saw Severus grind his teeth. "Potter..." he grunted.

"Let him continue," Ron said, putting a hand on Harry's arm in a calming manner and staring at Hermione,

"I would have preferred to subject all of you to a similar magical contract, but I was told that this would be an unrealistic expectation and not necessary. But I promise you this: if one of you betrays the group and gabs about what is said here, I'll hunt you down personally and punish you."

"Nundu!" Hermione hissed.

"Nundu?" Ron said. "What's that about?"

Harry watched the group quietly.

"Nundu, the most dangerous of all the magical beasts," Luna whispered, "except for the Lethifold... But the Lethifold isn't as beautiful."

"It's a code name. What did you think it was?" Severus said impatiently. "But to get to the point... The Underground is a group of people who are believed to be dead to the world. They were Death Eater targets who were rescued, but whose deaths were faked. They live in hiding but are ready to join the Order when the attack against, ah, the enemy starts."

"Believed to be dead?" Ron said, eyes hopeful. "How?"

"It will be revealed. I have to tell you, however, as sad as it makes me, that your mother is not among them, Mr. Weasley. She is one of those we couldn't save. We don't always know in advance."

Ron's face fell. "I see," he whispered. Luna walked over to him and took his hand. She stared at Hermione with a very thoughtful frown.

"Dumbledore?" Harry whispered hopefully.

"No," Severus said.

"Hermione?" Ron whispered, wide-eyed.

About time, too, Hermione thought, that one of them remembered her.

"Yes," Severus said with a small smirk and nodded at her. She took the phial with the antidote out of her pocket, added her own hair, and transferred back into her real self.

"What is this?" Harry said, suspicion written all over his face. "You want us to believe that this is the real Hermione after that woman's just swallowed Polyjuice Potion?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Polyjuice doesn't work with parts of dead people, Harry. How often have I told you that already?"

"Hermione!" Luna cried, a wide smile on her face. "How wonderful to see you alive." She went over to Hermione and hugged her. Hermione returned the embrace, relieved that at least someone was glad that she wasn't dead.

"Right," Ron said. "Right. You are Hermione, or at least she's still alive somewhere. No doubt about that, the body is hers. But how about the mind? How do we know that she isn't under an Imperius Curse? What kind of a scheme is this, Price?"

"Professor Price," Hermione said at the same time as Severus, which made her smile and his lips twitch.

"I really am Hermione." She went over to Ron and whispered something in his ear. Ron blushed and nodded. He whispered something in her ear in return and got a whispered reply.

"It has to be her," he finally said, glancing at Harry. "She knows me too well."

"How cosy," Harry said scathingly. "So that woman there's studied some of Hermione's mannerisms and seen some of her memories. So what? Hermione was killed by Snape. Are we supposed to believe that he didn't really kill her? Snape? He'd have noticed if he'd been fooled. You can say what you like about Snape, but he can put two and two together. He fooled Dumbledore for years, remember."

Hermione sighed. It was now or never. "Actually, he never fooled Professor Dumbledore, Harry, since he's always been on our side. He's been a triple spy, and while everyone thinks he's a criminal and murderer, he's really been on our side, helping us." She nodded at Severus-as-Price, who had taken out his own phial with the antidote and swallowed it. A moment later, Severus Snape stood before them.

"Snape!" Harry yelled and whipped out his wand. Everything seemed to happen at once. Harry sent one curse after the other towards Severus, but Severus didn't fight back. He merely stepped to the side and jumped to avoid Harry's hexes. Harry grimaced angrily and pointed his wand at Hermione only to quickly aim at Severus again and cast a silent spell. Severus was about to step in front of Hermione but was now hit full force by a Stunner, which nearly knocked him out. Hermione's heart ached when she saw him doubled over, gasping for breath. You could be trained as well as you wanted: the moment you let your emotions direct your movements, you were handicapped.

Severus had just demonstrated an unintentional example for that. She'd have to get him to fight back.

While Severus feebly jumped to avoid Harry's next Stunner, Hermione moved towards Severus. Luna and Ron watched wide-eyed.

"*Sectumsempra*," Harry yelled, pointing his wand at Snape, who jumped to one side, but Hermione had already thrown herself in front of Severus and was fully hit by the curse. With a soft cry, she collapsed, blood spraying from the many deep cuts on her body.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Severus, Ron and Luna cast the spell on Harry simultaneously. Harry fell to the floor with a 'thud'. Severus ran towards Hermione, taking her in his arms.

"Thank you," he said and nodded at Luna and Ron before he passed his wand over Hermione's body and chanted the healing spell that closed the wounds. He took another phial out of his bottomless pocket. "Dittany," he murmured and applied the potion to the cuts.

"I'm okay. It's all right," Hermione whispered, smiling up at Severus, who glared back at her. "But that could have gone better."

"I knew it was a mistake," he growled, conjuring a glass and filling it with a whispered *Agamenti*. Drink this. You need liquids." He held the glass to Hermione's lips. She drank it all down obediently, and he filled the glass again.

"Poor Harry," Hermione said after a while. "This was all too much of a shock for him."

"Perhaps," Ron said, scowling, "But I'd like a good explanation, too. What is this all about? Where is Price? What's with him?" He gestured towards Severus.

"I'm under a magical contract. As long as the three of you don't sign it, I can't tell you. You'll have to listen to Nundu."

"Why do you keep calling him that?"

"Nundu will explain in a moment, but shouldn't we release Harry from the spell first?"

"Not without a few precautions," Severus growled, and ropes flew out of his wand, tying Harry's arms to his Petrified body. Then he released him from the Full Body-Bind.

"I know it is a lot to ask," Hermione said, "but you will have to trust us. Why don't you let Nundu tell you all you have to know first?"

Ron nodded; Harry glared but didn't say anything. As if on cue, the door opened, and Perry Price with Parvati and Minerva McGonagall in tow walked in.

"I see that they know," Perry said, glancing at the ropes around Harry. "Didn't take it all that well, did they?"

"You know about this?" Harry cried accusingly, staring from Price to McGonagall. "And what's she got to do with it all?" He pointed his chin at Parvati who, of course, looked like Sibyll Trelawney.

Hermione sighed while they all sat down, and Minerva told the whole story of the Underground, about how it all started and about how they were now ready and waiting to fight at the side of the Order. Parvati completed the tale by telling how she had lost her family and how Severus and Hermione had saved her life.

Ron had stared from one to the other; his expression had changed from shock to thoughtfulness to hope. Luna had listened with shining eyes, nodding from time to time. Apparently to her, the Underground made perfect sense. Harry looked stunned and defeated.

"I hope you realise that this is an extraordinary expression of trust, Miss Lovegood, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley. We never, ever, talk about this to outsiders who haven't agreed to sign the contract," Professor McGonagall said with a stern expression. "I can't stress to you enough how essential it is to keep this a secret. As long as no open fighting has started, I would prefer if you didn't even think about it unless you'd agree to sign a contract, after all?"

"Hermione there..." Harry's voice was still distrustful while he gestured towards her with his chin, "knows that we know how to keep a secret, don't you?"

"I do, indeed." Hermione nodded and stared back at Harry meaningfully. Harry's eyes widened. He looked scared, all of a sudden, as if a horrible thought had just hit him.

"You haven't told anyone," he whispered hoarsely. "Have you? Hermione, have you?"

"To one person only," Hermione said firmly, shaking her head when she saw how Harry was about to start a rant. "And I kept the secret a lot longer than you two did." She raised an eyebrow and stared from Ron to Luna.

"You know?" Ron asked sheepishly. "Hermione, I..."

"Don't even start to apologise! I understand, and it's all right. I'm glad that you have found each other. I'm just reminding you before Harry starts ranting because I'm not the only one who had to tell the secret to someone else."

Harry scowled but kept his peace.

"If you have no further questions to ask them," Severus motioned towards Price, Parvati and McGonagall. "They will leave, and we have to talk about that other secret."

"YOU TOLD HIM?" Harry shouted, spittle flying.

"Shut up, Harry, and calm down." Hermione had had enough. "Why don't you listen and think, just for once. We, all of us here, have trusted you with our secret, our lives. We've delivered the lives of many other people into your hands. Severus certainly has; it's his life, too, that's on the line, more than anybody else's, and you have nothing better to do than continue your petty little personal vendetta against a teacher you don't like?"

"TEACHER I DON'T LIKE? HE MURDERED DUMBLEDORE AND BETRAYED MY PARENTS, FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!"

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said sternly. "We've explained everything to you. Can you not look beyond your personal feelings, for the good of all?"

"You know," Parvati threw in with a frown. "I'm not leaving here before these three have signed some kind of contract. To react like this, after all they were told... The Underground saved my life, saved so many lives, and Harry simply doesn't get it. I didn't expect him to be quite that irrational. I don't think he can be trusted."

"I CAN'T BE TRUSTED? ME? WHAT IS THIS? A MADHOUSE? HAVE YOU ALL LOST YOUR MINDS?"

"Don't worry. Mr. Potter won't be going anywhere just yet," Severus drawled. He had been watching the goings on with a sneer. "If we have to Oblivate him, we will do so. He should never have been told. I knew it..."

"What?" Ron yelled, "You can't do that. That's mental. Bloody hell..."

"Stop it! All of you, right this minute!" Hermione screeched. She didn't know who had angered her the most: Harry, Ron or Severus. "You two are acting like children," she pointed her finger at Harry and Ron. "And you're not behaving much better, Severus." She glared and he glared back.

"Severus?" Ron asked incredulously. Harry just glared. The other four watched, speechless.

"If you cannot get over your differences while you have a common goal, we may just as well take our wands to ourselves, you know?" Hermione said a bit more calmly. "This isn't James Potter, Severus. He's Harry. He has reasons to distrust you, just as you have reasons to be wary of him. You need to get beyond that, both of you. No one's asked you to become friends, but it should be possible to work together. You're acting like two stags who want show off whose antlers are bigger and don't know any other way than to head-butt."

"Very well said," Luna exclaimed. It earned her a snort from Ron and a grimace from Severus.

"All of us here are on the same side, for crying out loud. We have a war to win. We all have to grow beyond our personal, petty little feelings. You once called me a hypocrite, Severus, when I defended the Gryffindors and didn't see their faults but kept accusing the Slytherins of bias. You were right. I have to overcome that bias, and I understand that. I can't promise that I'll always be following up on this understanding, but I am aware of my faults here. They are my shortcomings and no one else's."

Hermione had worked herself up, now. She stalked up and down, gesturing wildly with her hands, pointing at whomever it was she was addressing. Her hair was flying around her head; her face felt hot, and she thought she must look a right mess, but she didn't care. These things had to be resolved.

"And now it's your turn, Severus. Why don't you try to understand Harry for a change? He was a child when he first met you...when you treated him as if it was his fault his father... was who he was." She looked pleadingly at him; he stared at her with narrowed eyes, his finger slowly stroking his lower lip.

"Leave my father out of this," Harry yelled.

"And you, Harry. You've worked so hard to be in the best shape possible. You want to be prepared; you accepted your task, as horrible as it is. But you don't realise that you were never meant to fight alone. There were always people watching over you. Professor Dumbledore did, and he arranged most of this here to help you. We have, Ron and I, ever since we became friends. And Severus... He may have seemed to be unfair to you, but he always, always, watched over you and protected you. Think about it." She breathed deeply. Suddenly, all the energy left her, and she stood in front of them all, feeling deflated.

"We quote Sun Tzu and discuss strategies, but when it comes to the first enemy we have to beat, the one within ourselves, we've already failed miserably. Is that what we want?"

She was met by silence. She sat down at Severus' side and buried her face in her hands. Before she sat, however, she'd seen his glittering eyes widen for an instant. Maybe all wasn't lost quite yet.

Harry glared at her for a long time. Then he looked at Ron. "What do you think?"

Ron sighed and looked at Luna and then back at his best friend with a half-smile. "If all of this is true and I am inclined, no, I desperately want to believe them then we'd better come to terms with each other, all of us. Because if what they say is true, we have an army." His eyes shone. "We have the Order, and we have that secret army, most of them well trained from what I understand?" He looked questioningly at Severus, who nodded. "Then we have a huge advantage. If only we could force the enemy into battle on our terms. If only we didn't have to find..."

"Let's talk about that later," Severus threw in.

"Anyway, it would be a much better chance for victory than we ever dreamed of, Harry. Think about it. You can go back to hating Snape when all this is over."

Everyone laughed except for Harry. At least he didn't look angry any longer, though. Instead, he looked hurt and thoughtful. "I agree to peace, for now, as long as Ron and Luna still think it's a good idea," he said. "I don't think I can trust anyone else here enough." He stared at Hermione, who nodded sadly.

"I understand," she whispered. "But that's good enough for now."

"Not for me," Parvati insisted. "I want some kind of vow from them. Otherwise I won't trust them."

"What did you have in mind?" Luna asked. "An Unbreakable Vow?"

"No, not that. But we have a modified version of the contract every Underground member signs," Perry Price said. He had been mostly studying everyone's reactions during the encounter and had calmed down a very agitated Parvati. "You would basically have to swear that everything that's been revealed to you today is to be kept a secret, and if you talk about it to any unauthorized person, you'll be paralysed by the same Body-Bind Curse as we'd be if we tried."

"And McGonagall and Snape? Why didn't they get Petrified?"

"You could call them the generals, if you will. They are no ordinary soldiers. If we can't trust them, we can't trust anyone. And Severus couldn't sign it...with the difficult task he has with Riddle," Hermione explained. "He can talk his way around anything, and so far he's been able to fool them all, even Bellatrix Lestrange. I saw him do it; it was quite impressive." She grinned at Severus, who smirked at her.

"But if he were incapacitated, Riddle would know immediately that he was under a contract, and all his work would be ruined. His mind couldn't be violated, but he'd be killed on the spot, and Riddle would know that something's going on. Severus has kept his secrets successfully for three years, now. I should think that you could trust him."

"Makes sense," Ron agreed. "That way, he can still explain away minor breaches of security. If he's Petrified as soon as he starts talking about it, there's no hiding any longer."

"Exactly." Hermione beamed at him. "So, will you sign it?"

"Yes," Ron said simply, and Luna nodded.

Harry sighed and nodded as well. "You can release me now, you know. I'll behave."

Once the contracts were signed, Perry, Parvati and Minerva McGonagall left. Hermione leaned back, touching Severus' shoulder, smiling at Harry, who was pacing the room and looking at both of them with mild disgust on his features.

"Perhaps we should send the two of you to a lonely island for a month when all this is over, so you can get to know each other." Hermione snickered when she felt Severus' elbow in her ribs.

"No thanks," Harry muttered.

"I know that this is a lot to ask," Hermione said, "and it was a lot for one day, and more is yet to come, but I really think the two of you should work out your differences. But maybe I'm just being selfish. I'd like the two of you to get along."

Severus merely sighed, and Harry narrowed his eyes. "Don't count on it," he growled.

Hermione leaned back into Severus' shoulder and closed her eyes. She had done what she could for now; next, they had to focus on the work they still had to do.

"We have all the Horcruxes, except for the snake," Hermione said when Harry finally stopped pacing, and they'd all settled down to talk. "And before you get all worked up about that fact." She frowned at Harry. "Let me tell you that this would never have been possible without Severus' help." She told her three friends how they had found and retrieved the Horcruxes.

"Luna was thinking about Borgin and Burkes as a hiding place for the cup, too," Ron said proudly. "We weren't certain if it was in a Death Eater's vault at Gringotts, or at Borgin and Burkes."

"But that's amazing! What gave you the idea?" Hermione had to suppress a hint of envy; they had managed to get things done without her.

"Luna interviewed the ghosts," Harry explained. "She reasoned that they were around when Riddle was at school and would have known what was going on. They did remember him very well, in fact, and told her lots of anecdotes. He charmed every teacher except one, and everyone was so surprised when he threw away a promising magical career and went to work for Borgin and Burkes instead. We had no idea how to go about finding out where it really was, though."

"The ghosts, but of course!" Hermione exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"You don't need to get upset because I had an idea you didn't have, you know?" Luna said with a smile. "You found them, after all."

"Yes." Hermione smiled back. "But we have no idea how to destroy them. Do you?"

"Damn! They haven't been destroyed, yet?" Harry asked angrily.

"We wait with bated breath for your instructions, Potter," Severus said waspishly.

"Peace, you two," Hermione interrupted what looked like yet another spat. "Apparently, you know as little as we do about how to destroy a Horcrux."

"You know that we tried to in the Forbidden Forest, Hermione," Ron said. "But that damned curse got us all confused..."

"Yes. I wish there were books in the library on the subject. How did Professor Dumbledore do it? He did destroy the ring when he was cursed... Did you notice anything, Severus?"

"Nothing unusual," he replied, pinching the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "I was too busy saving his life to wonder about what he'd been doing. He refused to tell me, anyway, when I asked. You saw my memories."

"Yes, and it's too bad that he didn't give Harry a hint."

"If he managed to learn how to destroy those things, we should be able to do it, too," Luna threw in. "The information must be available somewhere."

"I wish we had a room that provides books on demand, just like the Room of Requirement did during your secret DA lessons. Do you remember, Harry?" Ron said longingly.

Four pairs of eyes stared at him.

"What did I say?"

"Ron, you are a genius," Hermione said and took the phial with her Polyjuice Potion out of her pocket, as did Severus with his own. Harry had jumped up and was waiting impatiently by the door. The three friends watched in fascination as the transformed Hermione and Severus performed the stabilising Transfiguration spell on each other. When Severus was Price again and Hermione the Muggle girl, they left the room and hurried to the seventh-floor corridor.

Harry walked up and down in front of the moving tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy with his ballet-dancing trolls, murmuring something under his breath. It took a long while before the secret door appeared on the opposite wall. Impatiently, Ron opened it and rushed in. The others followed more slowly, looking in awe at the cathedral-like room filled with towering walls and alleyways of objects hidden by generations of Hogwarts inhabitants.

"It's all wrong," Harry exclaimed after having looked around. "It didn't work. This is the room where people hide things that shouldn't be found. The room where I hid Snape's Potions book...where the tiara was, and where Malfoy hid the Vanishing Cabinet. Damn, this room can't help us. We're screwed."

"I wouldn't be so certain of that," Severus murmured and stared at the stack of books piled in one corner. It was only a small stack, a fraction of the thousands and thousands of books in the room, but that stack was isolated, inviting, almost beckoning to him. "I know this place." He looked at Harry with a frown. "Your mother used to hide in here and read. She used to have all these ideas about..." He sighed deeply. "She was theorising that Dark spells and rituals merely mimic, are merely mocking, the benevolent spells. She was working on something when we met for the last time. It was something powerful..." He waved his wand over the books and cast a curse-banishing spell before he stooped down and took one from the stack. "*Body and Soul: How the Greatest Power of All Holds Them Together*" he read.

Hermione had taken another book. "*Affection and Affinity. On the Alchemical Wedding*."

"Here," Luna said. "*Unable to Die and Unable to Live: The Ultimate Choice*." She handed the book to Severus who cast another curse detection spell on it and then carefully opened it.

"It's about becoming a vampire... or a werewolf... or a zombie? That's not... no, wait. Here it is: Chapter 21. On the creation of Horcruxes, the most evil of all magical devices. Defilynge and besmirchyng the most secret and sacred ritual known to wizardkind, performed by the most evil of wizards, the creation of Horcruxes demands a terrible forfeit. A soul so rent asunder may never be entire again lest it were filled and healed with the greatest power of them all. But prior to this, each part of the soul must be freed from its confinement or be destroyed, excepting the part that resides in the bosom of the wizard. No sliver must remain if the soul should be healed. If it cannot be reunited, it must be destroyed." Severus looked up from the book. "The confinement must be parted from the soul fragment by destroying the vessel through the greatest act of violence known to wizardkind or by destroying the soul fragment with an act of magic most evil and thus prevent it from returning to its prison." (2)

"That act of violence... That would be the Killing Curse?" Harry whispered.

"My, my, aren't you astute, Potter?" Severus replied with a sneer.

"That would certainly destroy the container," Hermione mused. "But what would destroy the soul fragment...just in case you wanted to preserve the container, not the soul?"

"I've no idea," Severus said.

"Basilisk venom," Ron threw in and grinned when the others stared at him.

"Harry stabbed the diary with a Basilisk fang. Since simply breaking these things doesn't work, it had to be the venom that destroyed it."

"Right," Hermione said. "But since we don't have Basilisk venom, we'd best destroy the containers."

"Actually," Harry said softly, "as an alternative, I'd rather like to find a way to destroy the soul fragment instead of the container. I would hate to have to kill the snake. She's an animal; she has been made what she is, and it's not her fault. If we can get the soul fragment out of her, perhaps then she can live as a normal snake."

"I don't see much of a difference between her killing me as a normal snake or as You-Know-Who's tool. Are you showing off your moral fibre again, Harry?" Ron quipped.

"As reluctant as I am to admit it, I agree with Potter," Severus said to everyone's amazement. "Having a means of keeping the container intact could turn out to be advantageous." He frowned and glanced sharply at Harry.

Harry's eyes widened, and he stared back. Neither of them said anything; they simply looked at each other for a long time until Harry nodded and exhaled loudly.

Hermione watched them in surprise. She felt unease rise within her; something was going on here that she didn't understand. Somehow, Severus and Harry had come to an understanding, and despite her earlier lecture about working together, she wasn't certain that she liked this new development.

Luna had been quiet during the whole exchange. "I wonder what would happen if a Dementor were brought close to a Horcrux? Do you think it could suck the soul fragment out?" she suddenly asked.

Harry's mouth opened in astonishment, and Severus' eyes narrowed. Hermione noted, however, that his eyes were glittering; for some odd reason he looked optimistic. "Perhaps, Miss Lovegood. If we can command a Dementor to act exactly in the manner we want it to act, that might actually work. To my knowledge, no one's ever reported a soul coming back after a Dementor got hold of it."

"Worth a try," Harry breathed, glancing at Severus again.

Severus nodded. "Indeed, Potter. Worth a try."

A/N: (1) The relative Severus is mentioning is Caradoc Burke. I wrote my own back-story for Severus before I started AMIEW, and a part of that back-story is 'The Train', which can be found on this archive. We learn there that the founder of the store, Caradocus Burke, retired and that his son, Caradoc, is managing the shop, together with Mr. Borgin. They are closely related to the Princes, Severus' mother's family. I saw no reason to adjust my back-story to canon. I like my version of Lily Evans better.

(2) Many thanks to Melusin, beta-of.dreams, for 'mediaevalizing' this portion of the text for me.

I didn't know that something like that existed, but Melusin showed me the site of a dolls' house that could be the model for the one Severus played in:
<http://www.victorianstation.com/interior.html>

The Attack by Fire

Chapter 22 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who transfers my babble into language, sorts my random punctuation and is a good friend.

This chapter is dedicated to mollyssister, fangirl extraordinaire.

Chapter 22 The Attack by Fire

18. No ruler should put troops into the field merely to gratify his own spleen; no general should fight a battle simply out of pique.

19. If it is to your advantage, make a forward move; if not, stay where you are.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, XII. The Attack by Fire)

Helga Hufflepuff's cup, Rowena Ravenclaw's wand and Salazar Slytherin's locket were lined up on one of the tables in the Chamber of Secrets. Rowena Ravenclaw's tiara lay there as well but at a distance from the other items.

Severus stood facing the Horcruxes, wand in hand, while Hermione and her friends were watching from behind him. Hermione had volunteered to help him destroy the Horcruxes, but he had refused. Casting the Killing Curse drained the caster of positive feelings, and he'd argued that since Hermione had never cast it before, she would need far longer to recover than he would.

Severus frowned, deep in thought, and cast a series of spells on the items. The curse on the locket that had confused and sedated Harry, Ron and Luna in the forest was soon broken, so when Harry checked for benevolence or malice, the locket merely lay before them, shimmering in the harmless, silvery glow of a magical item without malicious magic on it.

The curses on Rowena Ravenclaw's wand were dealt with as easily. As the keeper of that particular item, Severus had been told by Voldemort what the curses were, and thus he knew exactly how to counteract them.

The protection on the cup remained to be removed; the revelation charm showed angry, red, vortex-like funnels bubbling and spiralling around the cup: a clear sign of curses and hexes. Severus wiped the sweat from his brow when Hermione stepped forward and offered to cast a containment charm on the cup while he worked on breaking the curses.

Nodding absentmindedly, he accepted. Hermione urged Harry to help her with the charm while Ron and Luna stood alert to perform damage control should something go wrong.

"That's it," Severus sighed after a long while, looking exhausted. "Now, I'll destroy them."

He paused, looking at the Horcruxes again and then at Hermione. "Are you sure that these are all of them?"

"As sure as we can be. Remember, we thought that the tiara was a Horcrux, but you keep saying there's nothing Dark within?"

"There isn't. See for yourself."

Severus chanted an incantation and pointed his wand at each of the items, including the tiara. All of them showed the peaceful shine of a harmless magical item, but the Horcruxes seemed to be hiding something under the silvery glimmer. It was more of a shadow than a colour: purplish, insubstantial, but visible if you knew where to look for it. It reminded Hermione of the dark purple mist that rose up whenever Severus created a new Inferius.

The tiara lacked that dark centre. Hermione was convinced. "All right, I see what you mean. Then Harry was right all along. He didn't think that this was a Horcrux. We concluded that Wormtail must have picked it up after Riddle was hit by the rebounding curse and vanished. Wormtail had Riddle's wand; he could have picked up the tiara, as well. And since Riddle couldn't kill Harry, he couldn't have made the item into a Horcrux."

"Perhaps," Severus replied while rubbing his forehead. "The child was of more importance to him than the parents; he would have wanted to use the death of the child for the Horcrux. I think you are right. However, he may have cast the necessary spell for the Horcrux creation ahead of time, and when the intended target didn't die, a Horcrux might have been created through the death of Potter's parents."

"So you agree with me that there could be one more Horcrux?" Harry asked, staring at Severus.

"Yes," Severus agreed simply.

"Hold on," Hermione said. "What's going on here? Harry?" She looked at her friend, who freed his gaze from Severus' and looked at her sadly.

"Oh, no!" It felt as if a veil had been lifted. Her eyes were fixed on the lightning-shaped scar on her friend's forehead. "No!"

"What?" Ron asked, but Luna seemed to have caught on as well and whispered, "The scar. Look at the scar. Harry could be a Horcrux."

"Can't you cast that revealing spell on him? Perhaps we're mistaken?" Hermione whispered, glancing pleadingly at Severus.

"The spell only works well with inanimate items...or animals. All people have Dark areas; some are more successful in fighting and suppressing the Dark within them than others, but it's still there. The spell cannot differentiate between that and something artificial, like the Horcrux curse."

"Bloody Hell!" Ron exclaimed. "But this makes so much sense. Everything's falling into place, now. The prophecy. And the connection between Harry and Riddle. The visions, the emotional connection... Oh, Harry!"

"Do you think Riddle suspects this?" Hermione asked, horrified.

Harry swallowed. "I don't think so. He was rather keen on killing me last time I saw him. That doesn't exactly look like protection of something he values, does it?"

"Right," Severus interrupted. "And this will give us the chance to remove the soul fragment without alerting, ah, Him."

"So that's why you don't want to kill Nagini?" Luna asked.

"Yeah, but also because she's an animal. It's not her fault that she's been used for Riddle's evil machinations," Harry insisted.

"And if we can remove the soul fragment from the snake without killing it, then we have a good chance of succeeding with Potter, as well," Severus said.

"But with a Dementor? What if it doesn't stop and sucks Harry's soul out together with Riddle's fragment?" Hermione didn't like the aura of fatalism that was surrounding Harry.

"It's a risk I have to take," Harry replied. "The alternative would be to kill myself or ask one of you to do it for me. When I'm dead, and the other Horcruxes are destroyed, then anyone can kill Riddle. It doesn't have to be me. It's what he believes...because of the prophecy, but we know better, don't we?"

"Indeed," Severus agreed. "But since there may be another way, there is no use in being so maudlin, Potter. And now, I had better destroy these." He pointed at the three Horcruxes. "Stand back."

Hermione saw with concern how beads of sweat formed on Severus' forehead and ran down his temples. He looked very pale; a grimace of loathing seemed to be etched on his face.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" The green flash hit the cup full force. A lightning-shaped crack formed in the cup, and with a loud howl, the soul fragment was cast out of its confinement.

Hermione covered her ears; she'd had no idea that the eviction of a soul would be so noisy. When the howling stopped, the ensuing silence seemed to weigh heavily upon them. The cup stood broken but harmless.

Severus wiped his forehead and proceeded to dispense with the wand and the locket. Two more Killing Curses in quick succession had the two items broken in a similar manner as the cup, and all three were now shimmering harmlessly in the benevolent, silvery light of the 'Benefiz, Malefiz...' spell.

Hermione rushed to Severus' side. He had sat down, looking totally exhausted. "Why don't you three take the items away and come back later?" she asked. "Severus needs some rest; casting so many curses must have drained him horribly."

"I'll live," he murmured, his eyes glittering.

Hermione took his hand, and as soon as the others had left, she hugged him firmly, stroking his arms and back.

"What are you doing?" He pulled her onto his lap and buried his face in her hair; his voice was muffled.

"You must have had to conjure so much hatred and bad feeling to cast all those curses," she whispered while kissing his throat. "I just want to replace that hatred with some happier emotions."

"Good idea," he murmured and kissed her passionately.

"Too bad we can't just sneak away for a bit," Hermione said and nibbled on his ear. "But the others will be back in a moment."

"Pity." He sighed and kissed her again. "But I'll take this as a promise..."

Hermione grinned and nodded. "I always keep my promises."

"I'm counting on it," Severus replied, but before he could kiss her again, the door opened, and Harry, Ron and Luna were back.

Reluctantly, Hermione got up from Severus' lap, ignoring the surprised and delighted smile Luna gave her. Both Harry and Ron looked slightly sick.

"So, by freeing these three soul fragments, they could theoretically be reunited with You-Know-Who. Is that correct?" Ron asked when they'd all sat down again.

"Theoretically, yes," Hermione confirmed, checking 'Unable to Die and Unable to Live: The Ultimate Choice.' again. But it would have to happen through an act of selfless love, and can you imagine anyone performing that ritual on him?"

"Not really," Ron agreed.

"Hmm, if that means making him a bit more human again... and then maybe I wouldn't have to kill him...become a murderer," Harry mused.

"But who loves 'You-Know-Who' enough?"

"Bellatrix does, but she'd be the last person to perform such a ritual," Severus threw in. "And without the Horcrux within you, you don't need to kill him, Potter. You said that yourself half-an-hour ago. Someone else can do it, if necessary."

"That's not really a relief. I don't want another person's soul to be ripped because I'm afraid to get mine damaged."

"I don't think that killing in self-defence damages your soul, Harry," Luna said.

Severus looked at her with a frown and shook his head. "Wrong, Miss Lovegood. Every killing, whether it is performed unintentionally, through self-defence, from malicious intent, in a war or as an act of mercy every killing affects your soul. Once you've ended another human being's life, you'll never be the same person again. That's how it is. It can't be changed. It is a loss of innocence, an acknowledgement of your power over the life and death of others, of your responsibility. It may not rip or even damage your soul, but it will have an effect on it. Your life will be changed forever through it."

"I don't want to kill anyone," Luna whispered.

"Let's hope you don't have to, Miss Lovegood," Severus said calmly.

"Is there anything else in these books that might be useful for us?" Hermione asked in an effort to distract her friends from the gruesome subject.

"Lily used to study some of them," Severus replied, ignoring the way Harry was staring at him. "She was immersed in her study of ancient magic. She told me...while we were still on speaking terms...how ordinary magic could be enhanced through love when it is focused, when you really mean it. It would be worth looking into that aspect of benevolent magic some more."

"The power the Dark Lord knows not..." Ron whispered. "That has to be it."

"Possibly," Severus conceded. "And now we'd better alert Minerva and plan how to proceed from here."

"Right," Hermione agreed and opened her locket, asking its inhabitants to relay a message to the Headmistress.

The Chamber of Secrets, quiet as it had lain for centuries, was now alight with candles and warmed by cheerful fires so often that every rat and owl which usually dwelt there had fled in disgust. Severus, Hermione and her friends had found it the perfect refuge to meet and make plans, better even than the Room of Requirement. The Chamber was still a secret to the students and most teachers. It was well hidden under a Fidelius Charm and only occasionally used for Order meetings. It was perfect for the conspirators to meet.

Thus, it was logical that the first meeting of the group which would plot the trap for Voldemort and lay the plans for battle should meet there, too. Hermione was dying to find out who all the lieutenants of the Underground were; so far, she had only known about Severus, Minerva and Aberforth Dumbledore. Seeing Alastor Moody limp into the room took her completely by surprise.

"You?" she blurted out but paused for a moment and smiled apologetically. *Why not Moody? He was one of Professor Dumbledore's oldest and most trusted friends, after all.*

"Surprised?" Moody cackled. "Snape..." He nodded at Severus, who was sitting at Hermione's side and returned the nod just as politely. There was no animosity there, none of the disgust and dislike Moody had shown for Snape in the past. Instead, there was acceptance, even grudging respect.

"When did...?"

"After Albus died, Abe here introduced me. They had planned it this way. And after I saw what Snape has accomplished... Only a fool never changes his mind, Missy. Surely you don't think I'm so old and stubborn that I can't admit a mistake?"

"Uh," Hermione said.

"You were supposed to think that way, Moody," Severus threw in.

"Who else is coming?" Aberforth Dumbledore asked.

"Harry, Ron and Luna. Perry and Parvati don't think there's anyone else. Am I wrong?" Hermione ticked them off on her fingers but was interrupted by the arrival of her friends, who were just as surprised to see Moody but a lot more enthusiastic.

Perry Price, Parvati and Minerva McGonagall all arrived at the same time. Minerva looked around and smiled. "We've met here today," she began, "because recent developments in our joint efforts have made it possible to move things ahead. The time has come to lure the enemy out of his hole and make plans for battle. Severus has some suggestions we need to discuss."

Severus stood up and faced the small group. "We have an army of approximately three hundred well-trained and skilled wizards and witches in the Underground. They are at our disposal. They are disciplined and used to following orders. They form the core of our army and can be relied upon under all conditions and in all areas.

"We also have around fifty Order members, some of which are Aurors. Most of them are highly skilled, and we can count on them, although they lack discipline and are individualistic and often stubborn. We need to employ their services wisely and with care.

"The centaurs and the merpeople are our allies, as are the ghosts and house-elves of Hogwarts. We also have two half-giants, Hagrid and Madame Maxime, as well as one fully grown giant, Grawp. They've agreed to help fight off the giants on the other side.

"The enemy has a total of a hundred-and-twenty Death Eaters, at least as many sympathizers who are willing to fight and around fifty more or less skilled, but devoted, wizards and witches in his inner circle. He has a group of werewolves on his side, several corrupt Ministry employees, the giants and a large group of Dementors. Our best course of action would be to divert and distract the enemy's force and lure him to a place where we want to fight. The fewer Death Eaters Potter has to face when the confrontation between him and his foe comes and I can't see how this can be avoided the better. And the confrontation should occur at Hogwarts."

"Right," Harry said. "So you want to use me as bait."

"Whether I want to or not, you *are* the bait," Severus said. "If He thinks that you are hiding at Hogwarts, afraid of facing him, he'll come to get you. We could make it a half-truth. I've been hinting along these lines in my reports to my, ah, employer, all along; Albus planned it that way. It only needs some impulse for the enemy to act. Maybe another vision or prophecy?" He looked at Parvati.

"Wouldn't it be better if I were kidnapped now?" she asked. "I could have frequent visions of how he should proceed. We could push him where we want him..."

"No," Price cried out and took her hand. "That's far too risky. You can make your prophecies from here."

"Nonsense," Parvati hissed and pulled her hand free. "Everything we do here is risky. I will be a lot more efficient when I'm where things get put into motion. I can react

directly to what is decided."

Severus stared at her for some time. "I am inclined to agree," he said softly. "But we need to be very careful. You should only be 'kidnapped' at the last possible moment and for as short a time as possible. We need you; you are a formidable fighter." His smirk made Parvati grin in delight.

"I don't like it..." Price grumbled, and now it was Parvati's turn to take his hand and squeeze it. "They wouldn't dare to hurt me, Perry. I'm too valuable to Riddle. And I can be more efficient there than I would be here. Trust me on this."

Price sighed and looked at their joined hands.

"The best way would be if you had a 'lapse' in one of your classes and uttered something about 'time to act, now' or such... This will be relayed to, ah, Him, and then I can suggest kidnapping you if none of his minions has the idea first. I shall be present as much as possible and see to it that you are treated well and have additional protection," Severus suggested.

"Right," Parvati said. "Tell me when the time is right, and I'll do it."

"Someone has to tell the Order that things will be moving soon," Moody said.

"I think it would be best if we informed them in groups, not all at once. How much can we tell them?"

"Do we fight as our true personas or in disguise?" Hermione asked. "How will the Order, and the Aurors, for that matter, know that we aren't Death Eaters? How will they react to the Underground?"

"Good point," Aberforth said. "I think it would be better if the identities of the fighters weren't released. And we should have something to be recognized by, something like the symbols the Underground members carry on their person to be recognisable in disguise, like that brooch Nightshade wears, there." He pointed at Hermione's Datura brooch.

"Not a brooch or any piece of jewellery. That can be taken off too easily and used by someone else. A fabric application of... a panther head," Hermione suggested, which got a snort out of Severus.

"I'm serious," she said. "You're known to all of the Underground. You've been leading us; everyone trusts you and relies upon you. It's only fitting that we all fight under the banner of Nundu." She smiled at him.

"I second that," Minerva said, also smiling.

"Motion carried," Moody bellowed. "Overruled, Snape. A Nundu head on all the Underground robes. We shall inform the Order and the Aurors about this when the time comes."

"Agreed," Minerva said. "And we'll alert our allies and prepare for the quick evacuation of those students who are still boarding at Hogwarts."

"Good," Severus said. "And now for the details. I think we should proceed like this..."

Harry was very quiet when he came out of the Pensieve in the small cave of Nan Guthan's introduction area. He had followed Severus and Hermione through small and wide corridors, dived through the sink hole and, of course, signed the full contract before he was allowed to access the area and be shown its true location.

Hermione had suggested that Harry see at least one of the Underground refuges to get a better impression of what Severus and the whole Underground had accomplished. She hoped that this would change Harry's attitude towards Severus for good, just as it had changed her own view. The two men had to collaborate closely and trust each other to bring their plan to fruition.

So far, it seemed to be working. Severus held his tongue in check and suppressed caustic remarks and snide comments. Harry merely gazed at him pensively from time to time.

"Why not let Severus give you the tour of the caves while I study these books here a bit more?" Hermione suggested after the main excitement of having Harry Potter in the Underground had died down. There would be a gathering of all the Nan Guthan Underground members later, but there was still time to pass until then.

When Severus and Harry had gone, Hermione took the shrunken book out of her rucksack and started to read *Body and Soul: How the Greatest Power of All Holds it Together* was a fascinating read, and she was soon so absorbed by the subject that she jumped when Severus asked her with his velvety voice whether she had found anything useful.

"Hi." She smiled at him and Harry, who had sat down opposite her. "So what do you think, Harry?"

Harry shook his head and looked from Hermione to Severus and back. "... Quite frankly, when you first told me about this, I had trouble believing it. And I never imagined something so... so..."

"Refined? Civilized? Comfortable?" Hermione suggested and grinned.

"Yeah," Harry said. "It's like a different world. A secret world... I was just wondering..."

"What?"

"Well..." Harry's cheeks reddened, and he looked embarrassed. "Er... with so many people being here for such a long time... Aren't there any babies?"

Severus snorted, and Hermione rolled her eyes. "We're on long-term contraception, Harry. The charm. It's permanent until you cast the counter-spell. Don't tell me you've never heard of it?"

"Oh. Er... I suppose I have."

"Well, for the sake of your future family planning, I hope you paid attention. It's cast on every adult when they make their decision to join the Underground. The only children you'll see here are the ones we rescued together with their families."

"I see," Harry said and nodded. "It's incredible. You've done..." He shook his head again. "It's incredible."

"Well, since we seem to have your approval now, Potter, maybe we can proceed. Was there anything in the book?" he repeated his earlier question to Hermione.

"As a matter of fact, there was. This is the most amazing book. It's a shame that... I think it explains how Harry's mother was able to save him," she finally completed the sentence.

"Is that the book she studied?" Harry asked.

"It's one of them," Severus confirmed. "But there must have been others, too. She'd been very busy with her research."

"And efficient, too," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Her sacrifice worked; Harry was saved." She stared at Harry with a frown. "But... you know... there must have been some sibling love between your aunt and your mother once, otherwise that protection wouldn't have worked...not according to that book."

"Aunt Petunia? She certainly doesn't love me..."

"Probably not, but she must have loved your mother once, and your mother her... The magic described here only works when the blood ties are confirmed through bonds of love. Otherwise, that protection wouldn't have worked."

"But I thought Dumbledore had fixed that protection?"

"He may have, but without your mother's sacrifice and the ties of her beloved relatives, he wouldn't have been able to do it. Your relatives were included in the protection, didn't you know that?"

"I had no idea," Harry said. "But what's the point? How does that help us now?"

"But don't you see, Harry? Your relatives are Muggles. All of them. And the love your aunt must have had for her sister makes the magic possible. That means that..."

"...There is no clear distinction between Muggles and magical people where basic magic is concerned. It's stronger in magical beings, but some of it is present in Muggles, as well. The transition from Muggle to Squib to full magical status is transitional. It means that we are all human beings, only different in certain talents. It is a rather revolutionary thought for wizards, and it is no wonder that this book has never been seen in the open, nor is the kind of magic taught openly anywhere." Severus spoke with passion.

Harry frowned and stared at him. "And that helps us how?"

"It might help with devising basic protection for groups of Muggles, like, for example, the families of Muggle-borns who are immediate targets for Death Eater attacks. I'm sure, in time, we could come up with other uses," Hermione said, displaying her full arsenal of enthusiasm.

"Well, that's a bit too theoretical for me," Harry said. "I only want to know how fast we can deal with You-Know-Who and his followers."

"There's the small matter of Horcrux creation and love magic, too," Hermione said, smirking at Harry's stunned face.

"What?" Even Severus looked surprised. Had she found something he hadn't heard of before? This would be a first.

"I've compared some of the procedures described in 'Body and Soul' with the descriptions in 'Unable to Die and Unable to Live' it's quite stunning, actually." She looked up at both men, a gleam of excitement in her eyes. "If I understand it correctly, the creation of Horcruxes is an imitation of a very ancient sacrifice for love. It says here that when someone sacrifices their life for a loved one: spouse, friend, sibling, parent or child...then a part of the soul of the dying person remains behind and binds to the beloved person as long as it is needed. It only returns and reunites with its main part after the person for whom the sacrifice was made is alive, safe and whole. In the case of a child, this would be at their coming of age. Your mother left a part of her soul in you, which saved you from the Killing Curse. It's just like Perry... or was it Severus? It's just like they told you. When you lost that part of your mother's protection, your magic changed. Don't you remember?"

"Yeah, but we've been through this already? What's the big deal?"

"I see where you're going, Nightshade. A willing sacrifice and a soul fragment left behind that saves the life of the beloved person," Severus said.

"Exactly. And the Dark version of it is a murder and a split soul not bound to a beloved person but to an item, an artefact. A Horcrux."

"I'll be damned. So it's a debasement of the love magic, basically?" Harry asked, looking bewildered.

"Yes. But what would be more important... If all the Horcruxes are destroyed, wouldn't Riddle's magic be affected, weakened, just as yours was, Harry?"

"I wouldn't count on it," Severus murmured. "He didn't show any signs of weakened magic after the diary and ring were destroyed, and maybe that effect on one's magic really is only detectable when the soul fragment is bound to the person who is protected. None of the murdered people left their souls behind. It not only debases the love sacrifice, it also turns it upside down. It's not the dying person who leaves a fragment of their soul. It's the act of murder that splits the soul of the murderer, who then preserves it for future emergencies. It is a forced, non-consensual stealing of life for self-preservation in contrast to the willing gift of life for the protection of a beloved other. It is a prime example of the predatory nature of Dark Magic."

"This is all far too much theory for me," Harry said. "I can't really see how we can use any of this in battle."

"There's more to it," Hermione said. "I'm sorry to bore you, Harry, but I just find this so exciting. I've always wanted to know how your protection worked Anyway. Love magic can also be used to strengthen the resistance of a person towards attacks and to strengthen their own spells. That doesn't need a sacrifice...only a focus of the love on the recipient. And a spell."

"That could come in handy. It wouldn't hurt to learn that spell," Severus said.

"That's what I thought," Hermione said with a grin.

In the meantime, the central cavern had filled with people. The meeting was about to begin.

"Nundu, a word, please." Draco Malfoy approached Hermione, Severus and Harry after the meeting in which the Nan Guthan group of the Underground had been given instructions about the upcoming battle. Apart from the Underground fighters being ready to come out and fight in disguise the remaining members would be responsible for the secrecy and security of the refuges and for the students who would be brought to the caves when Hogwarts was evacuated. With Nan Guthan being the oldest and largest refuge, its leader, Bee, had the authority to inform and instruct the other groups.

"What is it, Draco?" Severus stood up, obviously glad to have an excuse to get away from Harry.

"I want to fight, too. Please."

"You know that we can't let you."

"I know that you can't let Mum and Dad out, but me? Please. I need to do something."

"Draco, the safety of our armies is more important than your personal feelings. Even if I personally don't doubt your loyalties and would risk it for my own safety, there are some who aren't convinced. There is just too much at stake. Request denied."

Hermione was surprised to see Harry study Draco's reactions silently, although with a frown. She would have expected violent opposition to Draco's involvement and Severus' words, but Harry only nodded.

"If it's any consolation for you, Malfoy, your girlfriend will be actively fighting. I'm sure about that."

"Pansy? How do you...?"

"She's changed since your, ah, death. She's been teamed up with me in Defence class, and she is a stellar fighter, I'll give you that. She's been saying that she wants to be free to compete with me and my ilk, as she calls it, and V... Riddle in charge would never give her that chance. No competition, no proving oneself to be superior. There'd be only forced dominance...no freedom to fail or succeed. She says she owes you that; she's fighting for freedom because of you and Slytherin House. And I have to say, I agree with her reasoning."

Draco's features twisted into a small smile. "That's Pansy. She never gives up. And always fiercely loyal to those she thinks belong to her. That little despot..."

Hermione laughed. "How nice to see you so besotted, Draco."

"I could give that compliment back, Granger." Draco smirked at Hermione's blush. "But still, do I have to beg you all to let me do something useful?"

"Take care of the evacuation. That needs a lot of organising. We will trust you with this, Draco," Severus said, a small smile on his face, too.

"And you'll be protecting them if our attempts should fail. I know that your whole family will return remorsefully to, ah, Him, if our plans fail, but it is in your power to protect those students and the other people still hidden. Do it, Draco. Show that there's more to you than the obvious agenda of the Malfoys thriving under all circumstances."

"I find it difficult to convince you of my sincerity, Nundu, but I will protect those children. I promise. And understand this: my family has nothing to lose. Let us prove ourselves let us be useful. If Riddle wins Merlin help us we shan't be welcome, even if we told him about the Underground. And we can't tell him, anyway. Your protective spell will prevent us. It would be a lot more advantageous to keep the Underground hidden and active. Let us help by being prepared for anything."

"Very well. Look after the evacuated children, firstly. I shall assign Hannah Abbott and a few others who won't be fighting in the first line to look after the secrecy spells for them."

"You don't even trust me with the secrecy, do you?" Draco said with a sad sigh. "You simply don't trust me."

"I can't afford to, Draco." Severus looked just as sad. "There are too many people's lives at stake."

"I see," Draco said and turned to go to his quarters.

"You shall have opportunity enough to prove yourself when the battle is over. It will mean either dealing with a new, changed world after the defeat of You-Know-Who or protecting and hiding or evacuating what's left of the Underground. If we win, the purebloods who aren't directly associated with the Death Eaters will need guidance; they will need to be given a direction, and that will be the chance for your family, Draco. You can be crucial in getting them used to the idea of a more homogenous wizarding world. You'd be leaders; you'd be a new kind of elite."

Hermione listened in amazement and with quite a bit of admiration for Severus' ability to push people in the direction he wanted. She saw the thoughtful expression on Draco's face and knew that he was considering Severus' suggestions very seriously. The task offered to him would be something the Malfoys knew how to do best: manipulating, influencing, coaxing and they had been rather successful with this in the past. Under the right circumstances, the Malfoys could be useful allies. She wondered what Ron would say to all that. His family had suffered from the Malfoys' arrogance like few others. To have to work with them would come as a shock and likely be considered an affront.

The Chamber's long sleep was ended for good when Severus and Hermione erected a tent in one of the side chambers formed by the snake pillars. They had decided that they both had to be at Hogwarts as often as possible, now, close to where they wanted the battle with Voldemort to take place. Hermione had brought Crookshanks with her, and their only connection to the Underground now were their portraits and Patronus Charms. That would be enough to give orders and get the army into motion when the time came.

Parvati had had her 'lapse' in her Hufflepuff/Slytherin Seventh-year Divination class. *"Now. Now. If the Dark Lord doesn't move now, he never shall. And if he doesn't act on the..."* she had rasped out before she went on teaching as if nothing had happened, ignoring the gaping and open-mouthed stares of her students.

Severus had reported that the 'lapse' had had the desired effect on his master, who had summoned his allies and declared that the time had come for action. And Voldemort had also demanded that Sibyll Trelawney be brought before him.

Severus had tried to talk him out of this idea, arguing that a scared Sibyll would be less likely to have useful visions than one who was relaxed. He suggested she be watched closely by some of the Slytherin students but was opposed violently by Bellatrix Lestrange, who finally felt that her moment of triumph had come. She mocked Severus, called him a pernicky old biddy and encouraged Voldemort in his plan to kidnap Trelawney.

Since this had been exactly what Severus wanted, he gave in resignedly and continued suggesting that a scared Trelawney wouldn't be of any use.

"Oh, shut up, Snape," Lestrange had crowed. "We won't harm a hair on her silly little head. She'll be treated like a queen as long as she is useful. Isn't that right, my Lord?"

Severus hadn't liked the mad gleam in her eyes, but there had been nothing he could do about it at that moment. Voldemort had agreed with Bellatrix and had ordered Severus to get hold of Trelawney and bring her before him. It was decided that this would happen the next day.

After Hermione had seen that scene through Legilimency, she knew that this night would be the last one they had together before the battle and, perhaps, forever. A look into Severus' eyes showed her that he knew it, too. She suspected that neither of them would get much sleep that night, but who needed sleep? This night would be special.

And it was. Hermione had thought that they would be clinging desperately to each other, but she was mistaken. Severus showed a wildness, a playfulness and passion he hadn't shown her before. Their night was filled with laughter, and sighs and very little sleep. When morning came, they made love one last time, very gently, and then they got up without regrets and with just a hint of sadness. Everything that needed to be said at that point had been said; everything that had been planned so meticulously would now be set in motion. A last kiss, and Hermione transformed back into her Muggle-girl disguise.

After a short conference with their co-conspirators, they were assured that each part of Dumbledore's army knew their mission and would move to where they would be needed. Their allies had been informed, and now all that remained was to wait for Voldemort's first move elicited through Parvati's 'visions'.

Severus handed Hermione another phial, and she swallowed its content. The Shrinking Solution reduced her to the size of a mouse, and Severus gently picked her up and put her in his pocket, a place Hermione had wanted to explore thoroughly for some time. Then he went to the North Tower to 'kidnap' Parvati-as-Trelawney.

Apparition wasn't any more pleasant as a mouse than it was as a witch, Hermione thought when they landed in 'Death Eater Central' with a soft pop. To circumvent being detected by a '*Homenum Revelio*' spell, she had Transfigured herself into a mouse. Transfiguration into an animal was not an easy task, and unlike the transformation of an Animagus, the animal form could not be maintained for long stretches of time. However, being ever the perfectionist, Hermione had mastered this spell as she had any other she had set her mind to, thus she could enter Lord Voldemort's hidey-hole hidden in Severus' pocket without being afraid of being found out.

True to his role, Severus had donned his Death Eater mask and was now dragging a whimpering Parvati-as-Trelawney towards a destination Hermione couldn't see since she didn't dare look out of the pocket.

"My Lord, I have brought you the seer," Severus said after pushing Parvati roughly to the ground. He had lowered himself to his knees. Hermione had to struggle not to tumble about in his pocket while he did so.

"Rise, Severus. You have done well." That voice was Voldemort's. Earlier, Hermione had only heard it as an echo in Severus' mind when he had shown her something through joint Legilimency. Still not daring to take a peek, she suppressed a shiver and listened intently.

From where she thought Parvati must be, she heard weeping and whimpering.

"Welcome, Sibyll Trelawney," Voldemort said softly. "Seer of my fate. At last we meet, and you shall witness beforehand how Lord Voldemort makes use of fate's gift of your foresight. No harm shall befall you. You shall be treated with all the honour Lord Voldemort's oracle deserves."

Parvati uttered an earth-shattering scream, and then there was silence.

"What's with her?" a simpering voice asked: Wormtail.

"She's fainted, imbecile," Voldemort hissed.

"Your presence was too much for her, My Lord," Severus said smoothly while casting *aRennerivate* on Parvati. "Allow me to take her to a room where she can calm down."

"I'll go with you, Snape. She needs to be watched. We wouldn't want to miss any visions, now, would we?" That was Lestrangle's voice.

"You stay here, Bella," Voldemort ordered. "Let Severus take care of the seer. We need to prepare our next step. Wormtail..."

Hermione couldn't hear anything else since Severus had left the group. He murmured orders to Parvati about where to go...as much for Hermione's as Parvati's sake.

"You can relax, Sibyll," he finally said. "No one will bother you in this chamber. Not even a mouse."

That was Hermione's cue. Carefully, she climbed up to the opening of Severus' pocket and looked outside. They were in a small room; the walls were bare and made of roughly hewn stone. It looked old. Maybe a ruin or an old castle, Hermione thought.

"*Muffliato*," Severus whispered under his breath. "Are you all right?"

Parvati nodded and gave him a reassuring smile. "I'll manage."

Severus turned his back to the door to block the view, gently took Hermione-the-mouse out of his pocket and set her on the ground in front of a small crack in the wall...the perfect hiding place for her. She quickly hid in the mouse hole but kept close to the entrance...she wanted to watch what was going on despite her heart hammering wildly in her chest. It was from excitement, not fear, she tried to convince herself while ending the animal Transfiguration and relaxing in her shrunken human form.

"I shall leave, now. Wait a few minutes and then have your, ah, vision. I trust you have your crystal ball?"

Parvati nodded. Severus ended the *Muffliato* spell and went away.

Parvati sat down on the bed in the chamber and started rocking to-and-fro while sing-songing monotonously.

"Silly bint." Someone glanced through the small window at the top of the door. "Why doesn't she make her prophecy and be done with it?"

"Shut up and listen, Yaxley. Just listen. You don't need to watch her." That was Severus' voice. "But be certain to not miss anything. The Dark Lord won't be pleased if you do."

"Who can understand anything through that buzzing and humming? Her singing voice isn't exactly first rate, is it?"

"Do your work and don't ask questions," Severus hissed and walked away.

Parvati turned her head away from the door and winked in Hermione's direction. She continued humming and singing for a short while until, finally, she emitted a loud groan.

"Now... now... he must act now. If he doesn't act today, he shall never be victorious. Act now, act now..." She resumed her rocking and sing-songing immediately.

Yaxley's face had appeared at the window. He looked at Parvati wide-eyed. When nothing else was forthcoming, his head disappeared, and shouts and the sounds of running footsteps indicated that he would be reporting to his master immediately. Hermione held her breath.

In the meantime, Parvati had taken her crystal ball, waved her hand over it and stared inside as if her life depended on it.

A moment later, Voldemort, Bellatrix and Severus entered the chamber.

"What do you see?" Voldemort swept towards Parvati in his overly dramatic way and stared into her crystal ball. "What do you see?"

Parvati looked up, blinked and screamed.

"Oh, please," Bellatrix growled. "Let me take care of her, My Lord. She's given you the date that was missing. What more do you want with her?"

"Keep away from her," Voldemort hissed. "She shall witness my triumph. Lord Voldemort keeps his promises." An unpleasant smile split his noseless face. "One way or the other."

Bellatrix smirked, a mad gleam in her eyes. "Do you wish me to watch her, My Lord? It would be my... pleasure."

"Severus may watch her until I get word from Wormtail, and then you can take over, Bella."

"Thank you, My Lord." Both went away, leaving Severus behind, who cast another *Muffliato*.

"Stay in the hole when I'm not here," he ordered, his back to the door again. "Nagini is here." Then he sat down in an armchair in the corner and watched Parvati, who had resumed her sing-songing and was staring into the crystal ball again. "It'll be a while, now. Wormtail has sent the owl."

Hermione sighed. That meant that the first part of their trap was being prepared. So far, everything was going according to plan. She wished she could hide in Severus' pocket as a mouse again, to be close to him for a little while and calm herself down, but she didn't want to risk it. He would have a hard time explaining why he was talking to a mouse if someone came into the room unexpectedly.

"There they are," Parvati whispered after a while. "There's the owl. It's in the Great Hall. They are having lunch... There's Harry. The owl drops the parchment. Harry reads it. He jumps up and looks around wildly. Ron pulls him down. They whisper... It's well done; they don't pile it on too thick. Now they're pretending to eat, but they are being watched by people from different houses."

"Now they're getting up and leaving the Great Hall." Parvati waved her hand over the ball. "The owl will be here soon." She breathed deeply and collapsed on the bed. Parvati had explained to Hermione that watching people through the crystal ball took an enormous amount of a person's energy. Merely waiting for glimpses of the future to be revealed at random was much less strenuous.

"Do you have the mirrors?" Severus murmured.

"Of course," Hermione whispered from the mouse hole.

Hermione rummaged through her pocket until she found two small mirrors. It was actually only one half of a mirror each, each one a different part of a set of two-way mirrors. It wasn't the mirror Harry had been given by Sirius; they had never found the counterpart to it, and one mirror alone was useless for communication. This set had been produced by Mad-Eye; it would be used for phase two of their plan. Harry and Ron had one counterpart apiece to Hermione's two halves. That way, each one of them could talk to the other.

"Snape! Our Master wants to see you." Rodolphus Lestrange was at the door, beckoning to Severus.

"Will you watch her?" Severus asked after quietly lifting the Muffliato spell.

"No, we are to lock her in. Bellatrix shall take care of her later." Rodolphus laughed cruelly. "The seer won't be a concern."

"Very well," Severus said and got up from his chair. He coldly stared at Parvati, who had resumed her rocking and stared back at him, empty-eyed. Then he closed the door and locked it.

Hermione heard footsteps from two pairs of feet move away from the door. She knew that this was their cue; most likely, Harry's owl had arrived and delivered his reply to the message he had received earlier.

Hermione knew exactly which message that was. She stared into the mirror but nothing moved yet. That would hopefully change soon enough. But now she needed to get ready. She breathed deeply and tried to calm her frantically beating heart and get some clarity into her head. Adrenalin rushes weren't exactly productive for cool thinking, and impulsive actions weren't needed yet. After running through her trusted calming exercise a few times, she carefully glanced out of the mouse hole and listened intently. It seemed as if the room wasn't being watched any more. She went to the opening and whistled softly.

Parvati stopped her rocking and stood up from the bed. She walked on shaky legs to the corner where Hermione's hidey-hole was, all the while hugging herself and still rocking and humming. Right in front of the crack in the wall, she sank to the ground and curled up, head between her knees and looking to the ground.

Sheltered by Parvati's body, Hermione took hold of Parvati's jeans and carefully moved closer until she could sit down in the space between Parvati's legs and body, a place that couldn't be watched from the door. She took the mirror out, enlarged it with a nonverbal 'Engorgio' and sat down to watch, together with Parvati, who stared directly at it past her own knees.

It only took a while before they heard Harry's whispered, "Are you there?"

"Hmm-hmmm..." Parvati hummed. Another 'Muffliato' spell had been cast by Hermione; no one would hear what was being said.

"Ron's just taking the Polyjuice Potion, and McGonagall is casting the spell... He'll have to put the mirror into his pocket. You'll be able to hear but not see."

"Hmm-hmmm..." Parvati hummed again.

"Here he comes," Harry said. "Bloody Hell! Look at us." The image and focus in the mirror changed, and instead of Harry's face, Hermione saw two Harrys opposite each other. One was looking worried; the other was grinning like a lunatic.

"Guess who's who?" the grinning version of Harry said towards the mirror.

"Get on with it, Ron," Hermione snapped.

"All right. But you must give me a bit of time to enjoy my greatest moment," Ron said. "All these years I've been envying Harry. Now I can walk in his shoes and see how great it is to be the target." He smirked.

"Dammit, be careful, Ron," Hermione hissed. "This is deadly serious."

"I know. Calm down," Ron said, "It was my idea, after all. I just needed this moment, ok?"

"Fine."

"No more tellyvision, just wireless now," Ron-as-Harry said and put the mirror into his pocket. "I'll go now. Wormtail should be there in fifteen minutes."

"Good luck," Harry said, and although the sounds grew weaker while Ron was walking away, Hermione heard Harry's footsteps beat the floor in a steady rhythm; he must have started pacing.

Hermione bit her lip. What Ron was about to do would be very dangerous, but it could divert and inactivate a considerable part of their foe and would give Harry opportunity to meet Severus and destroy the Nagini Horcrux and his own.

In the meantime, the sound of a door banging shut could be heard. Ron was now outside the castle. "*Accio broom*," he muttered and continued walking (indicated by footsteps on the staircase and later a soft rustling when he walked over the lawn towards Hagrid's hut).

"Oi!" There was a swishing sound and a slight knock. The broom must have found its master. Hermione knew that Ron would hold on to the broom for dear life, no matter what would happen next. The whole affair had been his idea, after all.

A slight whistling sound indicated that Ron must now be flying towards his meeting place with Wormtail, with Peter Pettigrew, who had sent a message to Harry Potter, offering information about Harry's parents. Information that no one else could give to Harry; Peter Pettigrew had been their friend for many years, after all.

The idea had developed gradually. The need to divert Voldemort's forces, to divide and confuse, had been clear to all of them.

"Maybe, if I pretend to want to talk to Wormtail, I can lure him and others away?" Harry had suggested.

"He'd never come alone. He'd have a large group of his friends hiding and ready to seize you when you arrived. That's how he works...how he's always worked, him and his friends," Severus spat bitterly.

"But if I do the same, and a group of my friends lie in wait *for them*, shouldn't we be able to get hold of some of them without the others knowing?"

"It'd result in a fight, a first skirmish. Chances of keeping this a secret from their, ah, general are slim at best. With a larger group fighting, someone will get away or get a message out. We would have to time this very carefully." Severus scratched his chin and paced in front of Salazar Slytherin's statue.

"How would you contact Wormtail, just by sending him an owl?" Hermione asked. She hadn't liked that idea one bit.

"We can't wait for him to contact me, now, can we?" Harry's irritation had showed. He didn't seem all that happy with his own plan, either.

"Maybe you can," Severus said, now pinching the bridge of his nose and rubbing his temples. "I think I could convince Wormtail to do just that by warning him against it."

"Brilliant," exclaimed Ron. "And it shouldn't really be Harry who meets him but someone else. I'll go." He shook his head when he heard Harry's protest. "Think about it, Harry. They'll think that you've been lured out of the castle, and while they think that you're elsewhere, you could go and de-Horcrux Nagini. We would have to time it in a way that the main Death Eater attack would start at the same time, and that they think they have us in a trap. Sn... ah, Nundu could arrange that, together with the right prophecy, couldn't you, sir?"

If Severus was surprised by the sudden proclamation of respect, he didn't show it. "Certainly, I could do that. But there still remains the problem of the skirmish. If we want the enemy to start his attack when Potter presumably left the school, it would be detrimental if word got back to him that the meeting was a trap."

"That's why there won't be a group of Order members or Aurors waiting," Ron said, all excited now with his planning. *Hence the saying: The enlightened ruler lays his plans well ahead; the good general cultivates his resources. Move not unless you see an advantage; use not your troops unless there is something to be gained; fight not unless the position is critical.*"

Hermione snorted, and Severus emitted a low choking sound. Hermione could have sworn that it was suppressed laughter since his eyes were sparkling and his lips were twitching.

"Acceptable," he drawled. "Quite acceptable, Mr. Weasley. I see that you have at least learned something."

Ron grinned sheepishly and winked at Harry, who scowled. "I don't like it," he complained. "It's dangerous. How were you planning to get away from them all alone?"

"Like this..." and Ron had laid out his plans.

And so it had transpired that Severus had skilfully manipulated Wormtail into suggesting a trap for Harry Potter where he'd lure the young man out of the castle. Severus disapproved; Bellatrix was delighted. Severus grudgingly gave in, and Voldemort agreed. It was decided that Wormtail would get hold of Harry Potter and bring him to Voldemort, who would wait in the Chamber of Secrets for him while his Death Eaters and their allies would lay siege to Hogwarts and take the Ministry at the same time.

And now Ron disguised as Harry through modified Polyjuice was on his way to meet Wormtail while Voldemort should be on his way to Hogwarts.

A soft 'thud' from the mirror woke Hermione from her reverie. Ron must have dismounted.

"Harry Potter," a slimy voice said. Wormtail!

"Say what you have to say, Wormtail, and then leave."

"Ah, Harry, good boy. How very much like your father you are. But you have your mother's eyes..."

"Get to the point," Ron snarled.

"As you wish," Wormtail said in mocked reverence. "Young Harry, did you never wonder why I betrayed the people who were called my best friends?"

"Not really," Ron spat. "I suppose you thought that siding with Voldemort would keep your sorry arse out of danger, was that it?"

Hermione was amazed at how perfectly he could imitate Harry. But it really wasn't all that surprising. No one knew Harry better than Ron did...not even her or Ginny.

Wormtail sighed dramatically. "Exactly like your father...with a little bit of Sirius thrown in. Always ridiculing poor Wormtail. Always laughing about him, calling him names, thinking he is stupid." The voice grew louder and softer as if he was walking in circles around Ron.

"Clinging to your little broom, are you? Just like your father, the great Quidditch hero. James Potter and Sirius Black, they were the cool boys. Wormtail was allowed to traipse along; Wormtail was allowed to help hex Snape or other enemies, but when it came to sharing the fame, Wormtail was only the stupid side-kick. Wormtail needed help to achieve what the smart boys achieved. Wormtail didn't even have the exciting distinction of being a monster, a werewolf, like dear Lupin. And so Wormtail was sometimes useful to have around and always good to have a laugh at. The eternal sidekick. Ever in the shadows of the great mischief-makers. Be careful, Harry Potter. You have sidekicks, too. Aren't they envious? Maybe you should watch them closely."

"Never fear that," Ron growled. Hermione knew that tone; he was very angry now. "You sound just like Snape when he goes on and on about my dad. What neither of you understands is that I am not my father. And I can rely one hundred percent on my best friends. They will never betray me."

Well said, Ron, Hermione thought.

"Then you are lucky," Wormtail mocked. "But that would not have been reason enough. Wormtail had his standards."

Ron snorted in disbelief.

"You can laugh, young Harry, but I did... And I could have endured the taunting of my so-called friends. But I could not bear the derision of your mother. Such a pretty girl. All the boys wanted hereven Snape, for a while. And Wormtail wanted her, too, but she never spared him a glance. And then James Potter comes along, and before you know it, she is married. To James Potter, the boisterous idiot."

There was a growling sound. Hermione thought that Ron had to fight being sick. Wormtail and Harry's mother? That was a thought that made her sick, too.

"And so, by betraying them, I had the Dark Lord promise me to spare Lily. She should have been grateful to me for saving her life. But instead, she had nothing better to do than sacrifice herself for you." Wormtail's voice had grown very nasty now. "What a waste for a stupid little boy like you."

"My mother would never have accepted you," Ron snarled. "She'd have died before she'd have agreed. You're a piece of slime. Don't try to justify your betrayal. Nothing can."

"I see you're sitting on your high horse, like your father. Be careful, Harry. Those who sit up highest fall down hardest." Rustling sounds almost made his words incomprehensible. "Seize him," Wormtail cried. The Death Eaters who had accompanied him must have come out of hiding.

Hermione held her breath. This was the critical moment. She heard Ron's heavy breathing and quick footsteps; he was running.

"Get him. Don't let him get away." Wormtail again. Something was sizzling and crackling. Someone must have been casting curses, and from the sound of it, they had hit a tree.

Then the slight whistling sound told Hermione that Ron was on his broom, flying into the Forbidden Forest. She allowed herself to relax slightly. So far, everything was going well.

"No, no, no, he can't fly fast in there. Go after him! Don't let him escape," Wormtail cried, but his voice was growing weaker. Apparently, Ron had managed to put quite some distance between himself and Wormtail.

The rapid beating of running feet on the ground indicated that the Death Eaters were still following. From time to time, crackling and sizzling sounds betrayed curses cast at Ron. That went on for a short while, and then Ron was moaning, "Oh no, here they are. Why can't it be butterflies for a change?"

More swishing and whistling and an occasional 'Oi' and 'Shit' from Ron hinted at obstacles on the way. And then all went quiet.

"I'm going to take the mirror out and stick it to my robes so you can see." Ron's hoarse voice sounded loud now, and suddenly Hermione could see her friend's wide blue eyes. He looked appalled and slightly dazed. "This is the last part. Wish me luck," he said until the swishing of the broom resumed, and Hermione saw branches and trees fly by, interspersed with spider webs.

"There he is. Up there, quick," a female voice yelled but was cut short by a scream, shortly followed by more screams. And then the swishing stopped, and Hermione saw a huge spider web coming very close and the handle of the broom ramming into it.

"Merlin's rotten teeth," Ron swore. The image in the mirror was spinning wildly, sometimes only inches away from the giant spider web, sometimes showing Ron's face twisted in concentration and concern, sometimes showing his arms and hands and a part of the broom handle. He was hanging from the broom, which was stuck partly in the web. A series of curses and nauseating spinning of the image, and Ron's voice uttered, "We're back in the game." More swishing and rushing and then the bright light of a clearing.

"I've made it," Ron said, grinning triumphantly. "There's Bane. I'll just talk to him for a sec; the centaurs can round up any of the Death Eaters who haven't been caught by the Acromantulas, and then I'll head back. I've done it."

A/N: I had the idea about a Ron as Harry before book seven with the seven Potters was published, just so you know. And about Wormtail's obsession with Lily mirroring Sev's love and obsession: I had planned this before book seven, too. I didn't want to believe that canon Sev should be cursed with such an immature obsession. But alas, he wasn't given any mercy...

The Use of Spies

Chapter 23 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? ****Winner**** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who transfers my babble into language, sorts my random punctuation and is a good friend.

This, the last chapter of Part 2, is dedicated to all of you, my valued reviewers. Thanks to you, it's still fun and rewarding to write this.

Chapter 23 The Use of Spies

6. Knowledge of the enemy's disposition can only be obtained from other men.

7. Hence it is that with none in the whole army are more intimate relations maintained than with spies. None should be more liberally rewarded. In no other business should greater secrecy be preserved.

18. Be subtle, be subtle and use your spies for any kind of business.

27. Hence it is only the enlightened ruler and the wise general who will use the highest intelligence of the army for purposes of spying and thereby they achieve great results.

Spies are a most important element in war, because on them depends an army's ability to move.

(Sun Tzu, The Art of War, XIII. The Use of Spies)

After having witnessed Ron's triumph, Hermione activated the Protean Charm on her locket. Severus' own locket, well hidden under his robes, would now get warm and alert him to the successful diversion of the first group of Death Eaters. Opening the locket, Hermione whispered a question to its inhabitant.

"They are ready to move, Hermione. The first group with You-Know-Who and Severus is supposed to Apparate directly to the gates by the forest, behind Hagrid's hut. The second group is to go and take the Ministry."

"Hold on," Hermione whispered. She took one of the mirror shards and hissed, "Harry!"

"Here."

"Gates behind Hagrid's hut. Tell Tonks. Ministry, tell Kingsley. Now."

"Good! On my way," Harry said, and then only quick footsteps could be heard.

"Bellatrix has been ordered to stay behind with the third group and keep an eye on the seer. She's supposed to take her to Hogwarts in half-an-hour...together with her group. They'll go as backup for the siege, and Sibyll is supposed to observe You-Know-Who's victory."

"Thank you, Ethel," Hermione whispered and closed the locket. "Shit, shit, three times cursed shit. We'll have to deal with the LeStrange woman. Damn." She took a deep breath and turned to Parvati. "This is it. We'd better get ready." She took a phial out of her pocket, left the sheltered space under Parvati's knees, being careful to stay out of the area that was visible from the door window, and drank the potion. A moment later, she had regained her normal size. She produced Parvati's wand out of the same pocket and gave it to her. Parvati cast a Disillusionment Charm on Hermione, hid her wand in her robes and resumed the humming.

They waited. Hermione stood at the side of the door, carefully peeking out through its window. So far, everything had worked out as planned. The gates behind Hagrid's hut were where Severus used to Disapparate when Summoned while still a teacher. He had told Voldemort that he knew that area of the Forbidden Forest best and that he had hidden his family's old flying carpet there. This was the only means of secretly accessing Hogwarts' grounds since they had been protected against Apparating and flying in by broom. Flying carpets had been overlooked; no one had used them for decades in Britain. Therefore, using a carpet would be the stealthiest way for Voldemort to enter Hogwarts' grounds with a select group of followers and for starting the attack on Harry. Thankfully, Voldemort had followed Severus' logic.

Hermione shrugged off her self-congratulatory thoughts and focussed on the task ahead. *Why wasn't Lestrage here yet?* Hermione fidgeted impatiently until she finally saw Bellatrix hurry towards the room. She turned to Parvati and hissed, "Now."

Parvati jumped up, crystal ball in one hand, the other outstretched towards the door. When the door opened, she whimpered, "I saw you coming. You're not supposed to harm me."

"I'd love to play with you, but my master forbids it," Bellatrix shrieked. "Move along. We're leaving." She grabbed Parvati's arm and pushed her out of the door, marching her at a fast pace towards the entrance of the building. Hermione followed, being careful not to be detected. A group of, maybe, thirty Death Eaters, some of them with brooms, had gathered at the entrance.

"Off we go. This is the day of victory for our Lord," Bellatrix crowed. She opened the door and stepped outside, dragging Parvati behind her. That was the moment. As soon as Parvati and Bellatrix were outside the building, Hermione ended her Disillusionment Charm, slammed the door behind her and pushed Bellatrix away from Parvati. She took hold of Parvati's arm, ready for side-along Apparition.

"Oh, no you don't," Bellatrix shrieked, getting hold of Parvati's robes. Her group of Death Eaters had managed to block the door behind them by trying to open it and run through it at the same time. Hermione Disapparated.

They reappeared at the shore of the Black Lake, Bellatrix still holding on to Parvati's robes. It had started to rain; the slight rumbling in the distance heralded an approaching thunderstorm.

Hermione turned around and fired a hex at the Death Eater.

By blocking the hex, Lestrage had to let go of Parvati, and both young women used the opportunity to run for the lake shore. A small boat, hastily Summoned by Parvati, floated towards them at breakneck speed.

Bellatrix wasn't idle. She cast one hex after another towards them, and just before they were able to board the boat, Hermione slipped in the mud, and a Cruciatus Curse hit her square in the back. With a scream, she fell to the ground, trying to crawl to the boat but being unable to move in any defined direction because of the pain. She felt as if her bones would burn to ashes, as if her eyeballs would pop out, as if every nerve ending was being stimulated with hot iron rods.

"Sorry, Hermione. Just a sec..." Parvati whispered after having cast an Impediment Jinx. She unceremoniously heaved Hermione into the boat and dropped her. The boat started to move, but the Cruciatus Curse still hadn't been lifted from Hermione and was making her twist, jerk and scream in pain.

Parvati muttered jinxes and hexes until the boat picked up speed. A whispered 'Finite Incantatem' finally released Hermione from her torture. Trembling violently, she leaned out over the side of the boat and forcefully ejected the contents of her stomach.

"What's she waiting for?" Parvati murmured and slowed the boat down.

"Hasn't she Summoned them, yet?" Hermione asked weakly.

"Nowait. Now she's doing it."

"I'll get you, little girls, never fear," Bellatrix cried in a singsong voice and then put her wand to the Dark Mark on her forearm. A moment later, her group of Death Eaters Apparated all around her.

"Accio boats!" At breakneck speed, five small boats, coming from the direction of Hogwarts, shot past Parvati and Hermione and towards the shore where the Death Eaters were waiting. The Death Eaters who had brought brooms were already following the boat.

"Here we go," Parvati said and sped their boat up. After a few moments, with the Death Eaters still in tow, Hermione poured a bottle of ink into the lake. The tip of a tentacle emerged. Hermione sighed contentedly, and the boat moved even faster.

Screams and swearing made them look back. The Giant Squid had plucked the Death Eaters on broomsticks out of the sky and was now pulling them under water, only letting them resurface every few minutes to gasp for breath. Merpeople had capsized the pursuing boats and dragged their prey under water as well. A few of the Death Eaters had escaped and were trying to swim back to the shore as fast as they could but were eventually captured by the Squid and Merpeople, including Bellatrix, who was desperately struggling against one of the Squid's tentacles.

"Excellent," Hermione whispered. She was still trembling from the torture. As soon as the boat entered Hogwarts through the secret gate, she jumped out, almost losing her footing because her knees were so weak, and stumbled towards the Chamber of Secrets.

"Let's see if everyone is in position. Then I have to go."

"Perry!" Parvati exclaimed, and indeed, Perry Price was waiting outside the Chamber. The two lovers fell into each other's arms. Hermione tactfully looked away. She had to get out and meet Harry and Severus outside the grounds.

"Is everything going as planned?" she asked Perry, interrupting the kissing couple.

"I haven't heard anything from the Ministry, yet, but our evacuation is going well. Irma is rounding up the last stragglers. Some of the fourth-year students are hiding because they want to join the fight, obviously, but Irma will soon have tracked them down. Voldemort and his group have entered the castle, but they can't move very fast. I bet he didn't expect so much resistance."

"All right, that's my cue. Good luck." Hermione cast a Portus spell on a small key in her pocket and disappeared a moment later.

She reappeared in the middle of some dense shrubbery behind Hagrid's hut, a risky landing point at best, but well sheltered from unfriendly eyes.

"Nightshade?" That was Severus' voice. He must have heard the noise when she clumsily performed one of the awkward Portkey landings.

"Nundu," she reassured him.

"Over here," he whispered.

Hermione fought her way out of the shrubbery and squinted. She could hardly see anything. The slight rain from earlier had transmuted into a downpour. She saw a dark figure beckoning her towards him. That was Severus; she would have recognized his silhouette anywhere. A few quick steps brought her to him. He briefly squeezed her hand.

"Where's Harry?" Hermione whispered.

"Talking to the snake."

"Did you...?"

"Yes. And it worked just as we had hoped it would. The snake's fine and finally free to do as it wishes."

"Good," Hermione choked out. She wished the business with Harry's Horcrux were over already, too. "Where's the Dementor?"

"Waiting for my next command...over there." Severus pointed at a dark spot under a tree, which almost looked like the rain and fog surrounding it only a bit darker.

The bushes rustled. A gigantic snake slithered out, raised its head and looked at Hermione, its tongue moving in and out and smelling the air. It wavered briefly, then checked out Severus as well, hissed, and disappeared towards the forest.

"That was that," Harry said. He had followed Nagini and was now standing before Hermione looking tense, his face pinched in worry and fear.

Severus had begun to chant his Summoning Charm, and the Dementor was slowly gliding towards Harry, who had closed his eyes. Hermione felt very cold and very depressed all of a sudden. She knew that this was the Dementor's effect on her, but that didn't stop her from wanting to cry her heart out and never stop. She couldn't let that happen, though. She reminded herself forcefully that she had work to do. Harry needed her.

Looking at him, Hermione saw that he was breathing heavily and very fast. Cold sweat was appearing on his forehead, and his skin was very pale. The Dementor bent over Harry's face, its toothless mouth positioned over the scar, and inhaled.

"When do we...?" Her words were cut short by a low howl coming out of Harry's scar and then out of the Dementor's mouth. The Dementor swallowed visibly, and the howling stopped. The Dementor, however, wasn't sated. It moved its mouth towards Harry's. Harry sat there motionless; he had probably lost consciousness again, Hermione thought worriedly.

"Stop," she hissed, but Severus had already cast the banishing charm, and the Dementor was forcefully pushed away from Harry. It seemed to struggle against Severus' command but finally gave in and disappeared in the rain.

"Harry, are you all right?" Hermione had rushed over to her friend and was now kneeling besides him, not caring about the fresh mud on her already soiled jeans. "Harry, Harry, wake up." She shook him while Severus looked on with a frown.

"I knew it, I knew it. It was far too dangerous," Hermione said shrilly, feeling close to hysteria. "Harry, wake up. Harry!"

"Quiet," Severus commanded coldly. "Calm yourself, Nightshade." He stooped and lifted one of Harry's eyelids briefly. *Pennervate!*

Harry's eyes flew open, and he gasped, his eyes darting about in all directions, widened fearfully.

"Harry, are you OK?" Hermione shook his shoulders again.

"Yeah... Is it... Is it gone?" Harry's eyes slowly focussed on Hermione.

"The Dementor is gone, Potter," Severus whispered. "And obviously you haven't lost your mind the little there is of it."

The absurdity of the situation hit Hermione fully and relaxed her at the same time. She snorted. "If you ever lose your sarcasm, Nundu, I'll know that the world has ended. How do you feel, Harry?"

Harry shook his head to clear it. "I feel... fine, actually. Not much of a difference. How can we be sure that the Horcrux is gone?"

"I saw the Dementor swallow, Harry." Hermione smiled, looking at her friend. "And your scar's not red any longer."

"What?" Harry rubbed the scar. "Yeah... it's... I can hardly feel it any more. Uh... and what about my magic? With that soul fragment gone, will it be affected?"

"We shall check that in a moment," Severus whispered, listening intently for any sounds. "Your training should have taught you to compensate for that loss. But we can't stay here for much longer; we can't afford to be seen..." The Dementor-caused fog around them had lifted almost completely now, although it was still raining heavily.

"Watch it, Harry." Hermione had raised her wand and cast a nonverbal Stinging Hex at her friend but was blown off her feet by Harry's silent *Protego*.

"Your magic looks just fine to me," she muttered when she got up, trying in vain to brush the mud off her backside.

"We need to move," Severus urged them on. "Tonks will only be able not to fall over her feet for so long."

"Right," Harry said, a steely gleam in his eyes. He cast a Disillusionment Charm on Severus and Hermione and threw his Invisibility Cloak over himself. Severus took Hermione's Hand, Hermione held on to a fold of Harry's cloak and slowly they made their way to the castle. It was an awkward way of moving, but they couldn't afford to lose each other nor could they afford to be seen by friend or foe.

While they walked over the lawn towards the front steps, screams, yells and red and green flashes told them that the fighting had begun in earnest. The Death Eaters and giants were supposed to be laying siege to the castle, but as soon as they had Apparated outside the gates and fence, the Underground and Order members had attacked. Severus had ordered them not to wait for news from him or anyone else inside but instead to incapacitate as many enemies as possible.

The screams were horrible, and there were loud howls and cracking sounds. Hermione was worried that the protection on the grounds had been broken already; the fighting sounds were too close, too wild. This was not good. The protection should at least have held up until they were safely inside the castle, on their way to the Chamber of Secrets where Voldemort would be waiting, his most trusted Death Eaters at his side and Severus among them. This, at least, was what Voldemort had been led to believe.

In reality, it was Tonks who was impersonating Severus the Death Eater. They had made the switch after the Death Eaters had Apparated to the gates. Severus had gone into the forest to retrieve the flying carpet where Tonks had been waiting for him.

Tonks as Snape had gone back to the gates and flown Voldemort and his Death Eaters to the castle. Meanwhile, the real Severus had stealthily moved to the sheltered area behind Hagrid's hut where he'd met Harry. Harry had called out to Nagini in Parseltongue; Severus had Summoned a Dementor, and Nagini had been relieved of her uninvited guest.

So far, everything had gone like clockwork, and as soon as Voldemort and his followers had entered the castle, Minerva had received a signal from Severus to be prepared.

And now, soaked to the bones from the downpour, Severus, Harry and Hermione walked quickly through the main door. They were moving towards the marble staircase when a hex hit Hermione from behind. Harry caught her and prevented her from falling to the ground.

"What is this? Who are you?" One of the Death Eaters, who had entered Hogwarts' grounds earlier on, apparently had stayed behind at the doors. He had been hiding behind the suits of armour but was now carefully glancing around the armour in their direction, his wand raised.

"Shit," Harry whispered and let go of Hermione. A red flash from his wand hit the attacker. The Death Eater fell like a log.

"How...?"

"The mud! Look at our clothes." That was Severus' voice.

Hermione couldn't believe her eyes. Mud on their robes and shoes showed the outlines of their feet and legs, despite Invisibility Cloak and Disillusionment Charms.

"*Evanesco*." A wave of Severus' wand, and the mud was gone. Hermione added a drying charm for good measure. "Let's move," Severus whispered hoarsely.

Holding on to each other again, they hastened upstairs to get to Myrtle's bathroom but were delayed by the moving staircases. They had reached the fourth floor instead of the second floor, so now they would have to go through the library to reach the next flight of stairs down.

"Damn. Now is not the time to be acting up," Severus swore at no one in particular but stopped short when they heard screams and running footsteps. All three of them flattened themselves against the wall when the footsteps came closer. A moment later, two students ran around the corner...with three Death Eaters in hot pursuit. Ginny and Pansy. Looking terrified, they opened the door to the nearest classroom, ran in and locked it. The three Death Eaters stood outside and laughed before they blasted the door out of its hinges.

"Nowhere to hide, girls," one of them shouted, and the other one laughed nastily as they made their way through the dust and debris of the door, following Ginny and Pansy into the classroom. A moment later, Hermione heard a low 'thud', a grateful, "Thanks, guys", and a relieved looking Pansy came out of the door, wand in hand.

"Bloody hell, that was too close. Why are there so many of them?" she said while Ginny repaired the door. "I'd never thought I'd be so grateful to see a bunch of house-elves."

"Think nothing of it," a squeaky voice said. A house-elf appeared on the doorstep stealthily looking up and down the corridor. Hermione stared. The house-elf was wearing a knitted hat. One of the hats, from the looks of it, that she had knitted in her fourth year in her misguided effort to free the elves without first finding out about their needs and wishes. What was going on here?

The elf stared directly into her eyes, and Hermione got the distinct feeling that a Disillusionment Charm didn't work with elves. Just to be on the safe side, Hermione put her finger to her mouth and was relieved to see the elf nod slightly.

They waited until Ginny and Pansy had disappeared around the next corner, then Severus pulled the Invisibility Cloak off and shook a dazed looking Harry out of his daydreams. "We cannot afford to linger," he hissed, finishing his and Hermione's Disillusionment Charm. "We're taking too long. Hurry!"

Hermione lagged behind and turned towards the house-elf who had watched them in silence.

"Why?" she mouthed.

"Slaves cannot harm wizards," the elf squeaked.

So that was it. In order to protect Hogwarts, the students and themselves, the house-elves had to be freed. Freed with her knitted hats, no less. Not quite certain if she should be amused or affronted, Hermione let herself be pulled away and down the corridor towards the library.

The doors of the library, which reached from floor to high ceiling, stood wide open, the glass shattered. A cold breeze hit them when they carefully stepped up to Madam Pince's desk.

"Dementors," Harry hissed.

"Where?" Hermione couldn't see any.

"Damn it," Severus swore. He stooped down at something behind the desk. Hermione went to his side and, crying out in shock, kneeled down. "Ernie!"

Ernie MacMillan didn't react. He sat slumped against the desk, slack-jawed, eyes open but unseeing. He neither reacted to Hermione's shaking him nor to Severus' "Rennervate."

Harry watched stony-faced and very pale.

"He's gone. A Dementor..." Severus looked around wildly. Hermione watched him, wide-eyed.

"No! Mother!" Severus jumped up and ran towards Madam Pince's office. "Filch?" he cried. "Where is she?"

"I'm here, Severus."

"Thank Merlin."

Hermione and Harry followed him and looked into the office. Filch lay on the floor, looking exhausted. His head was in Madam Pince's lap, a wand held in his trembling hand. "They're safe," Madam Pince whispered. "They all are. We got them all to safety, thanks to Argus."

Madam Pince was Severus' mother? Hermione's mouth fell open; a glance at Harry showed her that he was similarly baffled.

"Bloody hell," Severus whispered. "What happened here?"

"Dementors. The Ministry has fallen, and they got in. A whole group of them, just when we were getting the last students through. Ernie was trying to protect us." Madam Pince's voice faltered. "I added my Patronus to his, but we weren't strong enough, and I couldn't leave the students." She started to sob softly. "I wanted to help Ernie, but the children..."

"I see," Severus whispered softly, squeezing her arm. "And then?"

"One of the Dementors attacked Ernie and kissed him. I was so scared, I couldn't produce another Patronus, and there were still two children to get through. I was prepared to shield them with my body when the Dementors came towards us, but then Argus took my wand. He... he cast the spell. And it worked. Argus cast a corporeal Patronus...and a very strong one at that. The Dementors scattered in all directions, and we managed to get the children through. And then you came..."

"I've never heard of anyone coming into their magic so late," Severus whispered and looked at Filch with wonder in his eyes. "But you must go now. We must end this. Take him with you." He gestured towards Ernie.

"Yes," Harry said grimly. "Let's end this once and for all."

Madam Pince and Filch grasped the Portkey that would take them to Nan Guthan, made sure that Ernie touched it together with them, counted to five and disappeared.

"Madam Pince is your mother?" Hermione whispered. She couldn't think straight. If she did, she would remember Ernie's fate. And if she let that thought into the forefront of her mind, she'd lose it completely, she knew. Hannah was so looking forward to seeing Ernie again, and now... Hannah was in charge of the evacuated children... She'd be there when Ernie appeared. Hermione swallowed violently, the tears threatening to fall.

Severus scowled. "We must focus on what lies before us, Nightshade. We're soldiers."

"Right," Hermione whispered, swallowed again and turned away from the spot where Ernie had lain just moments before.

At top speed, the three of them ran towards the rear exit of the library and down the next flight of stairs. Thankfully, they didn't change direction. While they ran, Hermione activated the Protean Charm on the old coin from their fifth-year DA training.

And so it happened that they arrived in the bathroom on the second floor where a group of friends and allies was already waiting for them.

There were ghosts and house-elves. There was Remus Lupin, Perry Price and Parvati, still in the disguise of Sibyll Trelawney.

Ron and Luna had come. Neville was there, too, and so was Ginny and, to Hermione's absolute surprise and delight, Pansy Parkinson. All of the teachers had come, including Minerva McGonagall, who smiled and walked towards them. Hermione and Parvati drank their Polyjuice antidotes; they wanted to go into battle as their true selves.

"You... You're dead," Pansy cried. "How... what?"

"No time to explain now, but Draco isn't dead, either," Hermione said and flashed the surprised Slytherin a smile. The light shining in Pansy's eyes after this revelation was certainly worth the short delay. From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Ron watching the exchange with narrowed eyes. He didn't say anything but frowned and nodded slowly.

"There's a group of people who were rescued at the last minute. Some of them work in the background, some will fight here with us tonight," Minerva McGonagall said to the teachers and students who knew nothing of the Underground as yet. Remus Lupin was one of the trusted Order members who did.

"The teachers shan't go down with you," Minerva addressed Harry. "We'll keep your backs covered and prevent any Death Eater from going down after you."

"Good," Severus said. "What's happened at the Ministry? How could it have fallen?"

"We were betrayed," Minerva whispered. "One of the Aurors, not an Order member thankfully, reported to Umbridge that something was being prepared. You know how we wanted to make certain that no one could access the Ministry without authorisation?"

Severus nodded, and Hermione whispered, "Umbridge?"

"Yes. Merlin alone knows what Rufus was thinking by keeping her in office. She'd been moved out of a position of influence a while ago..." Hermione glanced at Harry and saw him nod grimly. "Anyway, one of them must have opened a gate because a great force of armed Death Eaters had stormed the Ministry before anyone could raise the alarm." Minerva sighed shakily and dabbed at her eyes. "They tortured and killed Rufus; they wanted to know why he'd been expecting an attack, but Rufus didn't spill a word."

Severus and Harry had gone very pale.

"Percy? Is he alive?" Ron whispered.

"I don't know," Minerva said. "All I know is that as soon as Rufus was killed, You-Know-Who was appointed Headmaster, and I was fired. This is... I can't quite explain... The castle lets you feel these things, so I know. And Kingsley sent me his Patronus. I closed the Floo connection to the Ministry before the attack began; they had no way of entering that way, but they invaded as soon as the Anti-Apparition spells fell. I've no idea how Riddle learned what happened."

"The Dark Mark," Severus whispered, looking stricken. "It can be used to send simple messages; the burning of the Mark isn't always very intense. While, ah, he is alive, all Death Eaters can activate it, although no one is as skilled in manipulating it as him. During the years of his absence, the Mark was dormant."

"We have to hurry," Harry said urgently. "The Order and the Underground will have a hard time holding the Death Eaters back without the protective spells to keep them out of Hogwarts' grounds."

"Focus on your task, Potter," Severus snarled. "The Underground will deal with the Death Eaters. They won't know what hit them."

"Who is the White Phoenix?" Minerva asked.

"What?" Hermione asked, baffled.

"When Kingsley sent me his Patronus with the message that the Ministry had fallen, he mentioned that the White Phoenix had encouraged our fighters and renewed their faith. He said that they hadn't given up the Ministry quite yet and would do anything to regain control."

"Not as bad as it could be, then, but I've no idea who that Phoenix is," Severus murmured. "But if you meet him, send him down. We need to go before they decide to come back out again."

They marched down to the Chamber of Secrets in tense silence. Harry went ahead, closely followed by Ginny, Ron and Luna. Severus, Hermione and their other friends were hot on their heels.

When they finally reached the door to the Chamber, Harry paused and turned around. He looked at each of them with a twisted smile on his face.

"Thank you for being here with me," he said. "I am fortunate to have so many friends who I trust completely. Let's go."

Hermione and the others nodded. Hermione's heart was beating madly, the adrenalin in her system nearly making her sick. Severus had taken her hand and squeezed it. Glancing into his eyes, however, didn't make her feel any better. What she saw there was a good-bye: a fatalistic acceptance of fate, a finality she didn't agree with.

She tried to convey optimism and hope in her glance together with all the love and longing she could put into a brief look.

His lips twitched, and he let her hand go. She gripped her wand tightly. Harry took a deep breath, raised both hands and pushed the door open.

"Looking for someone, Harry? About time, too."

Lord Voldemort and his most trusted followers were standing in a half-circle when Harry and his friends filed into the room.

Voldemort opened his mouth, obviously not quite finished with his little speech, but then became aware of Severus getting into position at Hermione's side.

"Severus?" he asked, unbelieving, and whirled on the spot to look at the impostor in his own ranks. Alas, Tonks, who had morphed back into her brightly-coloured self, threw herself to the floor, rolled towards Harry's group and cast a rapid succession of hexes at the Death Eaters, which momentarily took them by surprise.

That was the signal for Harry's friends, and they attacked.

"Traitor," Voldemort hissed, and a green flash moved towards the spot where Severus had stood a heartbeat before, but Hermione, who was teamed up with him, had levitated him away just in time.

In the meantime, the fighting was in full force. Tonks, Lupin and Neville went up against Greyback and Theodore Nott the elder. The Carrows attacked Pansy, who was assisted by Ron and Luna. Ginny, Parvati and Perry had taken on the Lestrage brothers and Macnair.

Wormtail and Bellatrix stood at Voldemort's side, wands raised. Wormtail looked as he usually did: shaggy and slimy but basically unhurt. Hermione wasn't too surprised that he had escaped the Acromantulas; he wouldn't have fought in the front line, anyway. Bellatrix, however, looked rather battered. She was sporting a black eye; there were scratches and bruises on her arms and face, and one prominent purple circle on her left cheek told Hermione that the Giant Squid must have had her in his clutches

quite firmly. She wondered how the Dark witch could have escaped.

"You cannot win, little Harry," Voldemort whispered menacingly. He flicked a finger at Bellatrix and Wormtail and hissed, "Kill him."

"Still relying on your Horcruxes, Tom?" Harry mocked while Severus and Hermione duelled Wormtail and Bellatrix.

"Because if you are, you're in for a surprise," Harry said while ducking the Stunner cast at him. "We found them all and destroyed them. Nagini sends her regrets, but she prefers to live her own life from now on."

"Is that so? Then I shall simply make a new one." Voldemort's red eyes didn't show any emotion, but his voice sounded even more threatening now. "Well, well, well. I suppose our dear Severus taught you all you needed to know, didn't he? How illuminating."

Voldemort's voice had become very smooth. "Here we have a wizard who has been honoured beyond belief by his master, but is that enough for him, I ask myself? And I must answer: No. It is not enough for him. He wants more."

Voldemort stepped to the side and elegantly dodged the curses Harry cast at him, blocking them in almost casual dismissal.

"Look at you, Severus. Who'd have known that you were such a traitor? You who were my right-hand man, my most trusted servant."

Wormtail whimpered in protest and turned around to complain. The Full Body Bind cast by Severus hit him full in the back, and he fell to the ground, as stiff as a log.

"Yes, my most trusted servant." Voldemort dismissively released Wormtail from the Petrificus Totalus and took on Harry and Severus at the same time. Wormtail sniffled and crawled out of the way.

"Here you are, Severus. And young Harry, too. Both of you here, together with me. We are the three abandoned boys who could have ruled the world together as men. Three wizards, tainted but also strengthened by Muggle blood. But, alas, it's not to be. The three of us are like the heads of the Runespoor, don't you think, Severus? Now, which one do you think you are? The planner? Hardly. The dreamer? No, that's dear Harry, here." Harry barely managed to jump out of the way of the curse flashed his way at lightning speed. "No, Severus, you are the critic. The one whose head always gets bitten off."

Voldemort whirled around and Disapparated, reappearing a heartbeat later behind Severus' back. Hermione cried a warning, unable to react quickly enough while holding Bellatrix at bay.

Severus spun around, but the "Avada Kedavra" had already left Voldemort's lips.

Hermione saw the green flash leave Voldemort's wand and heard the sound of the powerful force rolling towards Severus, but she was frozen to the spot. Everything seemed unreal as if it were in slow motion. At the last moment, she threw herself towards Severus, trying to push him out of the way or taking the curse in his stead, but while she was jumping, she realised that it was too late. She saw how Severus eyes widened and then closed.

"Noooo!" she screamed, but before the curse hit, a scarlet and golden flash appeared in front of Severus and swallowed the curse. Fawkes burst into flames and fell to the ground. At the same time, Hermione reached Severus and pushed him to the side, just barely escaping a curse cast by Wormtail. They both fell into a heap on top of each other, but they immediately turned around, ready to cover each other's backs.

Harry hadn't been idle. He had used the distraction to bind Wormtail in ropes just as the latter was about to attack Severus and Hermione from behind.

"I'm the one you want to fight," Harry said quietly, casting a Sectumsempra towards Voldemort that was quickly blocked by the Dark Wizard after a warning from Bellatrix, who was now covering Voldemort's back.

Hermione and Severus got back on their feet. Hermione used the brief reprieve to check what was going on with the others while Severus carefully picked up Fawkes and put him into his bottomless pocket.

Tonks was lying in a heap opposite an unmoving MacNair. Remus stood protectively over her, desperately trying to fight off Greyback.

Parvati and Perry stood back to back, fighting Rodolphus Lestrange and Alecko Carrow.

Ron and Luna had just managed to stun Amicus Carrow, and Ginny was duelling Rabastan Lestrange. Pansy hurried to her aid.

Neville was without an opponent, looking around wildly for where his help might be needed most.

"So that's how it is?" Voldemort asked gleefully. "Holding on to your spy, are you? Well then, you'll have to do, little Harry." He stared into Harry's eyes, causing the younger wizard to cry out and fall to his knees.

"Harry, we're here," Hermione cried and tried to move to Harry's side but was blocked by Bellatrix.

Dodging the Cruciatus Curse thrown at her, Hermione cried, "How did you get in here, anyway?"

"The pipes," Bellatrix screamed and laughed like a maniac but continued casting curse after curse at Hermione.

Damn, Hermione thought. They had completely forgotten about the pipes. If the Basilisk could get out of the Chamber through the pipes, there had to be a way in as well. She dodged and jumped, blocked and cast spells, but as well trained and skilled as she had become, Lestrange was still stronger. Her madness seemed to give her extra strength; her ruthlessness allowed her to attack without mercy, no matter the method. She neither cared about herself nor others as long as her actions benefited her master.

Hermione breathed heavily. She was getting tired, but she had to hold out as long as possible to keep Bellatrix off Harry and Severus' backs, for Severus had come to Harry's aid and was standing at his side, attacking Voldemort fiercely with the full arsenal of Dark hexes and curses at his command. Voldemort couldn't keep his hold on Harry's mind, released him and instead returned Severus' attacks with similar ferocity. Dark green and purple mists were rising between them, and Voldemort was laughing, obviously very much enjoying himself.

"Spy," he spat out. "What do you think you're doing? Useless traitor, cowardly stool pigeon."

Severus didn't let himself be provoked. He continued his attacks until Harry quietly stepped next to his side and said softly, "Now."

"I am a spy," Severus proclaimed loud and clear. "And as such I must be as subtle as a shadow. I am the shadow man. But subtlety is something you've never much appreciated, have you?" He jumped when angry flashes shot from Voldemort's wand. *"Be subtle, be subtle and use your spies for any kind of business!"* Running and jumping, Severus raised his wand towards Harry and continued, "To you, the son of a beloved friend, the best friend of a beloved woman, I lend my strength." He chanted the incantation they had chosen from "Body and Soul: How the Greatest Power of All Holds it Together."

Harry seemed to stand straighter, a faint bluish glow surrounding him.

Dammit, Hermione thought. She should be included in what was to come, but instead she was wearing herself out fighting Lestrange. She somersaulted across the room, hoping to distract the vicious witch, but to no avail. While Hermione was struggling to her feet, Bellatrix had caught up with her, grinned like a madwoman and closed in for the kill. "Avada Ke..."

"*Sectumsempra.*"

Hermione watched incredulously as Neville's spell cut into Bellatrix Lestrange's neck with a sickening noise and cleanly severed her head. With open eyes, still staring in surprise, the head landed on the floor a few feet away from the body that hadn't even slumped yet.

Hermione felt very sick, and Neville must have felt likewise since he had gone very pale, but he also looked determined. A fierce glimmer brightened his eyes, and he shook the shock of having killed someone off him like a duck shaking water off its back.

"Harry needs us," Hermione whispered, staring around wildly. Remus and Tonks, who had regained consciousness, were now fighting both Lestrange brothers and Fenrir Greyback.

Perry Price lay on the ground next to an unconscious Pansy, and Parvati stood protectively over both of them; their opponents were lying motionless in a corner. From the empty expression in their enemies' eyes, Hermione surmised that they were dead.

Wormtail was nowhere in sight.

Luna, Ron and Ginny hurried towards Remus and Tonks and, in a joint effort, Stunned and bound the Lestrange brothers, but then Fenrir Greyback went berserk and jumped at Remus' throat.

Tonks tried to help, but a swipe of Greyback's huge claw-like hand sent her flying across the room. Greyback's other hand had closed around Remus' windpipe, and he slowly opened his mouth wide, grinning at the struggling Remus, ready to rip his throat open with his teeth.

Hermione stared in horror, just like her three friends who had wanted to come to Remus' aid. When Greyback's teeth buried themselves in Lupin's flesh, a squeaked, 'No!' briefly distracted the vicious creature. Hermione watched in disbelief as the rat that was Wormtail Transfigured back into his human form and buried his silver hand with surprising force in Greyback's chest. With a sickening crunch, Wormtail ripped Greyback's heart out.

"I hope you'll live, my friend," Wormtail said with a glance at the bleeding Remus and transformed back into his rat form, scampering away.

Ginny, Luna, Ron and Hermione stared at each other. Tonks in the meantime had rushed back to Remus' side, tending to his wound and chanting healing spells.

"He'll live," she told Hermione. "Go and help Harry."

Harry and Severus were fighting for their lives. Voldemort had laughed when Severus had chanted the spell from the ancient book and attacked them both with a fierceness that belied his earlier exertions, a fierceness which would have brought any ordinary wizard to exhaustion.

If they didn't defeat him now, they never would, Hermione thought. Swiftly Apparating to Severus' side, she cried the incantation that would add her strength to Harry's.

"Here is the best friend of your foe, who lends her love and strength. I am Hermione Granger whom you believed to be dead. I am the dead woman who is united with the shadow man, the man who is the clever spy," she cried, revelling in the shocked and slightly fearful look Voldemort gave her. "*For Spies cannot be usefully employed without a certain intuitive sagacity.*"

Harry breathed deeply and cast, "Imperio!". Voldemort laughed, shaking his head. "Is that all you have to defeat me, little Harry? For I counter with *Neither shall live while the other survives*," and I shall make very certain that you'll not be the one to survive. *Avada...*" He stopped, shaking his head. "Get... out... of my head, little Harry." But apparently he couldn't break free completely since he didn't repeat the Killing Curse.

"That's right." Ron had joined them. "And I add my strength and the love of a best friend to Harry." He chanted the incantation. "And about spies...*They cannot be properly managed without benevolence and straightforwardness.*

Harry's hold on Voldemort's mind seemed to become stronger for Voldemort lowered his wand, closed his eyes and murmured softly to himself.

Ginny had joined them as well. "All my love and strength goes to my soul mate, the love of my life," she said softly, eliciting a deep sigh from Harry while she chanted the ancient spell. She added, "Give up, Tom. Your spy has beaten you. *Without subtle ingenuity of mind, one cannot make certain of the truth of their reports* And ingenuity of mind is something you always lacked."

Voldemort had started to sway on his feet, a soft hum coming from his mouth and his nostrils. Hermione felt a wind rising and wondered what he still had in reserve. Harry's strength should have become irresistible, even for Voldemort. She knew that Harry didn't want to kill and hoped that he'd succeed in getting Voldemort to surrender.

"Without our spy, Tom, you would have won," Harry said. "But our spy has achieved great results for us; he is valued beyond compare. *For spies are a most important element in water, because on them depends an army's ability to move.*

"Give up, Tom. I have the means to make you human again. Join us; repent and be a wizard again, not a monster. I don't hate you. I can understand you and so can Severus. We are, as you said yourself, three lost boys who could achieve great things together as men. I can feel your pain. I willingly give you a part of my own soul." He chanted the ancient incantation that would reunite the soul fragments, and the very moment he finished, the hum that came from Voldemort rose to a thunderous roar, and a vortex of magical mist started to form around him. The force was so strong that it made the sparse furniture in the Chamber fly around in circles, carried and broken by flashes of magic, green, red, and blue, zapping through the mist. Hermione watched in horror as one of the red flashes hit Severus full in the chest. Blood was spurting from his wound, and he slumped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. A moment later, something hit Hermione's temple, and everything went black.

Epilogue of part 2

I feel lonely. After my return to the place with the big walls and the abundance of rodents, my human neglected me. She is not here. I want company. I want to talk to her. I am her familiar, after all.

I go and search. I get distracted; there are interesting smells here. This one is from the cat-who-isn't. She is marking everything with her scent and showing everyone who is in charge. Should I pay her a visit? Perhaps later.

There is the smell of the fierce one. Her human calls her Mrs. Norris. She is true-cat; she is beautiful. She is strong. She has a mind of her own. I adore her. But she isn't here anymore. I shall look for her. Later.

But here it is, the scent of my human. This is where she walked, together with the one who has become almost as dear to me as her. They understand me both. I can speak with both of them, although they aren't aware of it. I want to be with them. I shall look for them. Now.

My search leads me through the place of musty smells, of banished mice, of paper and glue, leather and cardboard. My mistress stays here often, but this time she just passed through. Stairs. Downstairs for two flights. Here is her scent. A door, quickly opened. I don't have my reputation of being a particularly clever cat for nothing.

Behind the door, a bathroom. A gaping hole in the wall where one of the ponds should be. The humans call the ponds basins, I believe. My human's smell leads down the tunnel. How interesting. Is she catching mice? I follow.

A door. The smell is strong. She must be in there. I enter.

A lot of people are in this room. A short sniff in the air makes me locate my human quickly. She lies there, half-slumped over her mate...the other human I love. I go to them and check them out. They're asleep, lazy buggers. Their chests move slowly but steadily. I climb on my human's lap, tread, turn around, settle down and watch.

The crowd in the middle of the room behaves strangely. A bald man with slits as a nose stands there, brown eyes wide open, looking young and innocent, a small smile on his face. A young man with the green eyes of a cat stands opposite him and gapes. A very old man with long, white hair and a white beard stands at the young man's side and hits him on the back repeatedly, uttering a 'Well done, Harry. Well done, all of you.' I've seen this man before. I think he was in charge of the place before the cat-who-isn't became its mistress.

The others stand and gape at the man in white.

And there it is, the smell of the rat. I stand up and stretch.

The young man now smiles, stretches a hand out towards the befuddled, slit-nosed wizard and says, "Come, Tom. There is much you need to learn, now."

The smell of the rat gets stronger; I get up from my mistress' lap.

"You're not letting him live? Are you crazy?" It is the rat-who-isn't. I've encountered it before. It is an enemy. The dog-who-wasn't told me that.

The rat-who-isn't takes a knife out of its pocket, thrusts it into the hands of a brown-haired, puzzled looking, young man and forces the young man's hand to slit the throat of the slit-nosed wizard who stands in the middle. The rat's thrust is so strong that the wizard's head is almost separated from the body. There is a lot of blood.

The green-eyed, young man cries, "Neville!"

Another young man, a ginger, cries, "Wormtail!"

"Just making sure the prophecy is fulfilled, as well as my life debt to you, Harry." The rat-who-isn't grins and transforms back into its rodent form. This is my moment.

I jump off my human's lap, and with much-practiced, smooth and soundless strides, I leap towards the rat before it can scamper away. No playing with the prey this time, too risky. With a deep satisfaction that puzzles me a bit, I strike and bury my sharp claws in the rat's body. It squirms, fights and threatens to bite me, mangy thing that it is. I bite its head off.

Why everybody is yelling is beyond me. The green-eyed man lets out a high-pitched wail and falls to the ground. I'm sorry that I couldn't do anything for the befuddled, slit-nosed wizard who lies on the ground, too, not breathing any longer, a gaping wound in his neck. But I know that the other one, the one with the green-eyes, will live.

I'm not sorry for having finally disposed of the rat-who-wasn't. It feels like revenge and late satisfaction for my friend, the dog-who-wasn't. He hated that rat with a fierceness that astounded me. We don't usually hate prey; we merely kill it.

My work is done. I just need to wait until my human and her mate wake up. In the meantime, I shall take a nap.

End of Part II

Part III - Return: Refusal of the Return

Chapter 24 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who still transfers my babble into language, sorts my random punctuation and is a good friend. Her patience seems endless.

This chapter is dedicated to my beta Melusin.

Part III Return

Chapter 24 Refusal of the Return

Having found bliss and enlightenment in the other world, the hero may not want to return to the ordinary world to bestow the boon onto his fellow man.

(Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces)

This must be hell. It was dark, and the nothingness of death enveloped him almost completely, being only briefly interrupted by moments of pain and flashes of bright light. Oh, yes, there was pain. There was PAIN. His whole world fluctuated between nothingness and pain. It was a searing, mind-numbing sensation that forced all awareness inside, that didn't acknowledge anything else and demanded his full attention. When there was pain, then there was nothing but pain. He moaned.

Something was prying his jaws apart. Cool liquid was filling his mouth, running down his throat. A sound: familiar, comforting, like a hum. Then there was nothing again.

When he realized that this wasn't actually hell and that the world had come back, it was still dark, but the pain had died down to a numb ache, a feeling as though all his muscles had been wrenched from his bones, as if all his joints had been torn apart, the sinews and tendons stretched beyond endurance. But this meant that there were muscles. He had muscles. He had sinews and tendons. He was capable of thinking and feeling. He knew that Inferi couldn't think and feel, so, after eliminating the other possibilities, there was only one answer left. He was alive. He was alive, and he felt as weak as an infant. He was the centre of his universe, and there was no one else there. He didn't remember anyone else, and right now, he didn't even care about anyone else.

His new world was silent, except for the painful beating of his heart. Gradually, he remembered that his pain had always originated in his heart and spread out, cramping up his whole body until it reached his fingers and toes. But now the pain had become somewhat more bearable, and his heart was just beating along: loudly and fast. It

hammered in a steady rhythm until it sang, *Love is like oxygen...*

What? Severus' eyes snapped open. It was still dark, and he couldn't see a thing, but the hammering of the frantic beat continued and so did the singing, which was horribly out of tune.

He rubbed his chest and felt the soft vibrations from inside. His heart was beating, but that infernal hammering and singing was clearly coming from somewhere else. The caterwalling finally gave Severus a clue as to where he must be and completely dragged him back into the world of the living. Only one person could sing with such enthusiasm and so horribly out of tune... and an old tune from the Seventies, no less.

"Paulie," Severus whispered, paused, and then croaked somewhat louder, "PAULIE!"

Severus registered with satisfaction that his voice wasn't suffering the same weakness as his body. He had his doubts about his mind, though *Paulie?*

The music, if you could call it music, stopped. Hasty footsteps approached the room he was in; it must have been Paulie's master bedroom and the door was thrown open. With a click of a switch, there was light. Severus squinted.

"Your Highness!" Paul Snape cried. "About time you graced us with your presence, man."

Severus' Muggle cousin grinned from ear to ear and sat down on a chair besides Severus' bed. He took Severus' hand; Severus almost snatched it away and patted it.

"Bloody hell, Sev, you gave me quite a scare. Good to see you awake, lad. Good to see ya."

Were those tears glittering in Paulie's eyes? Certainly not. Severus blinked again.

"What? Where?" he croaked out.

"Where do you think? My house, of course," Paulie said, still patting Severus' hand and giving him a sly look. "Good old Muggle neighbourhood."

Muggle? "What? How? Who?" Severus shook his head to clear it. He wasn't exactly feeling eloquent, right now.

Paulie smirked. "You could have told me that you're a wizard, you know. Just think what we could have done to pull the lasses, back then, with a bit of that magic of yours..." Paulie stared dreamily at the ceiling.

"Humour me," Severus grunted. "How did you learn about, ah, magic? Who brought me here? Why am I here?" He paused, trying to quell the fears that had suddenly sprung up.

"Your little Nightshade is all right, and so is your mum. Don't worry," Paulie patted his hand again as Severus let out a long sigh of relief, his head falling back onto the pillow. A heavy weight had been lifted from his heart; a weight he had only just realized had to have been there all the time since he had regained consciousness. It might have been part of the pain that had been squeezing his heart since it seemed to be beating more lightly, all of a sudden.

"Nightshade brought you here...you and all the others. Who'd have thought that I'd be running a wizard sanctuary one of these days?" Paulie laughed.

"Why?" Severus whispered. "Where is she? Who are they?" His heart turned somersaults at the thought of Hermione. She was alive; that was what counted. His mother seemed to be safe as well. The rest would sort itself out.

"Aunt Eileen is back at that school, and your Nightshade returns here every evening. Dunno where she goes hopping around during the day. You know, she took me on one of those disappearing trips with her..."

"Disapparating?"

"If you say so. Anyway, once was enough for me, thank you very much. Teleportation! Who'd have thought...?" Paulie's voice trailed off, his eyes glazing over.

"Why are we here?" Severus asked, afraid to hear the answer. "Who else is here?"

"I'll let Gandalf explain that to you."

"Who?"

"That old bloke who looks like Gandalf. You know Gandalf...that old wizard from the Lord of the Rings? Long white beard, long white hair, aura of power, speaks in riddles... He's just like him."

"What?" Severus sat up in alarm, disbelief twisting his features. "What's going on here?" he shouted.

"Wait, I'll get him for you." Paulie rose from Severus' bedside, patting his hand one last time. "He'll explain it better than I can." With a happy smirk, Paulie left.

Severus closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying to calm his once again wildly beating heart. What was wrong with his heart, anyway, with all that frantic and painful hammering? And why was breathing so painful?

A few moments later, the door opened again, and an apparition that looked just like Albus Dumbledore stepped in.

"Am I dead?" Severus whispered, feeling faint.

"My dear Severus," the apparition said. "You're not dead and neither am I, although we both came very close."

Severus closed his eyes. "This can't be real."

"Take a few deep breaths, my friend. Your heart isn't as strong as it should be, yet. It's been hit by far too many vicious spells. That last stunner..."

Severus ground his teeth. He was sure that he was losing his mind. "You look like Dumbledore. You sound like him. How can that be? Who are you? Never mind my strength, I want the truth," he bellowed, rising up, but falling back onto his pillows again immediately. His heart seemed to jump over a skipping rope in his chest.

"I can't blame you for disbelieving me," the white-bearded man said. "I wouldn't believe it myself, either. But it's really me. Look." The old man whistled a soft tune, and Fawkes the Phoenix appeared and sat down on the old man's shoulder, rubbing his head against his cheek.

"Fawkes!" Severus exclaimed. "What?"

The bird blinked and looked at Severus, obviously very aware of its continuing importance in being proof of good intentions. Then, it started to sing. It was a calming song, and a happy one. As always when Fawkes sang, Severus felt as if all the weight of the world was being lifted from him. He felt hope and confidence and the unswerving faith that everything was going to turn out well.

When Fawkes stopped singing, he nibbled at the old man's hair. Dumbledore, if it was indeed him, raised his hand and gently stroked his familiar's wings and back. It was his right hand, and it looked as white and unblemished as his left hand, which was resting in his lap.

"All right, say what you have to say," Severus whispered, feeling mellow enough to listen to anyone and anything.

"I did not foresee what would happen to me, Severus; there was no way that I could have foreseen that. I would not have put you through so much pain and guilt had I known." The old man swallowed and looked at the ceiling. "You found out what Lily Potter discovered, didn't you? You found out that many of the Dark spells dealing with souls and the preservation of life are in fact perversions of benevolent, ancient magic that was devised for safe-keeping?"

Severus nodded.

"And you guessed correctly that Horcrux creation is a manifestation of predatory magic, mimicking the protective power of sacrifices made with love."

"Yes," Severus sighed. "And?"

"You would have found out what I know now if you'd had as much time to study the topic as I had. There's even more to the Horcrux perversion than we thought. Its creation actually mimics a beneficial magic that surpasses the protective spells, but it seems to work only for people whose familiar is a Phoenix."

"Oh," Severus muttered. Some things started to click into place in his mind.

"Yes. When someone who is associated with a Phoenix sacrifices his life, then the Phoenix swallows a part of that person's soul and binds it to this earth. Just as a Horcrux is spelled to do, but the Phoenix does it willingly. I'd never have thought that my death would be considered a sacrifice, but apparently that's what it was. Either for Draco's soul, or Harry's life there and then, or the cause... I don't know.

"When I fell off the Astronomy Tower, I didn't die. Instead, I fell into a deep sleep that resembled death. I slept long enough for my body to heal completely, as you can see." He raised both arms and looked at them in wonder.

"When I woke up, it was because Fawkes had sung to me after he'd had a burning day. He sang a tune I've never heard before. Obviously, we both rose from the ashes. It took me several days to remember who I was and to gather my strength, but eventually I left my tomb and got my bearings. When I realised that I was really alive, with my magic intact, and as healthy as a hundred-and-fifty-year-old man can be, I tried to find out what had been going on. I didn't want to walk into Minerva's office and give her a heart attack, you know."

"Quite," Severus agreed. "Go on."

"So, I sneaked around the grounds and encountered a large group of Death Eaters waiting at the gates. They were cheerful, ready to invade Hogwarts, and from what I could gather from their gabbing was that the Ministry had fallen. So I went there."

"The white phoenix... That was you?" Severus whispered.

"Yes, that's what they called me after they saw my Patronus." Dumbledore smiled. "Obviously, my sudden appearance there gave them new hope and renewed strength since the witches and wizards who had fled the Ministry re-formed, and soon after, they won the Ministry back. I didn't linger and Apparated to Hogwarts where I gave Minerva a fright after all, but I also managed to cheer up many of our fighters. And so I finally made my way down to the Chamber of Secrets, but when I arrived there, the battle was already won, and all you brave people had helped Harry to defeat Tom in a way I never would have thought possible, to be honest. I have to admit that I was ready to sacrifice Harry, and as many of you of us as necessary. But Harry obviously had his own ideas."

Severus breathed deeply and smirked. "For some odd reason, I can now believe that it's really you." He swallowed, trying to suppress his tears, but not quite succeeding. If he could believe in the old man's existence, then he wasn't a murderer. "So it's over now? We won?"

"In a sense," Dumbledore said, looking sad. The usually sparkling eyes of the former Headmaster had become dull; the smile was forced, his voice sounding as if he were choking on unshed tears.

"It could be over, but Harry...."

"Potter?" Severus interrupted. "What happened to him? When we cast the spell, he seemed to gain control over the Dark Lord. At least, that's what it looked like to me before something hit me and I passed out."

"Then you didn't witness the true end of Voldemort, I'm afraid," Dumbledore said.

"What happened?"

"Well, you were there and saw how Voldemort couldn't hold out against Harry's strength when Harry invaded his mind. That must have been the last thing Voldemort was expecting, and thus Harry succeeded in capturing his mind and forcing him to feel all the love he had within him. And so Harry offered to make Tom's soul whole again."

Severus nodded. He remembered only too well; he had been involved in that incantation himself. "Yes, the old incantation did work well, didn't it? All that love and compassion offered to Potter proved to be 'the power the dark lord knoweth not' from the prophecy."

"Exactly!" Dumbledore agreed. "But it did not end there. Shortly after Voldemort's defeat, when Harry faced Tom...the boy who'd been lost...suddenly, Peter Pettigrew changed into his human form and forced Neville Longbottom to stab Tom to death."

"What? Damned rat!" Severus spat. "Another mistake that will haunt me forever..."

"Let me finish," Dumbledore interrupted. "We were, of course, speechless. We watched in horror as Pettigrew pushed a knife into Neville's hand, and, forcing that hand with his own, slit Tom's throat."

"Tom," Severus snarled. "You still call him 'Tom' after all he did, after all he became?"

"He was Tom Riddle when he died. There was no 'Dark Lord', anymore. You know as well as I do that the worst monsters, the most terrifying creatures, are our fellow human beings. Voldemort tried, and he got far, but in the end, he was human. He died as a human being and not as a demon, nor as an evil spirit."

"Almost too merciful a death for one like him. Potter did him a favour in letting him move on."

"I don't even want to think about a demon with his spirit, to be frank, and I don't really know if Tom managed to move on. I hope he did. I don't think his mindless self would have been capable of becoming a ghost."

"So he is really and truly dead now?" Severus shuddered and let out a deep breath.

"Yes, he is really and truly dead, but I am still not finished," Dumbledore said sadly.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "What happened to Potter? Was he hurt by Pettigrew?"

"No. As soon as the deed was done, Pettigrew let out a mad laugh and transformed back into a rat. We all tried to hex him, but before we could get to him, Miss Granger's cat came from ... somewhere..., caught the rat and killed it."

Severus' eyes had widened. "How very convenient," he sneered. "Aren't we lucky that we can blame it on the cat? No trial, no verdict, no lengthy debates about what to do with the traitor."

"Indeed," sighed Dumbledore, "but it's still not the end. When everyone had stopped staring at Crookshanks and the dead rat, we became aware that Harry had collapsed. This may have happened the moment Tom died, but there was too much happening at that time; no one was looking his way. We were all too busy watching Pettigrew. Harry fell into a coma and hasn't woken up since. Poppy couldn't revive him; the Healers at St. Mungo's couldn't help him...no one can. We are at a loss, now."

"I woke up. Maybe he just needs more time..."

"You've had brief episodes of consciousness, but you must have forgotten them as soon as they passed. You were in a lot of pain and heavily drugged. We were very concerned for your life for a while, but your state was nothing compared with the coma Harry is in."

"I see. So that's it, then." Severus frowned. "We lost the hero. A bitter victory."

"There are enough heroes around," Dumbledore said. "People are still celebrating. Many who were involved in the battle, and many who claim to have been involved, have been honoured. There is a new Minister of Magic, and not all is well, I'm saddened to tell you. That's why you are here."

"Who is Minister? What happened to the Underground?"

"Arthur Weasley is Minister, and maybe I should just let you read the pile of *Daily Prophets* I brought for your perusal." Dumbledore pointed at a stack of newspapers on Severus' bedside table. "I don't want to tire you out too much. Miss Granger would have my head if I did." Dumbledore smiled.

"Where is she?"

"She's doing research. We haven't given up on Harry. There must be something we can do. We found a way to defeat Voldemort; we must find a way to bring Harry back from wherever he is."

"How are his friends taking it?" Severus enquired. "After all we went through to get that Horcrux out of him, and now this..."

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed and nodded, looking sad. "Ginny Weasley is of course devastated. Her brother isn't much better. They both sit at Harry's side and refuse to leave him. Miss Granger has already started to look for a cure and is working tirelessly, more to prevent facing up to the sad truth than anything else, I assume."

Severus nodded. That sounded just like Hermione. "If I can be of any help..." he offered.

"First, you must recover fully and catch up on all that's happened, and then I am certain that you can be of much help. There may be a potion, a spell, some ancient magic; there must be *something*."

"Well then, I will join the search shortly," Snape promised, and Dumbledore gave him a pat on the shoulder and left.

Severus gave the stack of newspapers a doubtful glance. Did he really want to know the gory details after all those hints Albus had just given him? Couldn't he remain in blissful ignorance a while longer? He shook himself. Arthur Weasley's reign could hardly be worse than that of Voldemort, could it? Arthur was a reasonable, even gentle, man. He had to be half-mad from grief for his wife, but still, he was Arthur Weasley. How bad could it be? Severus flexed his fingers, stretched his arms, steeled himself and took the first paper from the top of the stack.

Elusive Granger Bolts Again.

The infamous would-be heroine, and ex-best friend of the boy-who-barely-lived, once again managed to escape the grip of the Aurors, who were in hot pursuit.

"She is just so fast. I've never seen anyone act so fast, at least not since all the Death Eaters were captured," Auror Dawlish told our reporter. "This confirms our suspicion that she is in league with that dangerous Death Eater, Severus Snape, who escaped captivity in the turmoil and confusion after the final battle. The ministry has increased the reward for the capture of Hermione Granger to 500 Galleons. Anyone who sees her is expected to report it to the authorities."

This reporter is doubtful about the wisdom of such a decision, however. Too many people remember the steadfast loyalty Hermione Granger has always shown to her two friends: Harry Potter, the hero, and Ronald Weasley, the minister's youngest son.

"My father is making a mistake," Ronald Weasley said when we asked him. "I can only hope that he comes to his senses soon. Hermione has always been on the side of the light. She and Snape, and all the Underground people with them, played an essential part in our victory. If only Harry would wake up... He'd set things to rights. But as long as he's asleep, we won't be able to do very much. All we can do is be with him, stay with him, at his cousin's house."

Harry Potter was moved from St. Mungo's a month after the final battle, claimed by his aunt Petunia Dursley, a Muggle and next of kin, and has been cared for ever since at his cousin's residence.

More on Harry Potter's condition and the reasons why Minister Weasley would prefer him in the ministry's care and not with Muggles on page 4.

"What the fuck? Fuck! Bloody, blistering fuck!" Severus couldn't believe his eyes. A warrant out for Hermione's arrest? Suspected of working with Death Eaters? After all she'd been through? Hermione, the bravest, most caring, loving... No, he wouldn't get into that. That was a matter from the past, a bright light when there had been little hope. Now things had changed. They didn't need each other so desperately any longer; at least, she didn't need him any longer. She was back with her friends; she would find someone more fitting, someone less tainted, someone her age. He'd not burden her with his own desperate need for compassion. It should be enough for him to know that she was alive. He sighed.

Maybe he should start at the beginning and learn how all this had come about. If only he didn't feel so weak. He let the *Daily Prophet* fall onto his lap and was asleep a heartbeat later.

When Severus woke up again, someone had turned the lights off in his room. It was still dark outside, or maybe he'd slept around the clock, and he could barely see his own hands.

He did feel a bit stronger, though. With that realisation, however, the memories came flooding back. Something was very wrong. Albus was alive and Hermione was in danger. Hermione was in danger. That could not be tolerated. He had to help her; he owed her that much. Damn his weakness. He fumbled for the reading lamp on his bedside table and turned it on.

Looking around, he noticed a glass of water and drained it with one long gulp. There, that was better. That had cleared the mind. Looking around again, his eyes fell on the stack of *Daily Prophets*. He really should start at the beginning. Stretching again, he pulled a few papers out from the lowest level of the stack.

The headlines that jumped out at him, were: "He-who-must-not-be-named defeated. Hero dead." → "Harry Potter lives, but yet to wake up." → "Albus Dumbledore alive? Snape innocent?" → "Arthur Weasley new Minister for Magic." → "Minister questions the infamous Underground, a group supposedly essential in the downfall of You-Know-Who." → "Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape members of the Underground: Minister calls Underground Death Eater Guerrillas." → "Arrest warrants issued for Dumbledore-double, Hermione Granger and Severus Snape." → "Granger gives impassioned speech on the wireless." → "Reward set for the capture of Granger." → "Minister bans Muggle-borns from wizarding society." → "Family divided over Minister's controversial Muggle-born act. Only two sons remain on Minister's side: the rest of his children proclaim him mentally ill and in dire need of medical attention." → "Muggles are to blame for the rift spreading through wizarding society. They should look after themselves

in future. We must segregate,' Minister tells the *Prophet* in an exclusive interview..."

Severus had seen enough. This seemed complete and utter nonsense. This couldn't be Arthur Weasley. Arthur, who had always been so fascinated by every Muggle artefact he could get his hands on. Why on earth would Arthur now ban Muggle-borns and blame Muggles? Was this an impostor? Maybe he was under the influence of a Death Eater, or the Imperius Curse or even a potion?

Severus needed to find out more, but the *Daily Prophet*, as usual, only regurgitated the same old stories. Hermione was wanted; Dumbledore wasn't real; he, Snape, was a criminal, et cetera, et cetera... He sighed. If only someone would come and talk to him. He felt completely out of the loop, but he was certain that people had better things to do and had no time to sit by his bedside and tell him stories. And rightfully so, Severus thought. He was a bit too old for bedtime stories, anyway.

"Severus!" A much wanted, and yet feared, voice interrupted his musings. "Merlin, Severus, I'm so glad you're awake!"

Something warm, soft, sweet smelling and bushy-haired hurled itself at him and sniffled into his chest. He took a deep breath, noticing how his heart seemed to feel heavier and lighter at the same time, took her by the arms, and gently pushed her away from him.

"Cut the dramatics, Miss Granger. I'm not dead quite yet."

"Oh, I was so scared. There was so much blood, and your heart..." She stopped in mid-sentence. "Miss Granger? Don't act up now, Severus." She wiped her eyes, sniffed in a very unladylike manner and glared at him.

He glared back, putting on his full annoyed-teacher routine. It didn't seem to impress her one bit.

"I knew you'd react this way, you stubborn git. I told you that you would, remember? But back then, you said you weren't a fool and wouldn't push me away. Now, live up to it." She tenderly cupped his cheek and kissed him on the lips. It was a long kiss. Long, tender, and sweet. It wasn't demanding, just loving and giving. Severus sighed into her mouth and returned in kind. He didn't think that he could have kept up the 'noble sacrifice' thing, anyway. He wanted her. He wanted to be with her. She made him feel whole in a way nothing else ever had. And if she wanted to be with him a bit longer, he admitted to himself that he would rather take what he could get than deprive himself.

It wouldn't last. He was quite certain about that, and he didn't know how he'd deal with losing her when it would come to pass, but for now, he'd take the comfort she offered. It would be less painful in the long run to push her away now, certainly, but if he had learned something from all the mistakes he'd made, then it was this: you wouldn't know if you didn't try, and you couldn't feel if you didn't offer something of yourself in return. And so he offered himself and his dignity. He'd been humiliated before; he ought to be used to it by now. He'd bear it; he'd get over it eventually. He got over everything. Eventually.

In the meantime, Hermione had stopped kissing him and was studying him with a slight frown. She tried to enter his mind and induce the mental conversation they both had become so good at, but he Occluded. She narrowed her eyes.

"You don't believe me. You think that I'll leave you as soon as our lives return to normal, don't you?"

He looked stricken, feeling like an eleven-year-old student who'd been caught mid-mischief. He shrugged.

She smiled. "Severus, will you marry me?"

"What?"

"Will you marry me?"

"Of course not. You've lost your mind. You can't be certain about what you want. You're far too young..."

"Oh, stop it," she snarled. "Just stop it. Tell me, if I had decided that I wanted to marry Ron, would you have reacted the same way? Would anyone else? Or would everyone have found it wonderful? I wouldn't have been older or more mature, but I would have made a similar decision, so what's the difference?"

"I'm too old, too jaded..." He tried to camouflage the bundle of emotions, turmoil, love and need that was messing up the layers of his personality, with a mask of ice-cold disdain. He wasn't sure if he'd succeeded; his ice-cold glare didn't intimidate her in the least. She was glaring back and quite efficiently so. He felt slightly silly.

"Yeah, yeah, we've been through this before. I like you this way, you know. I. Love. You. There, I finally said it. There is no reason why I can't say it now. I can shout it from the rooftops, if I want to." She smiled and shook her head. "But you don't believe me; I see it in your eyes. I love you. I don't say that lightly, and you know it. I shall ask you again in a few days."

"And you think my answer will be any different?"

"It would make me very happy if it were. You know that I won't give up easily. Unless you look me in the eyes and tell me that you don't want to be with me. Is that what you'll tell me, Severus?"

He scowled at her. She knew damned well that he couldn't tell her that. She had become an excellent Legilimens, after all, and even though she couldn't reach his mind directly, she could tell from a million little signs when he was lying. Like now. The Dark Lord, in his arrogance, would never have picked up these little signs because he'd never cared enough to know anyone at such an intimate level, but Hermione wasn't the Dark Lord. Thankfully. Severus sighed.

"You'll only have yourself to blame if this doesn't work out, you know."

"Is that a yes?"

"No."

"But it's not a no?"

"Yes."

"That's good enough for now." She beamed and kissed him again, passionately this time.

Oh, Merlin, how he wanted her. He felt his cock stirring, which was reassuring as that part of him had been rather passive since he had woken up. He kissed her back until they both moaned. Blushing and looking more than a bit dazed, Hermione freed herself from his arms and stood up, taking a deep breath.

"Now, since we know where we stand with each other, we can get back to work and start brainstorming. Wizarding Britain is in a mess and can't be allowed to remain that way." She was now stomping around the room, waving her arms and gesturing passionately, grumbling and huffing while she spoke. She was the most beautiful sight in the world. He had to push himself out of this mood, else he'd find himself making soppy declarations of love. This wouldn't do.

"I presume that your hero's welcome didn't quite turn out as expected," he drawled. The sneer on his face felt painful; his face seemed to have forgotten how to do it properly while he had been unconscious.

"Right," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. He expected her to stick her tongue out at him, but she only pursed her lips. "But that's not what's bothering me as you well know...since you know me so well." Her smile was cheeky, but didn't remain so for long. She frowned and exhaled noisily. "While I am a tad upset about it, there are worse

things, you know. One of my main worries is the Underground. We've won the war, but we can't afford to let our people come out into the open."

"I read. But why?" For a moment, Severus lost his cool. He had protected those people for years; he had looked after them, and he had learned to care deeply for them. He was not going to allow anyone to threaten them. He felt the anger heating his cheeks.

Hermione nodded and looked back at him earnestly. "At first, when people started showing up who were believed to be dead, everyone was happy. But when Arthur was made minister, suspicions were voiced. We actually had to rescue a good part of our people and hide them again since they were about to be arrested. The few who belong to powerful families too powerful for even Arthur to mess with stayed around. Their identity isn't doubted by the public despite the Ministry's efforts to undermine them. We are in contact; they're carefully working on changing people's attitudes towards the Underground and us."

"But why? Why the Underground? Where are they?"

"Why? Because you, cruel and dangerous criminal that you are, didn't stop your unexpected altruism after rescuing only poor non-political victims. No, you had to go and rescue Slytherins and even Death Eaters as well. You had to change their worldview and reform them or help them to redeem themselves. Things like that can't be allowed, you know. That doesn't fit in with the convenient black-and-wide worldview of our kind. Or maybe I should say *your* kind since Muggle-borns are now pariahs." She almost spat the last sentence.

"I see," Severus whispered, stricken by her pain and moved by her passionate defence of the Underground...his Underground. "But what happened to our people? Where are they?"

"When the secret of the Underground's existence was revealed, Arthur wanted to see for himself how and where we'd lived, so we showed him the Appin cave. The students we had evacuated there before the battle would have recognized it, anyway, because we didn't put them through the security routine, and the secrecy contract for Appin had been lifted from all of us, anyway. We decided to give those caves up. We didn't reveal the other locations, though, or our modus operandi. We reopened the Creswell Craggs caves since Lestrage and Pettigrew are dead, and you told us that none of the other Death Eaters knew its location. A contingent of our people are there now, organizing themselves and waiting for your command."

She looked at him with an odd smile and a glitter in her eyes that made him wonder if something was wrong with her...until he remembered that they had shared their first kiss in the Creswell Craggs gorge. He swallowed and pushed that memory away, back into the memory vault where it belonged. If he'd been stronger, he'd have pounced uncharacteristically and unceremoniously. But they had work to do, and he was weak. What had she just said? His command?

"My command? What about Albus?"

"Oh, Professor Dumbledore merely serves as an advisor these days, if at all. He says that after having been as good as dead for so long, he feels that he shouldn't challenge the Fates. He wants to live out the rest of his days in peace and without meddling in worldly affairs."

Severus let out a barking laugh. "Right!"

"Yes." Hermione smirked. "I know... but he seems to be sticking to it. He's staying in the background, helping with the research, but he doesn't do much otherwise. The Underground really is waiting for you, Severus, and so am I. Won't you come back to us?" She had taken his hand, stroked his fingers gently with her thumb and smiled at him. He closed his eyes and tried to get the sneer back on his face. She was so hard to resist.

"I... I shall do what I can."

"And that is so much more than what most others can do," Hermione whispered with tears in her eyes. "I hate the idea that you still aren't respected, aren't celebrated as the hero you are. But the Underground knows... For all of us, you are the bravest man we've ever known, the true unsung hero of this war."

He raised an eyebrow. "As are you. You're so full of drama today."

"And what if I am? It hasn't been easy seeing you unconscious for so long, never knowing if you'd wake up, hoping with every short episode of consciousness, despairing when you became unconscious again. I feel dramatic, and I'd like to drag you to my lair and have my wicked way with you, but it's too early for that." She sighed and stroked the outline of his lips with her index finger.

He sighed, sucked her finger into his mouth and closed his eyes. She moaned softly, and he let her go. "Unfortunately, you are right."

"That's because I'm an insufferable know-it-all." She kissed him again, briefly, and stood up. "I'll go now. You need to rest. I'll be back tomorrow, love. Hurry up and get well quickly. Damn, I really would like to drag you to my lair right now." Her breathing was heavy, and she looked flushed as her eyes followed the contours of his body under the sheets.

This made him flush in return. "I wouldn't mind being taken advantage of soon," he said hoarsely. He cursed his weakness, but it couldn't be helped. "I won't be of much use to you in this state, though."

"Nonsense," she said, coming close once more. "I don't love you because you are of use, but because you're *you*. Try to get that into that stubborn head of yours. And now I really must go." A last kiss, and she was gone.

Time seemed to stand still, at least that was the impression Severus got while he wasn't allowed to leave his bed. Two weeks after he had woken up, he was finally allowed to take a few tentative steps.

Poppy and Albus stood at the side of his bed, wands in hand. Both were ready to step in and stabilize him if he should stumble and fall.

His knees were feeling as weak as if he were going on his first date. Sitting up alone caused him to breathe rapidly, as if he'd run around the Black Lake. His legs trembled when he took his first few steps. Were there any muscles in his legs left to carry his weight? Not that there was much weight; he was thinner than ever before despite Paulie's efforts at fattening him up like a porker.

"You're doing very well, Severus," Poppy said, interrupting his musings. "Now lie back down and don't overdo it. We'll do this again in a few hours, and in a couple days, you'll be able to walk around on your own, just wait and see."

Severus didn't want to wait. He wanted to see, but he didn't have a choice. He didn't want to injure himself further by getting up and exercising when no one was around. He suspected that they were monitoring him without his knowledge. He didn't believe for a moment that Albus would have given up his meddling enough to not want to be aware of what everyone around him was doing. So it was better not to make a complete idiot of himself and obey whatever Pomfrey said, and that meant staying in bed most of the time.

Hermione had turned out to be more of a distraction and less of a helpful companion. She seemed to react to his slightest touch and take it as encouragement to wind herself around him like a vine and kiss every part of his bare skin she could reach. It took all of his resolve to not give in to the temptation. Maybe he should, he thought, then she'd see what it would be like to be with a man so much older than herself and feeble, but when he had suggested it to her, she had only laughed and kissed him again, stating that she didn't have a problem with waiting for her injured hero a bit longer.

She came visiting every day and chatted away, laughing when he was sarcastic, chiding when he was grumpy and offering compassion when he felt depressed. And she asked him The Question every day, without fail. Nevertheless, he didn't quite know what she wanted. They couldn't pick up their relationship from before the battle and act as if nothing had happened, could they? Nundu and Nightshade had been a couple; Severus and Hermione were different people. Unlike their pseudonyms, the latter two

came with baggage, backgrounds, and a less than pleasant history in his case. He really didn't know what to do. He wished that he was strong enough to follow his impulses and snog her senseless, take her to bed and shag her out of her mind. But it was still too early for that.

Then there was the little issue of the saviour of wizard kind who wouldn't wake up. Albus and Hermione were immersed in research, and Severus had promised to look through several old volumes of 'Magicks and Legends: Forgotten Spells Most Evil and Benevolent'. That entire sacrifice and resurrection thing could be traced back to Lily Potter's blood sacrifice, and that had been a very ancient spell. Hermione had brought all of the books Lily had left in her reading nest in the Room of Requirement. With a bit of luck, they should be able to find out where she had learned about that protective magic. Albus, who had sealed the sacrifice and protection after her death, had vague recollections of books he'd read in his youth, books that might even have been in his private library, but he couldn't find them. Severus held the nagging suspicion that Lily, probably with the help of her Marauder friends, had stolen those books from Dumbledore's library.

But be that as it may, Potter lay in a coma, the wizarding world had gone crazy, and they all needed to get to work and resolve the mess Arthur Weasley had caused after taking office. In due course, Severus learned that Arthur had never forgiven Severus and the Underground for saving so many people while Molly had been doomed. It seemed Arthur was convinced that Severus could have saved her if he had wanted to. The fact that Molly hadn't been rescued told Arthur that Severus was nothing but a Death Eater in sheep's clothing and couldn't be trusted. And his opinion was weighty enough to poison the minds of the less discerning among wizard kind, and that was most of wizard kind. They had to wake Potter as soon as possible. How they should go about that, however, Severus didn't know.

The Magic Flight

Chapter 25 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my beta-reader and brit-picker, Melusin, who still transfers my babble into language, sorts my random punctuation and is a good friend. Her patience seems endless.

Chapter 25 - The Magic Flight

When the boon's acquisition (or the hero's return to the world) comes against opposition, a chase or pursuit may ensue before the hero returns.

(Joseph Campbell: The Hero with a Thousand Faces).

The days went by and, apart from the training sessions with Poppy and sometimes Hermione, Severus was left alone. Everybody else seemed to be busy with something or other, and Severus felt increasingly useless and inefficient. He hadn't found anything in the old books that could have helped Potter, and no one else seemed to have made progress, either. There was an odd tension in the air as if everybody were waiting for something to happen, but Severus couldn't quite figure out what that might be. Surely they weren't waiting for Potter to wake up? Surely the Order and the Underground would be able to deal with the Ministry problem on their own? The wizarding world wouldn't always be able to rely on a Chosen One to get them out of trouble, would they? Eventually, they'd have to take matters into their own hands.

The general tension and his inability to leave his room for more than a brief trip to the bathroom was making Severus irritable. Somehow, he seemed to have forgotten how to hide his emotions. His anger and frustration wanted to get out with a violence that worried and confused him. What was happening? Was he in the process of reverting back to the angry man he had been in his youth? Surely not. Even back then, he had been able to hide his feelings better than this. Nowadays, he seemed to wear his emotions on his sleeve like some fool who had never heard of discipline. Severus felt pathetic.

Things weren't made any better by Hermione's insistence on pursuing her ill-advised quest to make him happy. He wasn't in any state to share more than a few kisses with her, but that didn't seem to faze her in the least. Unerringly, she asked him to marry her, and unerringly she received the same answer. He was convinced that a commitment to him was bound to suffocate her: he had survived enough restrictive masters to know how difficult it was to free oneself from their... affection. It didn't really matter if love or terror dictated such an attachment; he was not going to impose such a burden on Hermione. He had tried to explain his reasons to her, but she wouldn't or couldn't understand, insisting that an attachment between them didn't have to be restrictive. Her blind trust in him had begun to grate on his nerves and added momentum to the lingering anger deep in his gut. That anger was coming closer to the surface with each new marriage proposal, and he was afraid that some time soon it would boil over.

Therefore, it was not entirely unwelcome when finally, one day, Severus' quiet routine of brooding came to an end. Shouts and hectic comings and goings indicated that something important was about to happen outside his little bubble of self-doubt. Croaking out profanities, he grabbed one of his crutches it had taken a lot of convincing before he'd agreed to use them and opened the door to the landing. He saw Paulie huffing up the stairs, loaded with stacks of bed sheets and looking slightly harassed. He was headed towards the guest bedroom.

"Your highness," Paulie cried, "if it's not asking too much, I could do with a hand."

Without a word, Severus followed his cousin and helped with spreading out the sheets, airing the room, cleaning the cabinets and dusting the wardrobe.

"The least they could have done is provide you with a house-elf," Severus grumbled.

"You mean those little blokes with the big ears?"

Severus nodded and Paulie continued, "Two of them did come to help get the house ready, but they were sent away because your people don't want to use too much magic around here, to prevent being noticed, they say."

"That's wise," Severus murmured and helped to envelop a duvet with a fresh cover.

"I wouldn't have minded having them around, to be honest. They come here from time to time to pick up the laundry and bring fresh stuff, together with food," Paulie said, looking wistful. "Nice folks, those two. You want something, and they do it. D'ya think one of them might be a bass player? Can they sing?"

Severus snorted. "I haven't the slightest... Go and ask them yourself. And why haven't you asked for my help sooner?"

"You've been so busy with important stuff and with getting back on your feet again. Gandleore was very firm on that. He said I wasn't to disturb you. You weren't exactly fit for a beer and a bit of fun, either."

Severus had to smile at Paulie's name for Dumbledore. "Rubbish. I could have done with a bit of fun, you know. I almost died of boredom before I was allowed to get up on my own."

Paulie grinned. "And there's me thinking you were happily reading. You always were such a bookworm..."

Severus rolled his eyes. "As much as I feel obliged to uphold the Snape family's intellectual standingsomething you wouldn't know anything aboutI have to admit that reading all day, every day, does get tedious, even for me."

Paulie gave him a dirty look and then laughed. "Ah, well, enjoy being bored while it lasts. From the looks of it, your world is still in a lot of trouble, if the wild tales your friends are telling me are true..." He wrinkled his brow. "Wild really isn't the right word for this, anyway. Most likely I'm heavily drugged and fantasizing in an asylum for the insane. Gotta blame the whisky, or maybe I smoked one joint too many in our wild youth."

Severus, sobered, looked self-consciously at his hands. "I can assure you that all of this is very real. We owe you big time, Paulie, each and every one of us," he said softly, suddenly feeling very fortunate to have such an accepting cousin.

"Ah, get out. I'll get over it." Paulie winked. "It's a bit of excitement in my life. It's been very dull since you and your Nightshade left, you know. And that other fellow with the haughty name. What was it? Lucius, right? But anyway, it's too bad I can't tell the lads down the pub."

"Better not," Severus murmured. "Who exactly are these rooms for, by the way?"

"The spare bedroom is for the cousin of that bloke everyone is talking about. Him and his girlfriend. They're bringing all three of them here."

"Potter? They're bringing Potter to your house? What the hell is going on?"

"I'm not sure... As far as I know, the one called Harry isn't going to stay, but his cousin will. They'll be taking Harry to one of your secret hide-outs; they say it's safer there."

"But why? What's going on?"

"Apparently, there's been some kind of a threat. Your girl, Nightshade, she told me that he was supposed to be taken into your Ministry's care, and by the way she said it, that must be a bad thing. Something about the cousin's memories being altered and being forced to sign the papers, or something."

"What? I can't believe that Arthur would sink so low..." Severus grumbled, shaking his head. "Did everyone go crazy while I was sleeping? Even crazier than they already were?"

His stare seemed to want to draw the answer out of his cousin, but Paulie only shrugged.

"How would I know? That's what Nightshade told me is all I can say. That's why I'm cleaning the room..."

"Do they even realize what they are asking of you?" Severus wondered. "Don't let them treat you like a servant, you hear me? You're worth as much as the bunch of them..."

"Don't worry about me, Sev. I'm fine. It is a bit like running a hotel, sure, but they are nice people, and they're paying me."

"Oh, are they? Well, that's at least something," Severus muttered and continued more loudly, "You know, we could expand the space in your house if you feel that it's getting too crowded. I suppose we can risk that much magic. It could be concealed."

"They've done that already, right at the beginning—before any of the people here moved in. You should see the library in the basement, and the wine cellar. They've put in an extra bathroom, too, or maybe it's a swimming pool, it's that big. Great fun though; there are different foam baths from different taps... If my neighbours could see it, they'd call this Paulie Manor."

Severus snorted. "As long as you don't feel too bad about it... I still say we owe you. And what about London? Don't you have to go back to the studios?"

"Not for a while, yet." Paulie said placatingly. "I've given up freelancing and got a contract as a sound supervisor, but it's not starting before October. In any case, you can all use the house if you need it."

"Very well, then. And now I suppose I'd better find out what this business with Potter and his cousin is all about."

"Do that, Sev. There's a bunch of people in the kitchen who can fill you in. I gotta run."

Paulie slapped Severus on the back and hurried away, his mind obviously already occupied with some other task.

Swearing at his bloody weakness, Severus grabbed his crutches and dragged himself out of the room. How he hated to be restricted in his movements! He wondered if all the other rooms were still where they'd been when he had last been at the house, or if things had become unrecognizable from all the expanding and moving around. He hadn't been able to walk around much on his own yet; he'd better not start exploring just now, else he might get lost. *The kitchen, at least, would still be on the ground floor*, he thought while he carefully made his way down the stairs.

The scene that met his eyes when he opened the kitchen door wasn't quite what he had expected. Half the Weasley clan was sitting at the table, together with Luna Lovegood, Lola Lafolle, Rita Skeeter and Albus Dumbledore. They were arguing. Severus eyes darted around the room, but he couldn't see Hermione amongst them.

"Will someone kindly enlighten me as to what's going on here?" he drawled.

"Severus!"

Lola and Rita jumped up and threw themselves at him, and for a while he could neither think nor speak because of their hair in his face, and their lips randomly kissing his cheeks, nose, and on occasion, his lips. His arms were filled with two affectionate women who were wriggling like excited puppies. Lovegood remained seated, but she smiled at him in her usual absent-minded way and seemed to be delighted to see him.

"Ah, Severus, so good to see you up and about on your own," Dumbledore gushed and offered him a chair.

The Weasleys watched the happy reunion in silence; they looked subdued and sad. Only Ronald nodded a friendly greeting in Severus' direction and muttered, "I'm very glad to see that you're feeling better, Nundu."

Severus nodded back, sat down heavily and looked around. "Well?"

They all spoke at once. Unruly bunch, the lot of them. He sighed, filled his lungs and thundered, "Silence!"

The Weasleys shut up immediately. They were all still young enough to remember him from school. Lovegood watched him with shining eyes, and the others grinned and ceased their chatter.

"So good to see you're on the mend, Severus," Lola stage-whispered and winked at him, which elicited the giggles in Rita, who coughed and tried to suppress her laughter without much success.

"I see that the discipline in this endeavour leaves much to be desired," he growled, barely able to suppress a smile. He realized that he had missed Lola and Rita and their antics, and not only them. He had missed the Underground. Full-stop.

"I also see that the two of you are as bad as ever," he mock-growled. Both women wriggled their eyebrows at him and smirked.

"We've been very busy with Underground work, Darling. Otherwise, we'd have come to see you sooner," Lola said.

"Well..." Severus frowned. "Someone had better fill me in...Weasley." He pointed at Ron. "You tell me what's going on."

"Me?" The boy, no, young man he was almost Hermione's age, after all looked baffled and glanced sideways at Dumbledore, who smiled, eyes twinkling in their unmistakable and infuriating way.

"Yes, you. That way, I can expect a rational report."

"Whoa, little brother, you've got a fan," George Weasley quipped. Severus wondered where his twin brother was while he stared him into silence. George only shrugged and muttered, "Sorry..."

I really must be losing my touch, Severus thought, frowned and glared at Ronald.

"Uhm," Ron said, fidgeting in his seat. "What exactly do you want to know? You've already learned about what's been happening since the battle, or so I've heard."

"Yes. But what I don't understand is how this could have happened? How could your father change that much; why is no one questioning what he's doing, and where does that outrageous animosity towards Muggle-borns come from?"

Ron looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Those are questions I'd like to have answered, as well. The quick answer is that I don't understand it, either. I can only offer observations and speculation."

"I'm listening."

"After the final battle, there was a lot of celebrating, but there also was a lot of chaos, anarchy. Death Eaters were on the run, and then there were all those people from the Underground who everyone had believed to be dead and who came back, but were greatly changed from the way people had known them. Everyone was pretty confused, and no one knew who was in charge. There was a great need for order, a structure, guidance. People wanted a leader; they wanted a new Minister. I don't know who suggested Dad, but he got a lot of support; people know him, and no one expected... Uh... you know?" Ron looked sad and embarrassed, so did his brothers.

Severus glanced at them thoughtfully. "When and why did the Underground fall from grace?"

"Pretty soon after Dad became Minister," Ron continued. "When he learned that the Malfoys were part of the Underground and that you were one of the leaders, he became irrational. He began implying that the actual battle had been led by Aurors and the Order, and that the Underground had to have been an organization supporting the Death Eaters."

"That's insane," Severus growled.

"Tell us about it," Rita said.

"The Malfoys wanted to avoid trouble and moved to their estates in France, and Pansy went with them. She and Draco have got engaged, you know. They're helping the Underground from there as much as they can, mostly with money and with providing shelter if necessary. Everyone who wasn't too much in the spotlight moved back into the caves. Hannah Abbot bought the Three Broomsticks; her family didn't go back into hiding. They've always been respected and are now telling what really happened to everyone who wants to hear the truth. The Three Broomsticks is a good place for that."

Severus nodded. "How did she get over...?"

"She didn't. She's still miserable. Ernie's body died soon after the battle, did you know?"

Severus hadn't known, but he thought that the young man's death might have been a blessing since the presence of the empty, soulless shell of what had once been her boyfriend would have driven even the strongest witch insane.

"It helps her by being useful to the Underground again. She's working closely with Neville, who will be starting his apprenticeship with Professor Sprout this autumn."

"Good," Severus said and swallowed down a sarcastic comment about Longbottom. The young man had fought bravely, after all. "But all this doesn't explain the actions against Muggles and Muggle-borns."

"No, it doesn't. And I really don't understand it, either. There were Hermione, Colin and a few other Muggle-borns who were rather upset about the claims that the Underground was supporting Death Eaters, and they weren't silent about it. That was around the time when the Anti-Muggle-born campaign started. Hermione was furious, spoke up in every show on the wireless that would have her and called Dad a benevolent racist. That led to a lot of unrest, and the Ministry tried to make her look like a liar, extending that accusation to all Muggle-borns. Then they produced the arrest warrant for you, and Hermione went ballistic. She's been wild ever since, telling everyone about your deeds and demanding that Dad be removed from office. That's when Dad set the Aurors on her. As you can imagine, that made her even angrier."

Severus grimaced. He could indeed imagine. A righteously angry Hermione was not to be trifled with. Ron nodded sympathetically.

"Then there was the incident with Carlotta Pinkstone, who wanted to tell the Muggles all about us... but she was stopped," Ron continued. "Right after that, the Muggle Act was ratified."

"Erm," Lola Lafolle interrupted. "That's not quite the whole story. I don't think we're blameless in the matter of Carlotta and the Muggles. There were journals, you see..."

"Journals? About what?"

"Everything. The whole story. Rita was researching Harry Potter long before he was chosen for the Tri Wizard Tournament, and she'd written down everything she'd researched. But then her journals were stolen."

"What? Severus snarled. "How could you be so careless?" he growled at Rita.

Rita glared right back at him. "Your little girlfriend found it fitting to keep me in my Animagus form for a considerable stretch of time. No one looked after my possessions; I lost my job and almost my home. No one knew where I'd gone to, you see? And someone broke in, searched the house and stole the journals."

"And where are they now?"

"I got them back, and together with Lola, who also kept her own journals she's been chronicling what the Underground was doing during the war we've almost completed the series. When we found out that we both kept journals, we decided to combine and publish them after the war. That's how we got together." Rita took Lola's hand and tenderly kissed her fingers.

"You needn't look so alarmed. No one outside the Underground could have read my journals because of the secrecy contract," Lola continued the tale, giving him a indignant look. "I thought it was important to write the war's history and the chronicle of the Boy-Who-Lived from someone who wasn't in the Ministry, or associated with

Voldemort. Whoever stole Rita's journals, sold them to a Muggle writer, who found the stories entertaining and decided to write a series of children's books based on them. The first one got published last year, if I'm not mistaken. In any case, the story in that book was pretty accurate, although that woman invented a bit of nonsense to make our world seem more colourful, more interesting for children. If can you believe that."

Severus stared at her blankly.

"Carlotta has a network of Muggle friends, some of whom know about the wizarding world, and they heard about the book and got her a copy. From what I can gather, the book is quite popular among Muggle children. But anyway, Carlotta went to see Arthur, told him about our journals and showed him the book. She thought that Muggles were ready to learn all about us and wanted to convince Arthur to lift the Statute of Secrecy in Britain. But Arthur went completely mental when he saw the book. He went on and on about Muggle spies, that nothing was safe, that they were acting like children, but had the power to destroy everything, that they were stealing the wizarding world's secrets and that the pure-blood slander about Muggles stealing magic might be true after all. Then he sent the Aurors after us to get the rest of our journals. Luckily, Kingsley was able to tip us off, and so we were able to get everything back to the Underground for safe-keeping."

"So how much of our world has been revealed, and how are the Muggles reacting to it?" Severus asked, not quite certain what to make of this tale. He felt sick.

"As I said, the first book is pretty accurate. But Rita hunted down the Muggle woman and had a few, uh, talks with her. She got her journals back, and the stories that woman remembers now are quite a bit different from the truth."

Severus eyes widened in alarm. "You used Memory Charms?" he asked Rita.

She nodded. "Yes. And I'm good with them. You know that. My, uh, work for the *Prophet* required them on more than one occasion."

"And the woman hasn't been otherwise afflicted?"

"No, she is as sane as she was before. It's only her memory of the contents of the journals that was changed. And the Muggles... I don't think they believe it to be a true story; they probably think it's some kind of fairy tale."

"Why weren't all the Muggles Obliviated, and the manuscripts destroyed as is usually done?" Severus asked.

"Arthur forbade it. He would have thrown away all of our work. He said that the Muggles could have it for all he cared and that it was a work of lies and fiction, anyway—all that to-do with you as the hero of the war and the Underground. So we tried to set things straight as best we could."

"Somebody had better get me a copy of that book," Severus whispered, shocked. "We should know what's in it, just in case it backfires. Memory Charms aren't foolproof."

"Mine are," Rita said.

"I hope you are right. This is not good."

"I didn't know about all that," Ron whispered. "So that's why Dad...?"

"It certainly isn't reason enough to go topsy-turvy in his attitude towards Muggles," Rita said. "I think this was an excuse for his actions rather than the real reason. I think he was planning the Muggle Act long before he learned about that Muggle writer."

"This is... It's... I don't know. He's not the same person he used to be. I frankly have no idea what's got into Dad." Ron hung his head.

"Don't you talk to him?" Severus asked, puzzled about Arthur's madness, for madness it had to be.

"He's so... It's unbelievable. I couldn't... We couldn't stay. We left him after he announced the warrant on Hermione. Fred and Charlie stayed with him, and they keep us up-to-date. They swear that Dad isn't under the Imperius Curse, but I'm not so sure. You can't really tell, can you?"

Ron's hopeful look made Severus wince; he shook his head. There was no certain way, otherwise so many Death Eaters wouldn't have been able to use the Imperius Curse as an excuse for their actions in the past.

Disappointed, Ron continued, "Dad's actions have a mad kind of logic; maybe that's why people are once again willing to blindly believe in what the Ministry says. He tells them that Muggle-borns are the reason for the divide and unrest in the wizarding world. He seems to have forgotten everything he's ever said and thought. He wants magical folk to be united; he insists that it would be less likely for a new Voldemort-type to come to power if Muggles and magical folk were strictly kept apart. These days, it's all or nothing for him: there's no moderation, no compromise. He doesn't blame Voldemort: he blames Muggles and Muggle-borns for Mum's death."

"That's not a mad kind of logic; that's no logic at all," Severus interrupted, frowning.

Ron shrugged and cast a sideways glance at Severus.

"That's just the beginning. Dad wants... He wants to take magical children away from Muggles and give them to wizarding foster-parents..." He swallowed and blinked a few times before he continued in a raspy voice, "Which makes a bit more sense now, with these journals... But there's more... Dad tried to get hold of Harry. I suppose he wanted to know when and if Harry'd wake up. From what I've seen of Dad's decisions and behaviour, I... I'm afraid that he would not have allowed Harry to stand up for the Underground and tell the truth about it to the people out there. Uh..., I find it more likely that Dad wanted to have control over what Harry says... and not just by reminding him how well— He closed his eyes and seemed to force himself to continue, "I don't want to believe that Dad wanted to have the power to decide whether Harry could be allowed to wake up at all, but..." Ron cleared his throat and looked very unhappy.

Severus frowned. He was still having a hard time believing that the formerly so gentle Arthur could act like that, mad or not. He had always treated Harry like a son.

"Go on."

"We told Hermione what Dad had got planned, and she contacted Dudley and Sabrina. Sabrina had to be told who we really are, of course, but they agreed to take care of Harry. Harry was in a Muggle hospital for some time; we thought that maybe they had some means to wake him up from his coma that we didn't, but of course, they were as helpless as the healers at St. Mungo's. Eventually, Harry was released, but he was considered unfit to see to his own affairs. As next of kin, his aunt was officially made his guardian in the Muggle world. This was something the Ministry couldn't very well oppose; it would have taken a tremendous effort and needed a lot of Ministry staff for the Memory Charms for all those Muggle civil servants, hospital staff and for forged documents. It might have caused more suspicion than what they've come up with now, I suppose. But anyway, now Dudley is of age, he's become the official guardian. Harry had been staying at his place, anyway. His aunt had only agreed to the official guardianship. She didn't want to have Harry in her house."

Severus nodded. He knew Petunia Dursley. He was surprised that she'd been willing to help at all.

Ron closed his eyes and took a few calming breaths. "Now Dad has come up with... with... this. I can't believe that he would stoop to the level of the Death Eaters and steal Harry from his cousin, modify their memories it's only two insignificant, unknown Muggles, after all and who knows what else he's planned."

"This course of action isn't untypical for the Ministry and would require far less effort than the other option," Severus said. "They've always operated like that, more or less. At least where Muggles were concerned."

"That's true," Ron concurred. "And it's one more reason why we cannot just leave Harry and his relatives to the Ministry's mercy. That's why we'll be bringing them here. Hermione has gone to get them."

"Who's with her?"

"Ginny and Mad-Eye." Ron's lips twitched into a slight smile. "Mad-Eye's involvement with the Underground was never made public, as you know. If there was any trouble, he could always say that he was carrying out Dad's orders, and that he's out to arrest Hermione. We've worked out an emergency routine if something like this should happen."

Severus raised an eyebrow and stared at Ron. "An acceptable plan. Your sister, of course, wouldn't want to leave Potter's side."

Ron blushed, delighted by the unexpected praise. "Exactly. And we've picked up a few tricks from the Underground. Hermione wouldn't rest before she'd taught us, and since you've trained her yourself, you'll know..."

"Yes. Well, that doesn't sound as bad as it could have been." Severus nodded, and Ron's smile widened into a grin.

"Very well, then," Severus continued. "What exactly is to be done once Potter is hidden, and his relatives are here? There aren't many leads for a cure, are there?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "We're none the wiser than we were. We must continue with our search. And you need to get the Underground organized again. Arthur must be stopped. It is a bit difficult to see him as the enemy, though."

"Dad is not an enemy!"

"Arthur is not an enemy!"

Severus and Ron spoke simultaneously. They stopped and smirked at each other. "Sorry," Ron mouthed, and Severus proceeded. "Arthur's not acting like himself. Whether he is cursed or mad doesn't really matter; he needs to be removed from office. If he is cursed, we must find out who did it, and if it is madness, he needs St. Mungo's, not a battle,"

Severus nodded at the Weasleys and continued, "We don't want to fight Arthur; there has been enough of that. People will never trust us fully if we try to change things through more violence. The Underground can co-ordinate the resistance again, though. There have been efforts at turning public opinion, I understand? That's what's keeping you so busy?" He glanced at Rita, who nodded.

"Yes, Lola has started a new series of commentaries in *Witch Weekly* where Arthur's actions are questioned, and I'm freelancing with *The Quibbler*. It hasn't been easy since we directly contradict what the *Prophet* writes, but we're making progress. Some of our colleagues at the *Prophet* are beginning to openly question the Minister's actions, and we can use this to our advantage. It makes people pay attention. They still recognize my name, especially since I'm part of the mysterious Underground."

"Wouldn't that rather hamper our efforts? Won't they distrust you because of that?"

"Don't underestimate the mystery. Despite the nasty rumours, a decent number of people find the Underground romantic. They want to know more about it and are inclined to see us

kind of like honourable outlaws." She smirked when she saw Severus' grimace of disgust. "They could be useful in changing the general view on us."

"If they knew that the Robin Hood cave is one of our hide-outs, they'd go mad," Lola quipped, and Severus hid his face in his hands, but before he could come up with an appropriate counter, there were sounds in the corridor. The team had returned, and each of them had brought someone with them through Side-Along Apparition. Hermione was holding on to Dudley, who looked terrified. Ginny held on to Sabrina, who looked delighted, and Mad-Eye with Harry in his arms, who looked lifeless.

"Here we are," Hermione said cheerfully and let go of Dudley. She went over to Severus, squeezed his arm and nodded a greeting at the others.

"You're up," she whispered.

Severus' heart skipped a beat, which was usual when she was near.

"Have you been seen?" Ron asked.

"No, everything went well. We used several Portkeys to get us out of their house and through another part of the country, and then we Apparated the rest of the way, just as planned."

Severus was impressed. Ron Weasley really had come into his own. It was clear that he had been the one planning Potter's escape coup, and he had planned it well. Severus suddenly felt very proud. It wasn't often that a former student made him proud, but this was one of these rare moments.

Lola's voice brought him back to the present.

"Come over here, have some tea and then I'll show you two around." Lola had taken pity on Dudley and Sabrina, who were standing in the middle of the room like lost children. Looking relieved, they followed her.

"I shall put the Anti-Apparition spells up again in a moment," Dumbledore muttered. He had gone to help Mad-Eye, who was still holding Harry in his arms.

Severus couldn't believe how much his heart hurt, seeing Potter unconscious like this. He still didn't like the boy, but Potter had fought bravely, braver than many a man or woman twice his age, and he hadn't once flinched away from his impossible task. Severus admired the young man's tenacity and didn't want to see him incapacitated. A living, talking Potter might be a nuisance, but at least he was smart enough not to be taken advantage of. That was more than could be said for his unconscious shell.

Hermione glanced at him sideways. "Not a pretty sight," she murmured.

"No," Severus agreed with sadness in his voice. "There's nothing pretty about this."

The group had broken up without coming to a decision or agreeing on a course of action, but maybe that hadn't been the purpose of the meeting in the first place. Severus thought that the real reason for the gathering had been to reassure each other.

Lola and Rita helped to acclimatise the two Muggles. Dumbledore, Lovegood and the Weasleys went with Mad-Eye and Potter, and before Severus knew what was happening, the kitchen was empty, except for Hermione and himself.

"Mind if I take advantage of the situation?" Hermione asked and kissed him.

"Insufferable girl," he mumbled, trying to breathe in every molecule of her scent while he buried his face in her hair.

"The spells aren't up yet." She grinned, took his hand and Apparated with him to his room.

"Alone at last!" Hermione locked the door, crushed her lips to his again and keenly started to explore his mouth with her tongue while her hands wandered to his chest and started to work on the buttons of his shirt.

Severus held still, enjoying the moment. "Have you quite finished?" he hissed when she finally stopped, but the hiss sounded heated, even to his own ears, and so he wasn't surprised to hear her whisper, "Not for a while, yet."

"Have mercy on a tired old man, will you?" He stretched out on his bed, giving her better access to his clothes. He'd been waiting for this moment; it had been too long since they had made love. The anticipation made him short of breath.

"You'll get mercy when you deserve it," she whispered between kisses, her fingers being occupied with pulling his shirt open urgently.

"Doesn't look as if you'll be in need of mercy anytime soon." She kissed his chest and gently stroked the bulge in his trousers.

He couldn't stand it any longer. Rolling over, he sat up, growling, "Get out of these clothes, woman, before I tear them off you."

"Patience is a virtue," she murmured, smiling as she stood up and shimmied out of her robes. His breath hitched, and for a moment he worried about his heart.

"We'll have to take it slow, I'm afraid," he rasped, rubbing his chest and taking in the sight of her longingly.

"Why don't you let me take care of you?" she asked, and when he didn't object, she did just that.

Several long moments later, Severus lay on his back again, breathing heavily. His heart was racing, as it was supposed to do after the kind of activity they had been engaged in, but he neither felt too strained nor overly exhausted. In fact, he felt wonderful.

"Well?" Hermione asked smugly, licking her lips.

"I think we have something to work with." He grabbed her shoulders and pushed her on her back, enjoying her squeals and giggles. "We'll have to build up my stamina, otherwise there won't be any improvement," he murmured and started to kiss every inch of her, marvelling, as always, at the silky texture of her skin and the heat she emanated. How he loved to slowly move his hands over her body and feel how the soft swell of her graceful curves moulded into his hands and perfectly complemented his own lanky frame. He didn't think he'd ever tire of exploring the fascinating land that was Hermione's body.

Severus had been with other women before. It wasn't as if he was a novice in the art of lovemaking, but somehow, with Hermione, everything was new and different. *Was this what love was all about?* he wondered. He hadn't really loved any of the women he had been with in the past, although those relationships had usually been friendly and sometimes even affectionate. The encounters had been based on friendship, desire and mutual attraction, but he'd never allowed himself to fall in love, and he'd only chosen women who weren't intent on romantic love, but wanted a bit of fun or comfort, nothing more.

His love for Hermione had surprised him. It had grown slowly out of respect and admiration for the young woman who so bravely had tackled every task he had given her, and who had so steadfastly stood by her friends. He thought that the day when she had stood up to him and persuaded him in helping her help Potter with his quest might have been the day when he'd lost his heart. He certainly hadn't had any such feelings for her while she had still been his student at Hogwarts. He had always seen her potential, but apart from that, to him, she had been a girl like any other, only more annoying in her constant effort to impress her teachers. By the time Bee had told him about her own love for Florean Fortescue, however, Severus had known that he'd fallen head over heels for young Nightshade, and he was now completely defenceless where she was concerned. He thought that Bee must have sensed something from the way she'd smiled whenever she saw the two of them interact.

The realization that Hermione returned his feelings had been one of the happiest moments of his life. Holding her in his arms, feeling the warmth of her skin under his searching fingers, feeling the soft vibration of her heartbeat under his caressing lips aroused all his senses in a way nothing else ever had.

The wonder didn't end there. Hermione was enjoying what he was doing and was encouraging him with words, glances and sighs. She seemed to want him just as much as he wanted her, and when he watched her abandon herself to her pleasure under his hands and lips, he felt more accomplished than after mastering a difficult feat of magic.

Another long while later, he had accomplished his goal, and they both fell asleep: comforted, relaxed and sated.

In the morning, Hermione woke him up with a tender, lingering kiss. "As much as I would like to stay with you all day, I'll have to go soon. There's going to be another meeting tonight. We'll have to come up with a plan, either with or without Harry being awake."

"Right," he murmured, totally dazzled by her presence in his bed. He had forgotten how good that felt. His lips wandered from her cheeks to her collarbone and further down. Feeling her skin under his lips ignited his passion again, and he would have liked nothing more than to begin the morning as they had ended the night.

"Maybe I have a bit more time before I go, after all," she sighed softly, which fuelled his desire even more. With persistent enthusiasm, he went about his task of getting her undone, and from the languid, satisfied look on her face much, much later, he concluded that he must have succeeded. He hadn't felt so alive in a long time.

While he was still grinning like a loon and basking in the afterglow of their lovemaking, she lifted her head and studied his face with a serious expression.

"Will you marry me?"

That gave him a start. He hadn't expected that question right now. Dazedly, he blinked.

"I think not," he mumbled, feeling half-drunk from all the passion and half-shocked from the jolt of possessiveness that shot through him each time she asked. "You can do better."

"Idiot," she said affectionately. "I'm just trying to secure my claim, don't you know that?"

"Uh?" *Now that was eloquent.*

"You're a hero. You're the dark, mysterious type, and once we've found a solution for this mess, all the witches from far and wide will find you irresistible and romantic, and they will be all over you. Don't snort! I've seen hints of it already in the Underground, but there was too much discipline for things to get out of hand. Once we have our freedom back, there won't be any hesitation."

"Codswallop," he muttered. "One glare from me, and I'll have my peace and quiet. Besides, many wizards will be pursuing you as well." That thought made him uncomfortable, but if he didn't want to burden her with his miserable self, he had to face unpleasant facts.

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. But if you think so, then why don't **you** stake your claim?" She glanced at him and winked.

Severus didn't react to her flirting, but grabbed her arms none too gently.

"Don't tempt me," he hissed. "I want you to have a choice," he ground out, fighting the urge to drag her away, to claim her for his own, to never let her leave him... "I want you to have a choice that isn't enforced by dire circumstances. A choice that doesn't constrict you," he continued hoarsely.

His worst fears seemed to be confirmed by the look she gave him. She just stared, her eyes very dark, almost as black as his, her pupils fully dilated. Finally, she bit her lip and lowered her lids. Her long lashes cast shadows on her cheekbones, and Severus noticed how hollow-eyed she looked. She looked tired, and incredibly young. Far too young to be burdened with someone like him...

"I've made my choice," she replied after a moment of hesitation. Her voice sounded strangled. "But I realise now that cajoling you into a commitment isn't fair to you. You should be free to make a choice, too. As you said, back in the Underground, we helped each other through difficult times, but of course that doesn't mean that..." Her chin trembled. And there were tears in her eyes. What was she saying? Merlin help him.

"Don't be silly," he growled, still not quite certain what she was getting at. He felt stupid: insecure and immature like a teenager. "I've explained my reasons for not wanting

to burden you with a commitment again and again. If we look at it objectively, it becomes clear that all of this is mostly a matter of maturity..."

"Oh!"

Hermione's eyes widened. She stared at him, and he could literally see how she was clamming up. Suddenly, he very much wished that he'd opened himself up for mutual Legilimency. Trying to explain himself with words was so much more difficult than just conveying his thoughts through their mental connection. But that would be unfair to her. If she saw how desperately he wanted to be with her, to claim her, make her his own, to possess her... she'd be moved by his need in the best case; in the worst, she'd be afraid and repulsed. In any case, she wouldn't feel free to make her choice. He just couldn't live with the idea that she'd rush into an attachment they both might not be ready for. He definitely didn't feel very mature at the moment.

Hermione had gone very pale.

"I see," she said in barely more than a whisper. Her eyes were empty.

"I apologize," she continued. "I realize that you are right. And it goes both ways. A relationship shouldn't be a burden to either of us. I still have a lot to learn, and maybe I've not given you enough room. I'm restraining you, and you've certainly had enough people restraining you in the past. You don't need another one."

"What?"

Hermione swallowed several times while Severus stared at her, slack-jawed. That wasn't at all what he had wanted to say. When he got over his surprise, he tried to cut in, but she raised a hand.

"Let me finish. I realize now that you've never told me that you loved me back. I merely assumed... people should never assume... you know how the saying goes." She swallowed again, slipped into her clothes and fled the room.

Severus blinked and took a few steps towards the door.

"Hermione, wait! That's not what I meant..." His words only reached empty air. She was gone.

With a heavy thump, he sat down again. *Well done*, he thought. *Now you've got what you wanted, and she has second thoughts for all the wrong reasons. You can rejoice, idiot.*

He buried his face in his hands and continued with his self-condemnation. How could she not know that it was his own maturity he questioned after having wrestled for weeks with his self-doubts like a hormonal teenager? How could she doubt that he loved her? He had said as much when they had first kissed, hadn't he? Or had he? But he had let her into his mind—hadn't she seen how much she meant to him?

Idiot, he berated himself again. A woman wanted to hear it. She would need just as much reassurance as he did, wouldn't she? He was a bloody, immature, clueless idiot! This just proved his point. Now Hermione was unhappy, and that was intolerable. He'd have to explain to her what he had meant. She shouldn't be unhappy.

She thought she restrained him? That, too, was laughable. He was the one who had all the issues, who had no idea who he was or how he could go back to being someone who had never been there in the first place. Hermione didn't understand his dilemma. He'd never really had time to grow up, to come into his own. He had always played a role. He was the shadow man. Cassandra Vablatsky had given him the perfect name. He was a shadow without an idea who that person was who cast the shadow.

Severus rubbed his face and sighed, feeling very tired. Everybody else seemed to be so certain about just who he was and what he would accomplish, but what did they know? Fact was that they didn't really want to see him as he was. What they saw was what he had always intended them to see. He was afraid how they'd react when they suddenly remembered that he had a darker side. He had seen unspeakable horrors; his task as a spy had forced him to at least passively participate in unspeakable crimes, and the memories of those horrors were always looming in the shadows of his mind, barely discernible, but present nonetheless. And the worst part of it was that he had initially chosen those horrors of his own free will. Didn't that mean that there was a monstrous version of him hidden deep inside? A monster that could watch and even commit some of those crimes without being driven insane?

Severus knew that the monster within him was alive even though he had successfully subdued it for most of his adult life. It was as much a part of him as the determined and courageous warrior, and he was constantly aware of the duality.

What would happen if he turned out to be unable to suppress the dark part within him any longer, and his dark urges got the better of him? Would he lose all restraint and try to dominate everyone who came close to him, like his father had done with his mother? Would he rage and struggle until he was torn to pieces, together with those who loved him? Or would he be able to wrestle the different versions of himself into a whole, into a self that was worth keeping, of which he could be proud? If you took his thin veneer of manners and socially acceptable behaviour away, what was left? A brutal, murderous fanatic? A cowardly turncoat? An unfair, cruel teacher? An angry man who never found anything good in other people? Or someone else? How did other people find out who they really were, anyway? Was there anyone he could ask?

Severus had never expected to survive the war, and his persona had served him well in his task as Dumbledore's spy, but now things had changed. He had a future. He had found love. And he was about to push that love away. Had he made the right choice? Or should he just enjoy whatever came his way? Should he even be thinking about his own problems when the Underground and Hermione were still being prosecuted?

There was still so much work to be done, but the greatest danger was gone. A mad Arthur Weasley was to Voldemort what a toad was to a dragon. People should by rights be able to deal with Arthur themselves, conscious Potter or no conscious Potter. They had Dumbledore back; they didn't need him. What more could they want? He didn't believe for a moment that Dumbledore would really stop meddling with worldly affairs. Couldn't they just leave him alone? He was tired of being manipulated. He needed solitude, peace, quiet and time to think. Here and now, he couldn't have either.

Coward! he swore at himself. *Yammering about not having the time to think things through. How pathetic can you get? How can you let yourself drift into a sea of melancholy and self-doubt when Hermione's well being is being threatened? She's had to suffer enough animosity for being a Muggle-born. You can wallow in self-pity when Hermione is safe. Focusing on cleaning up the mess, that's what you're going to do. Best idea you've had all day.*

Shaking himself out of his dismal thoughts, Severus got dressed, went to his desk and continued to study the old volumes of obscure magic until it was time to leave for the meeting.

Rescue from Without

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? ****Winner**** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Disclaimer: This still doesn't belong to me. I'm only playing. Hermione and Severus are welcome to stay; the rest will be returned.

Thank you, Melusin, as always.

Chapter 26 - Rescue from Without

The hero may need to be rescued by forces from the ordinary world. This may be because the hero has refused to return or because he is successfully blocked from returning with the boon. The hero loses his ego.

(Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces)

Several hours later, the magical inhabitants of 'Paulie's Manor' were gathered in a cave at the beach around a Portkey which would take them to the Robin Hood Cavern in the Creswell Crags area. Although the Underground had kept most of its secrets, a part of the security measures had been lifted, and the Anti-Apparition circles were smaller than they had been under Voldemort's reign. The Underground leaders felt that there was no need to hide among Muggles any longer, or to crawl and walk all the way to the actual refuges. Instead, people could Apparate or Portkey into one of the hidden passageways and then follow the paths, tunnels and passages until they reached their destination. The method of hiding the caves with the Fidelius Charm and identification through familiars was still in effect, though, and the watch caves were manned again. The newcomers—members of the Order of the Phoenix and outsiders like Paulie, Sabrina and Dudley—had all signed the same magical contract as the Underground members. No one felt that keeping up the safety measures was over the top, which was a bad sign in Severus' opinion. The threat from the Ministry was very real, and that threat was felt sharply by everyone, not only by the inner circle surrounding the Underground leaders and by Potter and his friends.

Severus breathed in deeply, relishing the fragrance of the fresh sea air. This was the first time since his recovery that he'd been able to leave Paulie's house. Once they arrived at the Crags, he enjoyed the walk through the tunnels and passages and past the hidden lakes. Glad that the Underground was still well and functional, he returned the enthusiastic greeting from the guard at the watch cave when they reached it. Inside, they walked towards the general assembly cave where a large group of people, mostly the leaders of the Underground groups and members of the Order of the Phoenix, were already waiting.

"Nundu!" Almost all of them jumped up and rushed towards him when they became aware of his presence. He had to shake hands and pat shoulders. Despite his ever-present anger and self-doubt, he was close to tears. These people, his people, seemed to be just as glad to see him as he was them. The pride he felt for them almost overwhelmed him.

While these thoughts raced through Severus' mind and confused him even more, Minerva McGonagall went to the head of the table and tapped a spoon against her glass of water.

"I am very happy to finally see Severus amongst us again," she said with a smile. "Welcome back, Nundu!"

The whole cave echoed with the sound of applause. Severus looked around, a small smile on his lips and a warm feeling in his heart, despite his confusion. He nodded a thank you and sat down. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Hermione staring at him. She had gone to sit with the Weasleys and hadn't talked to him on their way to the caves. When he turned his head to look at her, however, she nodded and smiled reluctantly. He sighed, twisted his face into something resembling a confident expression, and turned his attention back to Minerva.

"Since we now have Nundu back, we can start making plans on how to proceed in getting the current administration to see reason again, or how to get Arthur to resign. Harry is safe here, and we're going to do everything in our power to wake him up. I'm confident that we'll succeed. With Harry's help, Arthur surely will see reason. But while we are looking for a cure for Harry, we should think about our strategy. Before we proceed, however, Albus wants to have a word."

Minerva nodded at Dumbledore and stepped to the side.

Dumbledore smiled and twinkled at the assembly.

"Over the last three months, I've spoken to all of you, and you all are aware that the life that was given back to me is precious and fragile. I need to live it out in peace and quiet. My time of meddling in other people's affairs is over; now it's time for Nundu and all the rest of you to lead the way."

He nonchalantly ignored the snorts and giggles and continued, "I'm absolutely certain that you'll manage to get things resolved to everyone's satisfaction without splitting our society even further. But this isn't something I can do. I just want to say good-bye to all of you. I'm going to Crete to live with Perry Price who, as you may remember, is my great-grand nephew. Perry and Parvati have owed me that everything is ready for my arrival, and so I'll be off now. I shall miss you, but I hope to see you all in Greece sometime, visiting. Not all at the same time, though."

The assembled group laughed.

Dumbledore's gaze swept over each and every wizard and witch in the room. He blinked a few times and, for once, his twinkle wasn't merry, but rather sad.

"It's been an honour to call you friends. Goodbye."

With a red flash, Dumbledore's Phoenix familiar appeared and trilled a few happy notes. Dumbledore held on to Fawkes' tail, and bird and wizard Disapparated together, in defiance of any and all Anti-Apparition spells, as usual.

Severus couldn't believe his eyes and ears. Dumbledore had really meant it. He had been serious when he said he'd give up manipulating everyone and everything. What would be next, hell freezing over?

"We shall miss him, but it is a happy thought to know that he's alive and well, isn't it?"

Minerva had stepped back to the head of the table and wiped her eyes. "Now. We'd better get down to business. What can we do to help wake Harry up? Did you find anything in the old chronicles, Severus? Hermione?"

Severus saw Hermione shake her head. He did likewise and stood up.

"Not much," he said. "The only thing I've found quoted regularly in connection with the unity of matter, soul and spirit is the symbol for the Three Primes. Paracelsus' Tria Prima..."

"Paracelsus? The one from the Chocolate Frog Card?" Ronald Weasley asked.

"Oh, shut up, Ron," Hermione hissed as Severus frowned at the young man.

"The famous wizard and alchemical genius, Paracelsus," Severus continued, "hypothesised that the spirit, the body and the soul are represented by the principles sulphuric, salty and mercurial. The mercury, representing the soul, binds the spirit, represented by the sulphur, to the body, represented by the salt. Likewise, we constantly get hints about the Lapis Philosophorum, the Philosopher's Stone, which contains the Tria Prima and is essential for making the elixir of life. The quintessence, if you will, seems to be that the elixir of life would restore the unity between body, spirit and soul. Alas, we don't have any elixir of life, nor a Philosopher's stone. And I don't think

anyone living today could make one reasonably fast, not even Albus."

"And Nicolas Flamel didn't leave any elixir behind?" Ron asked.

"No. According to Albus, he and Perenelle used it all up to set their affairs in order after the stone was destroyed."

"And then they died."

"Yes," Severus acknowledged and continued, "Less frequent than the symbol for the Three Primes is the occurrence of the symbol for cinnabar, but that leads us in the same direction as the Philosopher's Stone and doesn't really help us."

"Cinnabar?" Lovegood asked. "Isn't that a dye?"

"Yes. It's a mineral, a metallic salt. Red mercuric sulphide. We have the mercury, sulphur and salt theme again."

"Mercury and sulphur? Aren't the symbols for that Hg and S?"

When Severus nodded, puzzled, Lovegood laughed out loud, full of delight. "Hermione Granger and Snape. The two people who are trying to figure out how to solve the problem are what's needed for Harry's elixir of life. Now here's a couple with true chemistry. Or should that be alchemy?"

A part of the crowd giggled, but Severus blinked in surprise. Only Luna Lovegood could come up with such a connection. HgS indeed. He raised an eyebrow and smirked slightly, glancing sideways at Hermione. She stared at her hands, her expression frozen. The smirk vanished from Severus' lips, and he forced his features into an emotionless mask. Seeing Hermione so clearly unhappy made his chest hurt sharply. Bloody hell! He'd have to talk to her, and fast.

Severus swallowed a few times and pressed on, "So, as you see, we don't have anything practical yet and need to do more research, but before we close this meeting, I would like to say a few words concerning a possible strategy."

"By all means," Minerva said, and sat down.

"It is imperative that we resolve the Ministry problem without waiting for Potter to wake up." He glared at the assembly until the murmurs and gasps had died down. "What if we don't find a

cure? What if it takes years to cure Potter? Do you really want to wait that long and stay in hiding? I think we need to separate the two problems from each other. We can't just load all our problems onto Potter's shoulders; he's done more than his fair share for the wizarding world already. We need to learn to solve our own problems without relying on a Chosen One."

"What would you have us do?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked.

"Find out what's making Arthur act the way he's acting and remove that influence. We need all the information we can get from inside the Ministry."

"Another spy!" Ron quipped.

Severus nodded in acknowledgement.

"I can't help; I was fired," Tonks said. She sat at the far end of the table, hand-in-hand with Remus Lupin, who was looking surprisingly well, given the serious injuries he had suffered during the final battle.

"With both of us not being exactly low profile, we considered moving to France like Bill and Fleur did. When Arthur gave me the boot, things really got difficult for us here."

"That's unfortunate." Severus flinched. "How many members of our group have been outed? Can you help us, Shacklebolt?"

"Easier said than done," Kingsley said and shook his head. "But I shall keep my eyes open," he promised. "Arthur still trusts me."

"Good." Severus nodded. "At the same time, we need to get public opinion on our side. The ban on Muggleborns must be revoked." He stopped when he saw Hermione wave her hand in the air. "Yes?"

"I just wanted to remind everyone that the promises given to our fellow magical brethren weren't kept, either. There's no new contract with the house-elves nor has the Goblin problem been addressed. Centaurs and merpeople are as isolated as they've always been, and the giants haven't won any more friends, either. There's more going wrong here than just the ban on Muggleborns."

"Quite right. All of them were essential to our victory. Without them, we wouldn't have succeeded," Severus agreed.

"So, what do you want us to do first? Do you want us to attack Arthur? Can we risk another civil war?" Alastor Moody asked.

"No more violence!" Severus shouted above the commotion raised by the Weasleys, who had jumped up from their seats and started to yell at Moody. "We've had more than enough fighting. The war is over, and the rest of our problems should be resolved as peacefully as possible. We need to change things from the inside, and for that we need information about how things could have gone so horribly wrong. You can help with that."

"I'll keep my eyes open, too," Moody promised. "Some of the old-timers in the Auror department aren't opposed to sharing a beer or two. I think I feel like a bit of socialising all of a sudden."

Severus nodded. "What else can we do?"

"We need a constitution, a magical parliament with representatives of all magical beings and free elections. No more Ministry appointments by peers, lobbyists and jingling coins." That was Hermione.

"Right, and maybe we should threaten to form unions." That unexpected suggestion came from Ronald Weasley.

"That would be a bit harsh." Hermione winced.

"But efficient," Ron countered.

"What's a union?" Luna Lovegood asked, and several people tried to explain it to her, all at once.

"Silence," Severus said softly and waited until the bustle had died down. "These are long-term goals. It will take time to convince people that they actually want this. For now, the passive resistance of all beings involved, together with truthful accounts of what made the victory possible, should be the way to slowly change opinions. We'll proceed as usual. Spread the word, and let's get going. The different groups will come up with their own ideas. I suggest that Mr. Weasley is consulted whenever strategic planning is needed. He's proven himself capable."

Ron blushed in surprise and grinned. His brothers gave him a slap on the back.

"Right," Minerva agreed and promptly closed the meeting.

Severus rubbed his neck, grabbed his crutches and got up. He would talk to Hermione and explain what he had really meant earlier. Hopefully, she'd forgive him for his idiocy. The current situation was unbearable; he couldn't stand to see her so unhappy. And he desperately wanted her back. Maybe he could persuade her to go slowly, but still be with him. Maybe that wouldn't be too restrictive, for either of them. Time would tell where they could go from there. And after all, there was alchemy between them, wasn't there?

Before Severus could follow Hermione out of the room, however, Luna Lovegood approached him.

"Sir, do you have a moment?"

"What is it, Miss Lovegood?"

"Sabrina, the Muggle woman who's just moved into your cousin's house..."

"I know who she is," Severus interrupted impatiently. "Get to the point."

"She didn't want to interrupt your work and approach you herself, you know, but she wants you to have this." Luna handed him a small translucent stone.

"It's rose quartz," she explained, while he eyed the pink gem dubiously. "Sabrina said that you needed it. It soothes the heart, brightens the mood and lifts the burden from the soul."

"What?" He stared at her incredulously and sat down on the nearest chair.

"I'm sorry. I should have seen that you still don't have your full strength back," the infuriating girl said with a benevolent smile. She sat down on the chair next to his and laid her hand on his arm.

"Sabrina thinks that the stone will help you feel better, Professor Snape. But she didn't want to disturb you, so she asked me to..., you know? There is a black cloud hanging over you. Something that helps in driving the darkness away can only be good, isn't that right?" She stared at him earnestly.

Severus rolled the small stone between his fingers. It was pleasant to look at—he had to give her that—but still...

"This is ridiculous," he growled, feeling unsettled by how easily Lovegood had spotted his problem.

"It really isn't," she protested. "Sabrina may be a Muggle, but I suspect that there's a latent talent for magic in her. She knows when people are troubled, and she saw the darkness that is hanging over you, as do I, incidentally. I know what it's like to feel like you've been kissed by a Dementor. It's not easy to get out of that state, and if the stone can help you..."

Severus felt his ire rise again. The nerve of the girl.

"How would you know anything about what ails me? That something ails me at all?"

Luna completely ignored his anger and continued amiably, "You had a lot of time to think about things while you were recovering, didn't you? An intelligent man like you would have had an epiphany or two during that time. You would struggle to find a place where you could fit in. You have a future now, and I think you feel guilty that you've survived. It's not a secret that you were a Death Eater; naturally, you're bound to feel remorse for the things you've done in the past."

"You don't know anything about remorse, you meddling girl," Severus snarled. His anger had come to the surface with a vengeance, and he was struggling hard to keep it down.

"There's no need to be so nasty, sir. I know what remorse and self-doubt feel like."

Severus growled, unbelieving.

"Really, I do. For the longest time, I believed that it was my fault that my mother died. I was a child when it happened, and no one explained to me that I shouldn't blame myself for having distracted her from her experiments. It took time to let go of the imagined guilt and to accept myself after that."

"Ridiculous," Severus muttered, moved despite his anger.

Unfazed, Lovegood kept confabulating. "It wasn't easy, and I was all alone. My father had to deal with his own grief; he really didn't give much thought to how I was feeling. You have it easier; you aren't alone. You have Hermione and the Underground, and they love you. They'll be there for you whenever you need them. That's good, isn't it?" She beamed.

Severus rolled his eyes and barked out a harsh laugh, wondering where his anger had disappeared to. It would be so much easier to dismiss the girl's words in anger. But instead, he felt intrigued.

"That's completely different, and besides, they have better things to do..."

"They are your friends!"

"They have work to do..."

"They do, but that doesn't change the fact that they, that we, are here for you when you need us. It is good to talk things over with a friend, you know."

"And you think you are the right person for the job, do you?" Severus sneered half-heartedly.

Lovegood smiled. "Yes. Because I understand you. We've both been outcasts, unsure of who we really are. I never found Professor Dumbledore's speech about our choices showing us who we are very helpful, did you?"

"What?" What was she getting at now?

"I like to think that our choices *make* us who we are, which gives us control over our lives whereas beings *shown* who we are..."

"...implies predestined fate, and you reject predetermination," Severus finished her sentence. He had no idea where she was heading, but he was interested despite himself.

"Yes, don't you? I think we owe it to ourselves to constantly work on becoming the person we want to be. I think we ought to have the freedom to do that and not be tied down by the things we have no control over—like being Muggleborn, rich or poor, or having been lonely, bullied children. Like I was. And I suppose, you were, too."

That gave Severus pause. The girl had always been odd. It was to be expected that there'd be friction between her and her peers. But had she really been isolated?

"Weren't you friends with Miss Weasley and Nightshade?"

"Now I am, yes. But most people in my house thought I was weird. They called me Loony Luna to my face, stole my clothes, hid my stuff. Only when Dumbledore's Army

was founded in my fourth year did I make any friends."

"I see," Severus said thoughtfully. His anger had subsided. He felt an odd kind of sympathy for the young woman.

"You probably think I'm too young to be your sounding board," Luna continued. "I don't feel too young, but it's up to you, really. I'm here, and if you want to talk, I'll listen. Sometimes, it's better to talk to someone a bit distant, you know?"

She seemed to look straight into his soul with those unsettling, slightly bulging eyes; at least that was how it felt. He couldn't do anything but sit and listen to her.

"Hermione is too close to you," she continued. "The love between you will cloud her judgement. And yours. That's why you sometimes misunderstand each other. Like now. It happens to Ron and me, too. I think it happens to everyone."

Severus sighed. Was he that obvious? "So now you're into relationship counseling, as well as survivors' guilt therapy, are you? My, my, aren't you versatile?"

"There's no need to make fun of me, sir, although I'm quite used to it. I'm just trying to help. The two of you aren't exactly hiding your emotions, you know? Hermione looks very unhappy, and you look confused."

He let out a harsh laugh.

"Confused? Yes, you could call it that."

Could anyone figure him out just by looking at him these days? Severus shook his head.

"However, I'm not going to discuss my personal affairs with you, Miss Lovegood."

"That's fine." The insufferable girl smiled. "Just don't forget to tell Hemione that you love her, then things will turn out as they should. Did you notice that interesting pattern in the wood of this table? It looks like the tree was infested by the yellow-bellied bark-smidgeon. All these whirls..."

"What?" Severus rubbed his temples, a headache was forming behind his eyes. "I'm too old for her," he said tentatively. "I come with too much baggage."

Luna looked up from the wood pattern she was studying and stared at him.

"You sound exactly like Professor Lupin before he got married to Tonks, you know. Hermione loves you deeply; everyone can see that. She can deal with it."

"She doesn't understand..."

"No, of course she doesn't. She's always known where she fits in, at least in Hogwarts. She made friends with Harry and Ron in her first year and has never been isolated since. She's always had someone at her side, not like you. That's why you must explain to her how it is, how you feel, to give her a chance to understand."

"How can she...?"

"She will. But you need to tell her how you feel. Don't leave her guessing."

"I don't want to burden her with..."

"But you must!" Luna exclaimed. "Believe me, she wants to be burdened with your problems. She loves you and wants to help you feel whole again. All you need to do is accept her love and let your fears go!"

"That easy, Dr. Freud?"

"What?" Luna laughed. "Yes, it's that easy once you get to the bottom of it all. At least, it's been that way for me. As soon as I accepted who I was, I could let others get close to me and accept their friendship, even though they still tease me often. I'm not perfect and neither are they. And neither are you, nor is Hermione."

Severus narrowed his eyes and stared at her. "You are making a lot of rather daring comparisons here. We're not all the same."

Luna shrugged and stood up. "True. But we're all human, and we can't let the Spirkles eat up our passions. Best of luck, sir. If you want to talk some more, you know where to find me." She nodded and left the room.

Severus blinked. Spirkles eat up our passions, indeed. If he ever had to spend any length of time alone with that young woman, he'd go crazy. Her flightiness was driving him up the wall as it was. But she was observant and well-meaning; he had to give her that. She had offered her help without any hidden agenda or malice. To his surprise, he found that he quite liked her. Maybe he should think some more about what she had told him. He stood up, grabbed his crutches and left the room.

Now, where was Hermione? He was going to tell her how he felt and apologize for the misunderstanding. That was the least he could do. What a fool he'd been. He couldn't bear the idea that the two of them weren't together any longer and yet, he had pushed her away all the time. It hurt him to see her so unhappy. But was he the right man to make her happy? She seemed to think so, and yet he was thinking in circles again. Where was she?

"Weasley!" Severus called to the young man who had just emerged from the room where they had placed Potter. "Have you seen Nightshade?"

"Hermione?" George Weasley scratched his head. "I saw her leave a while ago. She was in a foul mood."

"Where did she go?"

"No idea. All I know is that she was looking for you earlier, and then she stormed out of the assembly cave in a right snit."

"Thank you," Severus grumbled and went on his way to the watch cave. He'd have to wait for her to come back to Paulie's house, then. He hoped she'd be less angry by that time.

Back at Paulie's, no one had seen Hermione, either. After Dumbledore's departure, George and Percy Weasley were the only other wizards who were staying there apart from Severus and, occasionally, Hermione.

"She wanted to check out some ancient libraries as soon as you were back on your feet, Professor," Percy Weasley explained. "Maybe she went right away? I'm sure she'll be back in a few days. That Google Charm of hers really is something. She's already covered most of the magical libraries in Europe: the Vatican only took her one day."

Severus frowned. He didn't want to postpone their talk. He hated the idea that she'd gone away doubting his feelings for her. She shouldn't be going out on her own, anyway, Underground training or not. They had worked so well together in the past; he wanted to go with her. He was so tired of sitting around. *Bloody weakness...* He hammered his fists on his thighs, but that didn't improve his strength and only earned him a funny look from Percy Weasley. Mumbling something incomprehensible, Severus went to his room.

Maybe he should write to her? Yes, that wasn't a bad idea. In writing, he could communicate thoughts he had trouble expressing verbally. He went to the window and opened it, letting out a low whistle. He waited for his owl, but Lady Mouse didn't come.

After calling her in vain for the third time, Severus started to worry. That owl had been with him for a long time; she was family, his familiar in the truest sense. He hated the idea that something could have happened to the bird. She'd never ventured far away from him, and always knew when he called her. She'd even visited once or twice while he was still recovering in bed, demanding to be talked to and have her feathers smoothed.

Severus paced up and down until he couldn't bear it any longer. He'd have to go up to the attic where a makeshift owlery had been set up. Maybe there he'd find out what had happened to her. Throwing the door open forcefully, he was ready to storm out of the room – as much as he could storm with those bloody crutches – when he stumbled and nearly fell over something orange and furry.

"Mroar," Crookshanks said and regally marched into Severus' room, tail held stiff and upright in that proud, self-assured cat manner.

"Crookshanks?" Severus hissed, surprised, trying to regain his balance. He got along reasonably well with Hermione's familiar, but hadn't been visited by the half-Kneazle before. However, he'd met him often when he had been with Hermione in the past. Maybe Crookshanks was looking for his mistress?

"Hermione isn't here," Severus said and bent down to scratch the cat behind his ears.

"I know," he heard a voice in his mind. No, not exactly a voice, more like the idea, the concept of a voice, but clearly understandable nonetheless. In fact, it felt just as if he were communicating with his own familiar.

"My human takes Mouse-Hunter-Bird with her. I look after you," was the next thought that manifested in Severus' mind.

"You?" Severus said flabbergasted. "You can talk to me?"

If cats could snort, Crookshanks would have. "You're mates. Mouse-Hunter-Bird talks to her, I talk to you. All is well."

Severus sat down heavily. Crookshanks jumped up on his lap, treaded with his paws and purred. He projected perfect contentment, just as Mouse did when he stroked her feathers.

Severus sighed. Even their familiars knew that they belonged together. Everybody seemed to know this except him. What a fool he was. He leaned back and closed his eyes. He briefly considered sending a letter with a borrowed owl, but decided against it. He'd wait for Hermione to return, and then they'd talk.

But what could he say to her? He'd have to open up, let her in and offer himself, flaws and all. He'd have to warn her about the darkness inside him, though, but maybe she would want to help him find out who he was. Lovegood might have had a point there.

He realized that the guilty part of him was an important part of what defined him, and he understood that the guilt would remain a part of him forever. But there weren't only bad things in his past, were there? His good deeds had shaped him, too. And did it really make a difference to weigh these things against each other? Shouldn't he just accept them as defining moments of his past and rather explore who he was now and where he could go from here?

He was well aware that he would never be popular or appear likeable to most people, but that wasn't what he wanted to be, was it? What and who did he want to be, anyway? He was certain about one thing, though. He didn't want to be like his father. And yet, he recognized so much of his father in himself, especially in his anger and his flights of temper. His father had always been angry, volatile and often violent. Severus wasn't certain if he could successfully suppress that part of himself, that part that made him so much like his father. He knew that losing control would mean losing everything he had worked for, every person who had befriended him, the respect of the Underground – and the love of Hermione. She had to know about his struggle. He would have to tell her, to make her understand why she had to have a choice: why being with him would never be easy, why it would be better for her if she gave up on him.

He could almost hear her reply: *You are not your father. You don't give in to your anger...* And maybe knowing what was possible and fighting against it did make him a different person after all, a person who could learn to accept love...

One of the things that constantly amazed him was that the people in the Underground seemed to really respect him, despite his temper, and not only because of his role as spy and leader. Was it true? Did he have friends who accepted him for who he was, without wanting to use him for some selfish scheme? Wasn't this too good to be true? Maybe he was lucky for once, or was he? He would only find that out for good when their world was truly free and at peace.

But then, that wasn't something other people could be certain about either, was it? Maybe he wasn't so different from other people, then? They all struggled for the same things, in the long run. Could he accept this for himself? Did this absolve him from his dark past? Could this compensate for the monster inside? Should he risk Hermione for a maybe? He sighed. Lovegood was right. Hermione should be the one to make that choice, and it should be an informed choice. He had hurt her already by assuming he was acting in her best interest. He'd have to accept her verdict, whatever it was. He surprised himself by feeling elated by that thought. Maybe there was a chance after all. But first, he needed to talk to her and try to make things right.

Six days later, Severus got an owl from Minerva announcing a meeting for the next day. He knew that the Underground would be meeting again at the Robin Hood caverns; they had agreed on that in their last gathering, and so there was no need for Minerva to have put the location in writing. What Severus didn't know was that the Muggles were coming, too.

"Hermione has found a ritual which might require the participation of a blood relative," Minerva explained while she slowly walked with him through the hidden passageways in the concealed part of the cave. The Muggles had been picked up by Lola and were walking ahead.

"Where is she? Is she here, too?" Severus asked. He was slightly out of breath, whether it was from the anticipation of seeing Hermione again or from the exercise, he didn't quite know. He could walk without crutches now, but still felt as weak as a kitten.

"She's in the cave, waiting. She's only just come back and asked me to call a meeting straight away." Minerva gave Severus a curious look.

Severus avoided her gaze and swore under his breath.

In the office cave, a small group of people was already sitting around a table. Severus saw Lovegood and the Weasleys, the two Muggles, Moody and Tonks and Lupin, who had decided to stay with the Underground rather than move to France. Hermione stood at one end with a notebook and several unrolled scrolls in front of her. She looked up when he entered the room and frowned.

Severus nodded a greeting at everyone and tried to keep down the anger that had flared up with renewed vigour. Why was she frowning? He really didn't understand her. He had been so happy to see her, and she'd greeted him with a frown. He desperately wanted to apologize and set things right between them, if that was what she wanted, but did she even want it? By the looks of it, she wasn't very glad to see him. Would he ever understand her? He had his doubts.

"Thanks for coming at such short notice," Minerva said. "Hermione's just come back from the secret library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh. She's found some clues that might help us revive Mr. Potter. All of us here know Harry well, which is why this group was chosen. Hermione, please begin."

"Thank you Minerva. Didn't Kingsley...?"

"He's been notified, but I didn't get a reply. In fact, I didn't hear from him all of last week, did you?" She looked at Moody, who shook his head.

Severus narrowed his eyes. He would have liked to have had a word with Kingsley, but before he could say anything, Minerva continued, "I suppose he's tied up in the Ministry. We'll have to clue him in later. Hermione?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "As you know, the magical section of the library in Nineveh didn't suffer from the same amount of destruction as the Muggle part. Many of the ancient

texts are still undamaged. Thanks to the flame-repelling spells, we still have the wax tablets, leather scrolls and papyri, not only fragments of burnt clay tablets. I got the idea of going there while I was in the Vatican archive. I found a footnote linking to a comparison of the description of hell in the Bible with that in the *Sha naqba imuru: He who Saw the Deep*. You know, the Gilgamesh epic. There's a theory that the Judeo-Christian god is actually the Sumerian god Ilu or Enlil, who is known for his violent and unforgiving temper. Whereas his brother Enki or Ea..."

"What does this have to do with Potter?" interrupted Severus, which won him a glare from Hermione. He stared back, stone-faced.

"Sorry, I got distracted," she snapped. "The parallels are fascinating, and it's worth studying thoroughly. All these ancient stories are full of little gems that should be of interest to any witch or wizard. Even Muggles know about the epic: several copies of the tablets were spread around in the non-magical libraries of the area, and they have managed to decipher a small part, together with a few other stories. There's a creation myth that's at the same time similar and yet quite different from..."

"Potter. What does it have to do with Potter?" Severus thundered, feeling how his impatience caused his misgivings about himself and a possible commitment to return full force.

Hermione lifted her head and looked down her nose at him. She sniffed. "Maybe all of you are familiar with the full epic, but I doubt it, and so I was trying to summarize."

"I only have a vague recollection of the epic, Hermione. Please continue," Minerva said amiably.

"Very well... There are several versions of the stories about King Gilgamesh of Uruk and his friend and companion Enkidu, and in each version, Enkidu dies in the end, and Gilgamesh is heartbroken and tries to bring him back to life. Gilgamesh eventually learns that mortality is something that every human must face and that his being partly a god doesn't make him immortal. There is a well-known version with Enkidu dying from a disease and another one where he goes to the Underworld instead of his friend and cannot return because he didn't listen to Gilgamesh's advice and angered everyone he met there:

'And for this quest his friend alone did pledge.

So Gilgamesh said this to Enkidu:

'Descend, descend to Hell where life does end

but listen now to words you need to know.

Go slow to where death rules, my brother dear,

and then arise again above and over fear.' (1)

"That's how it starts," she quoted. "Enkidu doesn't listen to Gilgamesh's advice and angers everybody he encounters in the Underworld and thus can't return. Gilgamesh is heartbroken and goes to the gods to plea for his friend's return. But Enlil, or Illu, the vengeful Lord of the Wind, wasn't interested; he won't help. The moon god doesn't help, either. So Gilgamesh goes to the Lord of Earth and Sweet Water, Enki or Ea:

"My god,' he cried, 'when death

called for me, my best friend went

in my place and he is now no longer living.' (1)

"Enki had Mercy and sent someone who showed him the way, and so Gilgamesh went half-way through the earth and was able to speak to Enkidu,

"Tell me of death and where you are.'

'Not willingly do I speak of death,'

said Enkidu in slow reply.

'But if you wish to sit for a brief

time, I will describe where I do stay.'

'Yes,' his brother said in early grief.

'All my skin and all my bones are dead now.

All my skin and all my bones are now dead.'

'Oh no,' cried Gilgamesh without relief.

'Oh no,' sobbed one enclosed by grief." (1)

"You see, he is really dead. His skin, his flesh, his bones are dead, but Gilgamesh managed to bring him back by performing a ritual that brings the spirit back by binding the soul to the dead body. If that ritual worked in that case then why shouldn't it work for Harry, whose body is still alive? We wouldn't even have to find a substitute to leave for Harry, which is another kind of ritual described in later, related myths. For instance, where Inanna, who also is Ishtar, and later Isis, was captured and..."

"Back to Potter," Severus reminded her.

Hermione nodded, grinned sheepishly, took a deep breath and looked around. Her eyes were shining, and her cheeks were flushed. Severus couldn't take his eyes off her, but he also listened raptly because he was intrigued. He had never read the Gilgamesh epic and wanted to know more. By the looks of it, even the Muggles were interested.

"Most of this is known to Muggles as well," Hermione continued, nodding to Sabrina, who looked all excited, obviously bursting to say something. "But there is more. There's another part that's hidden from Muggles. The Song of Enkidu is a long recollection of the different ways Gilgamesh tried to bring Enkidu back to life. He didn't succeed at first, and only when he accepted his own mortality and was living a full and joyful life, did Enki grant him his wish. Unfortunately, that part of the ritual hasn't been completely preserved, and I haven't found it in Nineveh or elsewhere. The older Sumerian version doesn't contain it, either.

"What we have is this:

"And Enki saw that Gilgamesh had learned

that fighting the fate of humans is futile and ruins the joy in life.

So he sent his son to teach the ritual

of freeing kin from death to live a life of love,

a life worthy of the brother of a king.

And Gilgamesh went through darkness to win the water of life.

And he gathered the stone things.

And he gathered the essence.

So Gilgamesh made the water of life.

For Enkidu was knowingly given the soul of his mother,

willingly given the love of his brother,

joyfully offered forgiveness of his foe.

The king took the essence of each and watched it flow.

Blood, flesh and bone are as mud, stick and stone,

they must be together, and not alone.

Being born from the sea set Enkidu free. (2)

"That's it," Hermione said and looked around with a radiant smile. She seemed to have forgotten that she was mad at Severus, at least for the moment, since she included him when she beamed at the group. No one spoke. They all needed to make sense of what they'd just heard.

Severus closed his eyes in concentration. That last part rang a bell. He had heard something similar before, but where?

"And what does this all mean?" Ron Weasley finally broke the silence.

"I'm not sure," Hermione replied, "but I think that last part sounds promising."

"How accurate is the translation?" Minerva asked. "It all sounds rather cryptic."

"I translated it myself," Hermione stated proudly. "Cuneiform is pretty straightforward once you get the hang of it, and I had both the Akkadian and the Sumerian texts to make comparisons. You know that I was always good at Ancient Runes— We need to figure out what it all means, though, of course."

George Weasley was whispering something into Ronald's ear that caused them both to giggle under their breath. Percy looked very impressed and was about to say something when suddenly Severus remembered why that last verse had sounded so familiar.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!

Flesh of the servant willingly given you will revive your master.

Blood of the enemy forcibly taken you will resurrect your foe." (3)

As he quoted, a shudder went down his spine.

"What?" Hermione stared at him wide-eyed. So did everybody else.

"It was the ritual the Dark... Voldemort used to get his body back the night of the last task of the Tri Wizard Tournament when Cedric Diggory was killed. I wasn't there, but I saw Lucius' memories in a Pensieve."

"Harry told us, too," Hermione whispered, and Ron nodded. Both looked pale.

"So what is this?" Minerva asked. "Do we have to resort to Dark Magic to revive Mr. Potter? I am afraid the result will not be what we want to achieve if that is the case."

"It's not necessarily Dark Magic," Severus said thoughtfully. "Albus holds the theory that many Dark spells are aberrations of benevolent magic. I tend to agree. The phoenix protection that saved Albus' life is the benevolent version of Horcrux creation. I find it quite likely that the Blood, Flesh and Bone spell was such a perversion of a benevolent ritual, too. Could you repeat that last part of the verse, please?"

"Blood, flesh and bone are as mud, stick and stone,

they must be together, and not alone.

Being born from the sea shall set Enkidu free.'

"Is that what you mean?" Hermione asked after she had read the last part again.

"Yes, it directly quotes blood, flesh and bone. But there is no reference to it in the earlier part, the lines just before that, the ones that mostly resemble the Dark ritual."

"For Enkidu was knowingly given the soul of his mother,

willingly given the love of his brother,

joyfully offered forgiveness of his foe.

The king took the essence of each and watched it flow.'

"You're right. That sounds similar," Hermione said and smiled. "I think we're onto something here."

"Voldemort's ritual required a potion with those three ingredients. His, er, body, for lack of a better word, was placed into that potion, and he arose renewed."

"Being born from the sea!" Luna exclaimed.

"Yes, I suppose it can be interpreted that way," Severus agreed. "The potion would likely be the water of life of that earlier verse."

"So it's not the same as the elixir of life?" Ron asked, looking confused.

"I don't know," Severus admitted. "There are stone things mentioned in that verse, but I don't know what they are. They may or may not be related to the Philosopher's Stone."

"There is another reference to the stone things in the creation myth," Hermione threw in. "The stone things seem to be magical; they were propelling a boat. There must have been charms on them, or maybe they contained elemental magic. They belonged to the Sumerian and Babylonian equivalent of the Biblical Noah, but if I recall correctly, Gilgamesh destroyed them in his pledge for immortality. There wasn't much more than that..."

"We need to know more details about the stone things, but perhaps we don't really need them. Voldemort's potion didn't contain a stone, and maybe we don't need one, either.

"Maybe," Hermione said, but she looked doubtful. Severus had to admit that she looked how he felt. He had a hunch that they would need those stone things after all. He sighed and forced his mind back to the immediate conversation.

"Anyway," he continued, "none of the ingredients for Voldemort were really willingly given, although Wormtail's contribution is debatable. I think that Wormtail was intimidated, and that might be one of the reasons why that ritual didn't quite produce the handsome face and body that had once belonged to Tom Riddle. The contrast with the requirements in the epic are striking, if you think about it. In the epic, it's all about love, forgiveness and kinship of souls. *Soul of the mother*. Just like Lily's sacrifice. She gave a part of her soul to her son, out of love, and this protected his own soul when it was threatened to be ripped out of him by the Killing Curse. The ingredients in the epic are described as loving gifts while Voldemort's ritual was all about forceful taking, about stealing, really. That's typical for predatory Dark Magic."

"That means we'd better be careful with this potion. We wouldn't want Harry to look like Voldemort," Ron Weasley quipped and, judging by the guffaws, everybody seemed to be glad for the relief of tension. After the laughter had died down, Weasley continued, "So these three things would have to be ingredients in a potion for Harry? But how can he get the soul from his mother if his mother is dead?"

"Maybe the soul fragment from the protection spell is sufficient?" Percy speculated.

"He lost that when he came of age. That particular spell only works for children. This one here is different, and it needs a mother who is willing to do what's necessary to give a part of her soul," Severus explained.

He looked thoughtfully at Dudley, but given the attitude Petunia Dursley had always displayed towards everybody with magical talent, he didn't have much hope. However, he had to ask. "I don't suppose your mother..."

Dudley swallowed and shook his head. "Mum never saw Harry as her son. She wouldn't start now."

"How do you get the soul from someone, anyway?" Sabrina asked.

Hermione and Severus looked at each other. They had unthinkingly fallen back into the easy rapport they had shared when they had worked together during the war. This was how they had solved many a problem, and if Hermione was willing to set their differences aside while they worked together, so was he.

"This is one of the big questions," Hermione replied. "We only know that a blood sacrifice can make the gift of a soul fragment possible, as was the case with Harry's mother. It's described in *Magicks and Legends: Forgotten Spells Most Evil and Benevolente*. Harry, too, wanted to sacrifice a piece of his soul to make Tom Riddle human again, but something must have gone wrong when Wormtail killed Riddle so shortly after the transfer. We think that Harry's soul got so frightened by the violent loss of that fragment that it got confused and lost and now can't find the way back into his body."

Hermione paused and looked at Severus. "Come to think of it, the ritual we used to lend our love to Harry's to make a living sacrifice possible has a few elements these ancient rituals have as well. You know, love of the brother, forgiveness of foe. It's all based on the same principle, apparently."

Severus nodded. "Yes. And the principle is love, the greatest power of all. Love transcends death, and without love, life loses its meaning."

Hermione stared at him for a long moment, then she seemed to shake herself out of her thoughts. "Anyway, another way to lose one's soul while still being alive is the Dementors' Kiss. They can suck a soul out of a person. They find their nourishment in souls."

"They eat them?" Sabrina asked.

"In a sense..."

"How horrible," Sabrina whispered. "I thought souls were indestructable?"

"We don't really know what happens to the souls when they are separated from the body. I mean, we don't know a lot about souls at all. We know that they exist, that they bind the spirit to the material world, that they can be ripped when someone commits murder, that fragments can be passed on to loved ones through sacrifice—but we don't really know where they go. All we know is what a living person looks like who's had their soul sucked out. It's a terrifying sight."

Sabrina shuddered and swallowed, wide-eyed. "I bet the Aliens would know."

"The Aliens?" Hermione's eyes went round, and Severus' eyebrows shot up. What was the woman babbling about?

"I thought you were reading the chronicles of the Aliens. Weren't you? They came to Earth from the planet Nibiru 100,000 years ago to mine for gold. They needed slaves, and so they genetically altered the DNA of *Homo erectus*, and the result was us. Enlil and Enki were great lords among them. They'll come back as soon as Nibiru's orbit comes close to the sun again. There's also a connection with reptiles."

The whole group, except Luna, stared at her in bewilderment.

"Really?" Luna asked fascinated. "Tell me more."

(1) Tablet XII from the Gilgamesh epic (Sumerian Liturgies and Psalms by Stephen Langdon, Oxford University, 1919)

(2) I made that up. There are a few snippets from tablet XII in there, too.

(3) JKR: Goblet of Fire.

The Crossing of the Return Threshold

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? ****Winner**** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

This still doesn't belong to me. I'm only playing. Hermione and Severus are welcome to stay; the rest will be returned.

Thank you, Melusin, as always.

Chapter 27 - The Crossing of the Return Threshold

The hero returns to the world of common day and must accept it as real.

(Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces)

"Perhaps you can continue this conversation after we've concluded our meeting?" Minerva interrupted Luna. Severus felt thankful; he didn't think he could have endured much more of this without blowing a fuse. Hermione seemed to be engaging similar thoughts. Her face was red, and she seemed to be making an effort not to comment.

"Sure," Luna said with a cordial smile. "Go ahead."

"Thank you, Luna," Hermione ground out, but the sarcasm seemed to be wasted on the other girl. Hermione looked as if she had swallowed a toad, and Severus couldn't blame her. His reply to Luna's and Sabrina's theorizing about reptile aliens would not have been as calm as Hermione's had been.

Hermione took a deep breath and looked around. "Now, where were we?"

"The fact that Potter doesn't have a living mother," Severus provided.

"Right. And we wouldn't know how we could get a part of her soul, anyway."

"It seems that we need to do more research before we can solve this problem," Minerva said. "I suppose the love of the brother is why Mr. Dursley is here?"

"Yes, I thought that maybe a cousin would be good enough if the person in question doesn't have a brother. Would you do that, Dudley?" Hermione asked.

"Do what?" The young Muggle man looked scared and confused.

"I don't know the details yet. But you feel friendly towards Harry, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"That has to be good enough."

"Forgiveness of foe would be the easiest part, I assume," Severus threw in. "That can be me or Draco."

"That's what I thought, yes, if you'll agree?" She looked at him sharply.

He sighed, gave her a tiny smirk and nodded, "I will."

Her eyes flashed, and she quickly looked away. "Very well, then. So, how do we get love, soul and forgiveness into a potion, given that we can manage to get them?"

"Maybe the potion has to be brewed by these three people, putting their soul, love and forgiveness into the brewing?" Ronald suggested and Severus blinked. That wasn't a bad idea at all.

"That's a possibility. It hadn't occurred to me..." Hermione looked thoughtful.

"The king took the essence of each. It says so in the text," she suddenly burst out. "The essence of a soul, of love and of forgiveness, what would that be?"

"I'm not sure," Severus murmured. "Voldemort's potion literally contained blood, flesh and bone."

"Blood, flesh and bone is mud, stick and stone. What does that mean?" Ronald asked. He had written down the verses and was staring at his notes, frowning.

"The essence of life is..." Percy started, but was interrupted when Luna began to sing.

"Sticks and stones will break your bones

And leave them lying in the mud.

But you'll be scared when we're alone

Like I might suck your blood.

And I could tell you a witch's spell..., "(4)

All eyes were on her again.

"What was that?" Minerva asked mildly. Severus admired her for her self-discipline. He knew that she didn't normally tolerate nonsense, but with Luna Lovegood, exceptions had to be made. At the root of all that oddness lay a sharp and observant mind.

"That's a song my mother sang to me the day she died, but I forget the rest."

Severus felt goose pimples rise on his skin. He had a feeling that they were on to something important. "What exactly was she working on when she died?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. I think she was trying to make a potion against the Imperius Curse and other kinds of mind control. Do you want me to look it up for you in her journals?"

"Yes! Where are they?"

"They're at home, in my room. She left them to me, and I treasure them. I haven't had the courage to look at her last entries, yet, though..." Luna gazed at her hands and swallowed.

"We understand, Luna. But this could be so important..." Minerva said.

"I can look through the entries with you if you like," Ronald offered, which earned him a grateful nod from the young woman.

"Then we should perhaps conclude this meeting," Minerva suggested. "We need to think about what we've learned and try to get as much more information as we can before we meet again. Everyone should take a copy of the verses and study them. Let's meet again the day after tomorrow, shall we?"

They all nodded their agreement and stood up.

"Moody, a word please!" Severus hurried after the old Auror. From the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione leave the cave with the Weasleys. Damn, he wanted to talk to her, but he had to talk to Moody first...

"What is it, Snape?"

"It's about Kingsley. Have you seen him?"

"As I said before, no!" Moody said, his artificial eye spinning wildly.

"Bloody Hell, where is the man?" Severus swore. "We need information about Arthur: who is working with him, to whom he talks regularly, who might have an interest in manipulating him..."

"I told you I'd contact some of my old mates," Moody said impatiently. "I'll be meeting a few of them tonight at the Leaky Cauldron. I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything."

"Very well, then," Severus said. "And keep an eye out for Shacklebolt."

"Who else but me?" Moody grumbled and stomped out of the cave.

It wasn't easy to get hold of Hermione. Over the next few days, she flittered in and out of Paulie's house, talked to peoplenever to Severusand was gone before he could even call her name.

Shortly before they were all going to meet to be Portkeyed to the Robin Hood cave, though, the opportunity for talking arose. Severus walked into the kitchen, and there she sat, alone, just pouring herself a glass of orange juice.

"There you are!" he blurted out. "I need to talk to you."

She looked up at him and frowned. "Do you, really?"

"Yes, please. You misunderstood me. Let me explain..." He put his arms around her, but she got up and evaded him quickly.

"I don't think I misunderstood," she said, her angry frown slowly shifting into a sad expression. "And in any case, now is not the time. I need to think a bit more about all we said. We need to focus on other things, too, right now." She put the glass down on the worktop and moved to the door.

Severus felt like a deflated balloon. His heart hurt, and his thoughts went fuzzy.

"I..., please..."

No, what was he doing? Even to his own ears he sounded like one of those overemotional, clingy people. He hated this. He swallowed, schooled his features into stony indifference and stated, "You don't love me anymore."

Surprise, sadness and something else was flickering over Hermione's face while she stared at him. That last emotion might have been pity, or perhaps compassion. Severus couldn't say.

"I don't stop loving people so quickly," she said gently. "But that doesn't change the fact that I need time to think. And besides," she continued, her tone suddenly changing from gentle to waspish, "if you need someone to talk to, there's always Luna." Without giving him a chance to reply, she turned and left the kitchen.

Severus stood speechless. He didn't quite know whether he should laugh or cry. Did she mean that she still loved him? Could he hope? And that last part? Suddenly hope sprang up in his heart and made him smile. Could it be that she was jealous? Of Luna Lovegood? Apparently she had seen them talking. That wasn't all that bad, then, was it?

Severus' heart felt lighter than it had for days. The mild guilt about causing her suffering and jealousy was quickly pushed aside. The jealousy was ridiculous, and if Hermione would only think about it with a cool head, she'd come to the same conclusion. They would find a time to talk about Severus' problems and fears. Yes, they were fears; he had to admit that to himself. He only wished that they could talk right now and not have to wait. He didn't want to be without her if there was a chance at reconciliation. Bloody emotioal fool that he had become, but he missed her more than he had ever missed anyone. Which just showed that she was really more mature than him, despite her youththere were more important things he should be focusing on right now rather than his love-life.

"Where is Moody?"

Neither Kingsley Shacklebolt nor Mad-Eye had shown up for the meeting and concern was showing on the faces of those who were attending.

"This can't be a coincidence," Ronald said. "Something must have happened to them."

"We'll have to go to the Ministry, as a group," Severus said. "We don't have anyone else who could spy, and if those two have been found out, there's too much risk for one person going in alone."

"How do you plan to go in?" Hermione asked. "We can't conjure Inferi as substitutes as we used to do."

"I don't think we need substitutes. We can use Polyjuice Potion. And I shall send an owl to Lucius. He can tell me who can be bribed and who can move around without raising suspicion."

"Uhm," Percy Weasley said. "Maybe I can help."

"How? You don't work at the Ministry any longer. Besides, everybody knows that you're not on your father's side," Severus stated, looking puzzled.

"That's just it, my advantage, isn't it?" Percy said and blushed. "I can go in and pretend to seek reconciliation. They wouldn't believe it from any of my brothers, but they would believe it of me." The last words came out in a whisper. He looked down at his hands; the blush had intensified and now reached his ears.

"You know," George said and patted Percy's shoulders, "that could work."

"Yeah," Ronald agreed. "It's brilliant, Percy."

Percy looked up, a small, sad smile on his face. He shrugged. "Worth a try."

Severus frowned and looked at Hermione. She raised an eyebrow and nodded. "It sounds feasible," she said.

Minerva nodded vigorously. "You need to be very careful, Percy. If someone has suspected that Kingsley and Alastor are working against Arthur, wouldn't that someone be suspicious if you showed up all of a sudden? Your association with the Underground is known, after all."

"You mean they'd reckon that this is our third attempt at spying, with the first two having failed?" Ron caught on immediately.

"That's a good point," Hermione said. "Maybe we could use a decoy, someone who is even more suspicious and can draw the attention away from Percy?"

"Who?" That question was uttered with more than one voice.

"I don't like it," Severus finally felt compelled to step in. "I can't think of anyone who could serve as a decoy. We need to go in as a group."

"Let me try it first, please." Percy sounded almost desperate. "I can approach Dad in private. He will believe me when I tell him that I feel guilty about Mum's death." He swallowed, tears were glittering in his eyes: in the eyes of most people present, in fact.

"If I come to the Ministry with Dad, no one will dare to stop me," he continued. "Believe me, I know the average Ministry employee's ways. They'll believe me. If anyone knows how to suck up to authority, it's me."

"Don't sell yourself short, Percy," Minerva said reassuringly. "We all make mistakes, and you are still young enough to be entitled to some foolishness. I still think that your idea is good, but it is also dangerous. We need a backup plan, in case you are found out as well. We don't want anything to happen to you."

"Well, three vanished spies won't be much help to the Underground, either," Percy said.

"It would be better if we could watch what's happening." Hermione asserted. "But the two-way mirrors would be too suspicious."

"Too bad that we don't have one of those Muggle contraptions. Harry took me to a moving picture once. James Wong or something. He had all these things..."

"You mean James Bond," Hermione said with a grin. "Yeah, some of his gadgets would come in handy. A video cam..." Her eyes widened. "Portraits!" she stated proudly.

"Portraits," Severus agreed.

"What?" Percy asked, confused.

"Very good!" Minerva's eyes sparkled. "We used portraits for communication during the war. They were linked to each other, but not to a building. People would wear lockets, and the people in the portraits could move from one to the other and give us reports and quick warnings. We couldn't have operated, otherwise. Perfect timing always was essential."

"Ah, and you think they'd do that for me as well?"

"I'm sure of it. They've been reconnected to their old homes, but we kept them linked to each other. We can hide one of the lockets under your clothes in a way that the person in it can look out, perhaps through a concealed button hole. If something should happen, we will be warned and can come to the rescue." Hermione was all enthusiasm again. She seemed to boil over with eagerness.

Severus tried to think of something that would speak against the plan, but couldn't find anything. The plan seemed sound.

"Let's do it that way, then," he agreed. "How quickly can we have the portraits ready?"

"It won't take longer than a day," Minerva assured him. "Please don't do anything before that, Percy. When you have your locket, you can start. Your wish to rush to your father's aid is understandable. We all feel the need to rush in and help Kingsley and Moody, too, but keeping a cool head will help them more."

Percy nodded and looked relieved.

"Now," Minerva said, "with that plan in motion, we can go back to Harry's problem. Has anyone had any new ideas about the meaning of those ancient verses? Did you get any clues from your mother's journals, Miss Lovegood?"

Lovegood looked very pale. For once, her eyes had lost their dreaminess, and all Severus could see in them was pain and grief.

"Yes, I think so," she said. "My mother was working on a modified blasting spell. It was the spell that killed her. She wanted to open the Locked Room in the Department of Mysteries. According to her notes, it contains the mother's bones, but I don't really believe that the bones of my grandmother are kept there."

"The mother's bones? That's yet another puzzle. The other rituals called for bones of the father or the soul of the mother and the essence of each. And Stone Things. Those would be our ingredients, but what are they, really?" Hermione looked how Severus felt, completely clueless.

"Stones are the bones of Mother Earth," Sabrina suddenly said. She and Dudley had been sitting at one end of the table, quietly listening to all the discussions. "Maybe what you need is a precious stone, a crystal. You'd need a stone linked to the soul."

Everyone was staring at her. Severus felt how his own jaw fell slack. Precious stones had been used in potions and alchemical concoctions throughout the ages.

"Gosh," Hermione cried. "You're a genius, Sabrina. Leave it to a Muggle to get our heads out of the clouds and back to solid reality. So we'll find a stone, or several stones in the Locked Room. We need to go to the Ministry in any case, then."

"We need to wait until we have the intelligence from Mr. Weasley," Severus said.

"So we don't need anything from Harry's mother, then?" Ronald asked.

"Let's hope not," Hermione replied.

"The Dark spell was quite literal, though," Severus thought out loud. "Riddle went to his father's grave and exhumed the bones."

"But didn't you say it was a perversion, a corruption of the original?"

"Yes. Still, your verses ask for soul of the mother, not bones."

"Take the essence of each. What's the essence of all these things?"

"Blood." Percy said. "That's what I tried to say last time. The essence of life is blood, isn't it? A drop of blood from mother, brother, foe would be the essence of each, wouldn't it?"

"But blood, flesh and bones are mud, stick and stones. Bones - stones, get it?" Ronald threw in.

"Yes. That means we need the mud, stick and stones. What's the mud and the stick?"

"Good question," Severus said with a snarl. "And there remains the small fact that we can't have blood from Potter's mother."

"One thing after the other," Minerva said. "We just need more time to think, and in the meantime we have to find out what's happened to Alastor and Kingsley and Arthur since I'm quite convinced now that he is under undue influence. We have many more clues than we had a few days ago, and I feel quite optimistic that we'll succeed in waking up Harry soon."

"Erm, about the mother... I had a few ideas, based on things I read in the Sumerian documents," Hermione interrupted.

"Yes?" Severus looked at her questioningly. It wasn't like Hermione to hold back with her findings for so long.

"I'm not certain. That's why I didn't say anything earlier, but I think that we can solve the problem by having someone adopt Harry. The Gilgamesh epic mentions that Gilgamesh's mother adopts Enkidu so they can be true brothers. Enkidu didn't have a mother. The two heroes wanted to go on a very dangerous adventure that was likely to kill them, and Ninsun that's Gilgamesh's mother thought that they could look out for each other better when they were real brothers, or so I understood it." She shuffled through her scrolls. "Here it is:

"She banked up the incense and uttered the ritual words.

She called to Enkidu and would give him instructions:

'Enkidu the Mighty, you are not of my womb,

but now I speak to you along with the sacred votaries of Gilgamesh,

the high priestesses, the holy women, the temple servers.'

She laid a pendant on Enkidu's neck,

the high-priestesses took his hand and led him in the bath

and the 'daughters-of-the-gods' washed him with the purity plant.

'I have taken as my son Enkidu the Mighty.

Enkidu to my son as the brother of Gilgamesh I have taken.'(5)

"And so Enkidu had a mother, and later they are always described as brothers. When Gilgamesh revived Enkidu, Ninsun could help. "Hermione looked determined. "I'll adopt Harry myself if needed." She smiled at the surprised faces turned towards her. "After I found that passage, I did a bit more reading."

That got a giggle from Ronald and Lovegood. Someone mumbled, "Light reading."

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, you know me. And I've found a ritual where an adoption mimics pregnancy and birth. The potential mother takes the child under her clothes and walks around with it, as if she were pregnant. She then pushes the child out of the clothes, as if she were giving birth. And that counts as a birth; there is no difference before gods and men between a child born of the body and of one adopted that way. So I thought if we don't find anyone more suitable, I could do that; I'd become Harry's mother."

"That won't be necessary," Minerva said. "I shall gladly adopt him if that helps him. I'd be proud..." She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

"That would be even better," Hermione agreed. "Harry looks to you as a kind of mother substitute. Of course, he viewed Mrs. Weasley as a substitute mother as well, but..."

"So that's settled, then," Severus cut in quickly, seeing the downcast expressions on

the Weasleys' faces. "Minerva adopts Potter, and we need to work out the recipe and the missing ingredients. It's a start."

The next day, Percy Weasley approached his father in a pretended effort at reconciliation while a selected group of people gathered around a miniature portrait contained in a locket and waited. One of the painted people in the portrait relay reported back at regular intervals, and from the looks of it, Arthur had listened to Percy's explanation and accepted him back into the fold. They arranged to go to the Ministry together the next day where Percy would start working for Arthur and spying for the Underground.

Severus had been talking with Minerva and was now approaching the group watching the portrait.

"Who is in Mr. Weasley's portrait?" Severus asked after the last witch who had just reported back to the group had disappeared again. "I trust it's someone believable for him to carry around?"

"It's the portrait of Justus Pilliwinkle," Hermione said. "He was the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and quite famous."

"1862 to 1953," Ronald Weasley added proudly.

Severus stared in surprise at the young man and Hermione grinned.

"It's Ron who made the suggestion," she said. "If someone asks, Percy can say that Mr. Pilliwinkle is his role model and that he aspires to become just as efficient at being a civil servant as him. No one who knows Percy will doubt this claim."

The next morning, they watched the portrait again, but when several hours had passed without any dangerous or suspicious activities, they decided to take turns. Thus, it was George Weasley who called the group together urgently after Justus Pilliwinkle had returned from Percy's locket to his other portrait in the Underground (his portrait at the Ministry of Magic had been disconnected) and raised the alarm. Someone had tried to extract information about the Underground, and Percy had been hit by the Full Body-Bind of his magical contract.

"Percy was just about to go for lunch when he was called to the second floor by an aeroplane memo," Justus began his story. "The Head of Magical Law Enforcement wanted to see him. So Percy went down to his office and was offered tea. Then, Thicknesse opened a door to a side chamber, and in came Dolores Umbridge and Mrs. Edgecombe."

"Umbridge!" Hermione cried. "Gosh, Harry should have insisted that she was fired. And Mrs. Edgecombe?" All of a sudden, Hermione paled and clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh no... Oh no... This is all my fault..."

"Let Mr. Pilliwinkle continue," Severus said.

He knew why Hermione was so shocked. If she hadn't learned that sins from the past always came back to bite your ankles, she'd have to learn it now.

Justus glanced from Hermione to Severus and then continued, "All three cast a simultaneous Imperio on Percy and then started to ask questions about his motivations and if he worked for the Underground. Percy immediately became as stiff as a log and fell off the chair."

"Oh," Hermione whispered. "That's clause 2 of our contract. Full Body-Bind if someone tries to extract information by force. It actually works..."

"Of course it does," Severus hissed. "Go on, Mr. Pilliwinkle!"

"They were swearing like mad, and Thicknesse kept yelling, 'I told you so,' at the other two. None of the spells they tried on Percy could wake him up, naturally. They were yelling at each other, and then they shoved him into a broom cupboard in that side room. I haven't been able to see a thing since; it's been so dark. That's when I left. If you go in, you should find him there."

"Does anyone know what happens to a person who's been hit with three Imperius Curses?" Ronald asked in a whisper. He was very pale, as was George, who seemed to have lost his ability to joke.

"Most people can't even resist one Imperius Curse. How could anyone resist three?" Hermione's face had lost all colour. "Do you think they cast it on Arthur, too?"

"It would explain a lot," Severus nodded. "Three spells... It would take a lot more than a simple Finite Incantatem to release someone from that."

"What do we do?" Ronald asked urgently. "We can't leave Percy there."

"We won't," Severus said. "We'll go in and get him out. One group gets Percy, the other looks for Kingsley and Mad Eye, who will be under the Full Body-Bind as well, I'm sure, and after we've found them, Nightshade and I will try to open the Locked Room and get those stones for Potter. We won't have many more opportunities for going into the Ministry after we've retrieved your brother."

"Can't we get Dad, too?" George asked. "Kidnap him or something? If he really is under three Imperios by that trio, no one knows what he'll come up with next."

"That's very risky," Severus said, pondering. "If Arthur is not under a curse, he has a legitimate reason to send us to Azkaban."

"He'll have to find us first," Hermione said. "I think this is a risk we must take. Who'll be looking after Ministry affairs when the Minister isn't there. Is there a second-in-command?"

"I bet it's Thicknesse," Ronald replied. "The Head of the Aurors is too new in office to be considered, so Thicknesse'll be the next logical choice."

"Right," Severus said. "Which makes me inclined to agree with the kidnapping plan. If Thicknesse wants the Ministry, Arthur is in danger. As soon as he becomes too bothersome for that trio, they'll want to be rid of him."

"Do you think this is an organized group? Do they have connections to Death Eaters, or do the three of them operate independently?" Hermione asked, still very pale.

"I have no idea," Severus conceded. "But as far as I know, Thicknesse wasn't among the Death Eater supporters in the Ministry."

"It's all my fault," Hermione whispered and hid her face in her hands.

"Bollocks!" Ronald exclaimed. "Umbridge and Edgecombe were in cahoots with each other long before you hexed Marietta and sent Umbridge to the centaurs. I wonder if Firenze would like to make a trip to the Ministry?" Ronald had a dreamy smile on his face.

"That's not funny, Ron," Hermione reprimanded. "But at least we can guess at their motives. But what about Thicknesse? I can't say I've ever consciously noticed him before."

"He'll want the power, I suppose," Severus said. "Incidentally, he's one of the names Lucius sent me of people who'd be susceptible to bribes. If Umbridge has promised him support, he'd easily side with her."

"We could simply kidnap Dad at home. If we tell Fred and Charlie about this, they'll help us. There's no need to risk getting caught at the Ministry," Ronald said.

"It's not that simple."

"That won't be easy."

Hermione and Severus had spoken at the same time. They looked at each other sheepishly.

"Go ahead," Hermione nodded politely, and Severus cursed the frostiness between them.

"If we take Arthur from his home, we will have to do that at the same time as going into the Ministry. This needs careful timing. Anything else will raise suspicion and increase the risk of being found out and stopped."

"After the disaster with Percy, don't you think that they'll be expecting another attack on Arthur and keep him under surveillance?" Hermione asked.

"Possibly," Ronald conceded. "So how will we do it?"

"As I said earlier," Severus said, "we'll use Polyjuice. We'll move in tonight. In the meantime, we get organized."

"Please, we want to be there..." Ronald said. "And we should first talk to Charlie and Fred. They'll have to help us get into the Ministry."

"Yes, talk to them. That will also decide where we'll best get hold of Arthur. And your brothers should keep themselves available as backups. You can go in the group that retrieves Arthur. Nightshade and I shall look for Percy, and the other two together with group two. When the task is finished, Arthur will be brought to Paulie's house, and our three spies will be cared for by the Underground. We'll meet again here in one hour. Weasleys and Nightshade, you come with me."

Two hours later, Reg Cattermole and Stan Rastrick were walking down the hallway of the first level towards the Minister's office. They carried tool bags and had plumbing equipment floating behind them. "Toilets and sinks've been stuffed everywhere," Cattermole said loudly. "We'd better get to work."

"Right," Rastrick said.

Chatting all the way, the two men walked up to the office where they stopped and knocked. Apparently, they were granted automatic access since they opened the door and went inside.

Severus watched Ronald Weasley, who was posing as Cattermole, and GreyhoundJeremiah Cadwallader from the Undergroundwho looked like the Ministry's janitor, Stan Rastrick, walk into the office. He turned back, rounding the corner and bumping into Hermione, who had cast a Disillusionment spell over herself.

"Quickly, under the cloak," he whispered and pulled Potter's invisibility cloak over Hermione, who cancelled her charm. Together, they walked down the corridor to the lift.

When it stopped, no one exited and no one entered. A woman, an employee in the Magical Beings department called Arabella Mockridge, stood in the lift and pushed the button to the second level. She had a small smile on her face and seemed to be talking to herself when she said, "Here we are." Carefully, and slowly, she got out of the lift, making certain that she didn't lose any of the files she was holding under her arm.

Susan Bones, for she was the woman in disguise, walked straight towards Pius Thicknesse's office and knocked. No one answered. Carefully, she opened the door,

slipped inside and put the files on the desk that was in one corner of the room. In the meantime, Severus and Hermione had walked into the side chamber and opened the door to the broom cupboard. Percy wasn't there.

"Dammit," Hermione swore under her breath. "We'll have to search the whole Ministry now..."

"I cast a trace on Weasley's shoes," Severus whispered. "If they left him his clothes, and he's within range, we can find him. With any luck, Moody and Shackbolt will be at the same location."

"Devious," Hermione said with an admiring grin. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"No time," he whispered while he carefully shut the door. Susan was still standing in the office, holding the door to the corridor open and looking outside.

"We're finished here," Severus whispered. "Meet us at point B in thirty minutes sharp."

Susan nodded slightly and walked away from them.

Hermione and Severus went back to the lift and pushed the button. That late in the evening, barely anyone was still working. The two groups were wandering around freely. No one gave them a second glance, or more than a casual greeting. Hermione and Severus, however, were still using Harry's invisibility cloak. They didn't know how long it would take them to access the Locked Room, and although they didn't have to worry about drinking the potion every hour, they didn't want to risk an encounter with the original versions of their polyjuiced selves if they couldn't get out before morning.

Hermione pushed the button for the first level, and when they arrived there, Severus cast his charm. Hermione pushed the button to the ninth level, and on their way down, they watched Severus' wand, which would indicate when they got closer to their target. Apparating inside the Ministry would have been possible, but they didn't know where they would reappear; the danger of being caught was too great.

The wand showed no reaction while the lift smoothly moved downwards. Only when they reached level nine did it shake wildly, almost pulling Severus from under the cloak and towards the door.

"The Department of Mysteries!" Hermione whispered. "Why would they have brought Percy here?"

"Him or his shoes," Severus ground out while wrestling with his wand. "Let's find out."

The wand led them right to the door of the circular room.

"Leave the door open," Severus whispered. "It will keep the other doors in the same place."

Hermione looked puzzled, but noticed that indeed, as long as the door was open, the twelve doors leading out of the room didn't revolve.

She conjured a door stopper, and together they opened one door after the other, discovering that the fifth door from the right was locked and couldn't be opened. Hermione marked it with a fiery cross.

The seventh door from the right led into the Death Chamber. When they opened it, they heard a voice swearing. At the bottom of the sunken stone pit, they saw a figure moving. The room was only dimly lit, and they couldn't see very clearly. Severus' wand, however, insisted that Percy was somewhere in the pit.

"Careful now," Severus whispered as they tiptoed down the steep steps towards the raised stone dais in the centre of the pit. When they were halfway down, they saw that a bearded man was dragging and pushing a floating body towards the crumbling stone archway on the dais.

"Bloody Hell," Hermione exclaimed, but Severus had already thrown the invisibility cloak off and cast a Full Body-Bind at the man. Luckily, the man had been too occupied with his task to notice them in time. For good measure, Severus bound the man with silvery ropes from his wand while Hermione bent over the body.

"It's Moody," she cried. "Help me, quickly!"

Severus spun around and noticed that Moody's wooden leg was already half-way covered by the tattered curtain on the stone archway. The good leg had bent at an awkward angle and was pinned under Moody's body. The shoe had been caught on one of the protruding stones of the archway, which had likely saved Moody's life.

"Where are the others?" Hermione whispered and put a hand on her heart. "Oh Merlin, please don't let them..."

"Here's young Mr. Weasley," Severus said. His wand had led him to the young man, who had been dumped behind the lowest row of stone benches, head and upper body covered with a sack. "And Kingsley is here, too," he added after he had spotted the Auror half-concealed by Percy's robes. By the looks of it, they had been dumped on top of each other.

"Go on, free them," Hermione urged.

"Not sure if I can. I'm not one of their oath binders," Severus murmured, concentrating hard. *Finite Incantatem!*

"Bollocks," Severus swore. He had released Kingsley, but as soon as the Auror had opened his eyes, he had started to speak. "The group that calls itself The Underground is..." and he was Petrified again.

"All those Imperius Curses," Hermione said. "They must be a strong compulsion to reveal the secret of the Underground, and of course Clause two takes hold again as soon as they start to betray it, as long as the Underground isn't disbanded."

"Thank Merlin for Albus' foresight," Severus mumbled. "We'll have to levitate them to the meeting place. Let's get going."

"What do we do with this one?" Hermione inclined her head towards the Petrified and bound wizard.

"We'll take him along. The Underground can take care of him until things here are resolved."

Hermione levitated the three bodies and tied them together with ropes from her wand. She threw the invisibility cloak over them and Disillusioned both herself and Severus. Severus touched one corner of the cloak and took Hermione's hand. Merlin felt good but there was no time to enjoy the touch. As Hermione directed the invisible stack of bodies, he led them up the stairs and back to the circular room.

"Careful now," Severus murmured as they left the Department of Mysteries and turned to the left towards the stairs. Reluctantly, he let go of Hermione's hand, and they both took hold of the feet and shoulders of the wizard who was the lowest in the stack. As if moving a stretcher, they carefully navigated downstairs, walked down the corridor and entered Courtroom Ten where they would meet the other group.

The others were already waiting.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Susan exclaimed when she saw Hermione end the Disillusionment Charm and take the cloak off the four immobilized men.

"How did it go?" Severus asked, his eyes darting around the room, registering that Ronald Weasley was holding his unconscious father in his arms and that Greyhound had a Petrified Marietta Edgcombe floating in front of him.

"We had to take her prisoner," Susan explained. "She was guarding Mr. Weasley like a watchdog." Susan paused and looked at the fourth man in the stack of bodies. "Who's that?"

"No idea, but he tried to kill Moody and would probably have killed the other two as well if we hadn't shown up in time."

"I've seen him before," Ronald Weasley interrupted. "His name's Runcorn. Albert Runcorn, I believe. Dad used to despise him because he was one of the worst anti-Muggle and anti-Muggleborn campaigners of the Ministry. Looks like he's associated himself with Umbridge and her lot."

"I could have done without making his acquaintance," Severus said, sneering horribly at the unconscious Runcorn. "Take both of them to Paulie's house and lock them in the basement. Make certain that one of ours keeps watch at all times. Never leave Paulie or one of the other Muggles alone with them. We'll figure out what to do when we know what's the matter with Arthur."

"Right," Susan said. "Do you have the Portkey, Jeremiah?"

"Here it is." Greyhound produced a thin rope from the depth of his robes, arranged it in a way that it touched each of the unconscious people and waited until Susan and Ron touched it, too.

"Good luck," Ronald whispered while Susan counted down, three, two, one... and Severus and Hermione were alone in Courtroom Ten.

"Do you have a plan how we can get into the Locked Room?" Hermione asked.

"Not really," Severus admitted. "We'll have to rely on intuition and need to look for traces and clues. Moody and Kingsley surmised that there would likely be a password."

"Well, we'll have to try if we want to get the stone things," Hermione stated resolutely. "Let's go." She stepped up to Severus and threw the cloak over both of them.

As soundlessly as possible, they made their way up the stairs and went back into the Department of Mysteries. They had just secured the door to the circular room again when a simpering, shrill voice shrieked, "*Expelliarmus, Homeno Revelio*." Both of them stared in shock as their wands flew out of their hands towards their attacker, dragging the Invisibility Cloak along..

"Quickly," Hermione hissed and dragged Severus to the door of the Locked Room.

"Dammit," she swore as she pushed and pulled with all her might. The door remained unimpressed.

That was a mistake. We should hide in the Time Room, Severus thought wildly while Umbridge...that voice could only be that of Umbridge...gleefully mocked them as she came closer.

"My, my, what a catch. The two most undesirable individuals breaking into the Ministry, abducting the Minister and trying to murder me. What else can I do other than kill you in self-defence?" She looked around. "Where is the Minister? Where did you hide him?"

"He isn't here," Hermione said defiantly.

"Be quiet," Severus hissed, cursing Hermione's Gryffindor rashness that couldn't be suppressed by the best Underground training. From the corner of his eye, he could see her blushing.

"You will tell me where he is immediately," Umbridge said, gloating. "It won't do to leave the Minister without my counsel for too long."

Hermione raised her chin and kept her mouth shut, still looking defiant. Severus would have opened a Legillimency connection between them, to discuss their options, but they couldn't make eye contact for very long. He looked down his nose at Umbridge and waited.

"Your lack of cooperation is unwise," Umbridge said. "Don't you know that you are required to work with Ministry personnel? Your defiance shows just how misguided you are. It is your own doing. You force me to take more efficient measures. *Crucio*." She simpered and pointed her wand at Severus.

Severus fell to his knees, looking at Hermione and thinking, *Don't tell*, before the searing, burning pain of the spell dislocated his joints and made his bones feel brittle.

It went on endlessly, but it wasn't the first Cruciatus Curse Severus had experienced, and his mind automatically moved to its hiding place; a place that lay more deeply hidden than even the mind vault he used for Occlumency. He had built this hiding place during the long torture sessions inflicted by his former master. Come to think of it, the first thin walls had been erected while he was still a child. He had only reinforced the structure later. It was a place that kept him sane even if his body was broken and cast away like an old toy. If what he did could be called sane. He thought that by now his mind must resemble a dungeon with different levels and different rooms: a room for the pain, one for the secrets, a third for the monster inside, a fourth for his shame and guilt... Couldn't there be a room for happiness for a change?

When the pain finally stopped, Severus found himself lying on the ground, bleeding from his nose and mouth, and shivering. He heard sobs and saw through a reddish haze that Hermione was kneeling by his side and crying.

"How very odd," Umbridge said. "All these misguided heroics won't get you anywhere. But if you insist..." She pointed her wand at Hermione.

No, not her, Severus thought and shifted his body in front of Hermione. It was probably a futile attempt to protect her, but he'd die before he had to watch her being tortured.

"Get away from her, you silly man," Umbridge shrieked. "If only you'd cooperate, I could help you, you know. We used to work so well together."

Severus meanwhile had succeeded in pushing Hermione to the ground, and now he was trying to cover her body with his as best as he could. Hermione held perfectly still. Maybe she thought he had a plan?

"Oh, very well," Umbridge cooed when Severus didn't reply. "You leave me no choice. I don't really care which one of you helps me get Arthur back under my protection." She raised her wand. "*Avada...*"

Several things happened at once. Severus spread his arms and legs to make certain that the spell wouldn't hit Hermione and cast all the nonverbal protection spells he could think of for good measure. Not that any of them would have any effect against the Killing Curse...

At the same time, Hermione tried to push him out of the way.

"Not Severus," she pleaded desperately.

But instead of completing the Killing Curse, Umbridge let out an angry shriek, dropped all the wands she'd been holding and tumbled towards them.

Severus felt a strange sensation from behind, some kind of suction. He felt how he was irresistibly pulled towards the source of that sensation. The door to the Locked Room had opened and sucked them all in.

It closed behind them with a loud bang, and then everything went black.

When Severus regained consciousness again, he felt all afloat, warm, comfortable and unexplainably happy. He couldn't see nor hear anything; there was no light, no noise. The room seemed devoid of sensation.

He had no idea where Hermione was, but somehow he knew that he needn't worry about her. Nor was he worried about Umbridge and her threats any longer. How odd.

Severus felt at peace and one with the world. Floating in the dark, he felt an overwhelming love for everything alive, from the smallest Billywig to the largest dragon. And not only living things were there to be loved. Severus felt the desire to worship the earth, to disperse himself in the air, to let himself be consumed by fire and his ashes washed ashore by water.

He looked around. The grey mist had risen, or maybe his view had become clear again, but the darkness had given way to a multi-coloured glitter, just as if the place were lit by a multitude of coloured fairy lights.

Severus blinked. The light originated from the walls. It shone from all sides, the air around him seeming to vibrate from all the colours. Looking closer, he realized that the walls were covered with crystals, precious and semi-precious stones that seemed to glow from within. It was almost as if the room was one big geode.

The light and the vibrations were comforting and calming, and Severus felt drunk from well-being and relaxation. Hence, it took a while before he remembered what had brought him here.

Hermione! He jumped up from the comfortable divan that somehow had stretched out under him and seemed to be cradling his long frame. What had happened to Hermione, and where was Umbridge, for that matter? Worry crept into his relaxed mind. Where was he? Was Hermione safe? Did she need his help? He had to find her.

He jumped up and impatiently started to touch the walls, trying to feel for a door even if he couldn't see one.

Wand! Where was his wand? He was a wizard. He should be able to find a way out of this, shouldn't he? Frantic searching of his pockets produced nothing, and then he remembered that Umbridge had disarmed both him and Hermione just before he got sucked into this place. Was this the Locked Room? Was this the room Dumbledore had suspected of containing the greatest power of all? How disappointed the old man would be if he told him that this was merely a fancy kind of crystal cave, containing nothing more than precious stones. And before he could tell Dumbledore anything, anyway, he'd have to find a way out of here.

Wandless magic it would have to be, a wizard's inborn ability to sense and assess his environment, that sixth sense he had explained to Hermione so many weeks ago.

Hermione! Again, he had almost forgotten about her. How could he? Where was she? He had to know if she was safe. He summoned all his concentration and focussed on his mental image of her. On her brilliant mind. Her lovely brown eyes. Those kissable lips. The compassionate, stubborn, clever, practical, brave and passionate package that was Hermione Granger, the love of his life. He could see her clearly with his mind's eye.

Point me, he thought and opened his eyes when the crystals under his outstretched fingers seemed to melt away.

What the...? Instead of the door he had expected, two man-sized mirrors had appeared. Puzzled, Severus stared into the first one. It showed his own reflection, looking as he really did, ugly mug and all. Did that mean that it couldn't show desires or the like? Was this not a magical mirror, then?

While Severus was still wondering, a milky haze formed around his reflection, and instead of his face, a tiny room with two tiny people appeared, playing out a scene almost like on the telly.

Severus stared. The people in the scene were him and Hermione. He watched attentively. Maybe there would be clues for how to get out of the room and find Hermione.

Their tiny counterparts were kissing. Mirror Severus held Hermione tightly, possessively, whispering, "I am yours, forever if you'll have me."

She smiled and kissed him again, and then the scene changed. They were running away from something, both with their wands drawn, dodging spells and casting their own until they reached a gate and disappeared through it.

The scene changed again: they were fighting with each other this time, both were red-faced and snarling.

Yet another change the changes seemed to be coming more quickly now and they were making love on a bed. Hermione was screaming in ecstasy, repeating, "You are mine," over and over.

"I am yours," Mirror Severus was grunting as he came.

Another change, now they were travelling.

Now they were fighting again.

Now what was this? She had collapsed, hit by a spell. He knelt beside her and chanted a healing spell.

In the next scene, she seemed to painfully regain the use of her wand arm.

Then they were running again. They were constantly running towards somewhere or from something, Severus couldn't tell which it was. Change after change showed him a life with Hermione as it could be if they were together.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from her laughing, radiant face. Was she happy? The mirror didn't give an answer. It showed a few more scenes, and then it went hazy again, only showing his own puzzled reflection when it cleared. What was that all about? Severus didn't have a clue.

He scratched his head and turned to the mirror to the right. Again, there was his reflection, then the haze, and then another scene started to play.

He saw Hermione standing at a window and looking outside. He could see what she saw: two children were playing in a garden, and a red-haired man was with them. Hermione smiled at them. She looked content and at peace.

In the next scene, the man he was Charlie Weasley held Hermione in his arms while their two children were opening presents under a Christmas tree. A puppy was frolicking about.

Severus felt sick. So this was Hermione's alternative when he wasn't in the picture?

A happy family and a safe, peaceful life? He shuddered and suppressed the sudden urge to smash the mirror.

In the meantime, the scenes played on, showing Hermione's calm, smiling face in one peaceful scene after another. Visiting friends. Playing with the children. Talking to her husband. Visiting a grave and leaving a red rose. Which grave? The mirror seemed to zoom in on the headstone. The inscription read: *Here rests Severus Snape. He died as he lived, a hero and alone.*

Severus gasped and took a step backwards. The haze covered the image, and then his reflection appeared again.

Puzzled, he stared from one mirror to the other when they changed again. Instead of the mirrors, there were two doors.

Severus didn't need to be told that only one of the doors would lead him to freedom. Obviously, he had to choose a future for himself and Hermione. He sighed, his heart

felt very heavy. He felt so full of love at that moment that he would have given anything to be with her, but would she be happy and safe? No, being with him could cause her harm. She'd be constantly in danger, and their life together that had been shown to him as a likely possibility wasn't a peaceful one. His choice was clear. If she could live in peace, he'd gladly give his life.

Steeling himself for what was to come, he opened the door to the right and went through.

The door closed behind him. He found himself in another, pitch-dark room, then suddenly, the floor vanished from under his feet, and he fell down with a yelp.

A ramp-like structure broke his fall, and on this ramp he slid further down, with increasing speed, until he landed on the floor, the wind knocked out of him.

What the...? He was back in the circular room, alone, and none the wiser than before.

It didn't stay that way. A few minutes after he arrived, he heard a noise from above, saw an opening form in the ceiling and then something was hurled through, landing on his stomach.

It was Hermione, and she was crying.

"I've made the wrong choice. I know it," she wailed. "I was too selfish. Oh, Severus..."

"No, you didn't," he said and hugged her. "You're here, and alive. And you'll be happy and have a family, and a calm life without danger. Without me." He tried to smile, but was sure that what he showed her was a grimace.

"But that's not what I chose," Hermione said, raising her head and wiping her nose. "I was selfish. I wanted to be with you..."

Tears were running down her cheeks again. "I chose the happy, dangerous life with you, even though I saw you injured. I should have let you lead the quiet, safe life without me..."

"That's what you saw?"

"Yes. Wasn't it what you saw?"

"Not quite. But in any case, we're both here. Both doors seemed to be the right doors. But we don't have the stone-things." He sighed.

Hermione looked surprised. He noticed with satisfaction that she hadn't moved away from him yet. "What the...?" she said. "Something's in my pocket." She rummaged through the pocket of her robes.

"Where did they come from?" She showed him her hand, holding two large, sparkling gem stones that reflected the dim light so brightly that he had to squint. The stones looked like clear quartz crystals, but Severus had never seen crystals that glowed from within.

"Do you think these are the Stone Things?" Hermione asked, awed.

"We'll soon find out, I suppose," Severus said softly. "What else would they be?"

(4) The Pierces, Sticks and Stones (<http://artists.letsingit.com/the-pierces-lyrics-sticks-and-stones-5r62lt7#axzz2NRFVCGBC>) -- Yes, The Pierces only recorded that in 2007, but Luna's mum learned it from her grandmother who was infamous for her love spells. What do Muggles know anyway?

(5) Tablet III of the Gilgamesh epic.

Master of Two Worlds

Chapter 28 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? ****Winner**** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Chapter 28 Master of Two Worlds

This still doesn't belong to me. I'm only playing. Hermione and Severus are welcome to stay; the rest will be returned.

Thank you, Melusin, as always.

Because of the boon or due to his experience, the hero may now perceive both the divine and human worlds.

(Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces)

Hermione stared at the two glowing stones in her hand.

"So you think the room gave me what I wanted? But I was certain I'd made the wrong choice as soon as I went through that door," she said. "Now, I'm not so sure. I know you'll think I'm crazy, but there's that knowledge in my heart..."

She paused and looked into Severus' eyes. He didn't blink or look away. He kept himself wide open, but she didn't take advantage. Instead, she seemed to realize that she was still lying on top of him, encircled by his arms. She blushed and freed herself.

"Sorry," she murmured and stood up.

Severus sighed. His body was of the opinion that the places where Hermione had been just a moment before were now deprived of something. It felt cold without her in his arms.

"I love you, you know," he blurted out. "I'm not good at saying it, obviously, but I do, with all my heart. But I need you to understand why I'm reluctant..."

"Don't..." Hermione whispered, but she smiled as she hushed him with her hand on his lips. "I promise you that I'll listen, but not here, not with that room still messing with our minds, or our hearts... because..."

"Because you think the room compelled me to tell you that I love you, is that it?" Severus surprised himself by not being angry.

She nodded, looking sad.

"I'll say it to you every day for the rest of our lives," Severus promised with a small smile, "but I agree; the room is messing with our heads. For some reason, I know, in my heart, that I made the wrong choice and assistance was denied, but apparently, my love was solid enough to be allowed to leave the room. Don't ask me how I know this..."

Hermione nodded. "And I know that I made the right choice and that we are on the right track with our potion and our ritual. These stones will help us, I'm certain. We'll have to trust our intuition for once, I suppose. That won't be easy for either of us." She smirked.

He smirked back. "No reference books, no logical reasoning, just relying on what feels right. What a stretch for analytical minds like ours. You wouldn't happen to know why my choice wasn't right? I only wished the best for you."

Hermione stared at him. After a while, she asked, "You saw me with someone else, didn't you? It was calm and peaceful, and you weren't in the picture? And the other choice would have been passion, fights, danger, more passion and a fierce, deep, all-consuming love?"

"Yes." She didn't need to know that he had died in the vision he had chosen.

"I chose the option with the danger and the passion, and the burning love." She sighed and stepped close to him, putting her head on his chest. As if of their own volition, his arms circled around her.

"There's no denying that this is what I would wish for our future," she sighed into his chest. "But I thought I was being too selfish, choosing danger for you over a calm life without me."

"Maybe we're supposed to be selfish when it comes to love," Severus mused. "That's actually something Miss Lovegood said to me when we talked... that I need to learn to accept myself. The Room taught me the same lesson in different words. I couldn't be happy if you're not happy, and maybe you can't be happy when I'm not happy?" He gently raised her chin and looked into her eyes.

She nodded, and he sighed again. "Being concerned about one's own happiness as well as that of the other seems to be the healthy choice, then."

"The regard for our own integrity and uniqueness, the love and understanding for our own self, cannot be separated from our regard and love for all other living beings," Hermione said firmly.

"What? That sounds like..."

"Quoting a textbook, yes. Although it isn't a textbook. It's from a book my parents have on their bookshelves. I read it last summer."

"It is called *The Art of Loving*. I read it, too, back in the Seventies."

"And dismissed it?"

"I can't remember." He smirked.

Hermione giggled. "Never mind. Much of it is horribly outdated, but there are some excellent insights about love in there, too. Maybe that's just it. We need to love ourselves before we are able to love others, and if you can't love yourself, The Room thinks you're lacking something."

"You find me lacking?"

"Not me, The Room." She smiled up into his eyes.

"You know, I really would like to propose to you now," he said, touching her nose gently with his own big, crooked facial protrusion.

"No," she said, being serious again. "I don't want a husband who needs to be coerced into wanting to love me, as well meaning as The Room may be. We need to get going, wake up Harry and organize the Underground." She must have seen the hurt look in his eyes because she very lightly kissed him on the lips and added, "When we're free of this manipulative piece of architecture, we'll talk. Promise."

It had to be enough. Severus exhaled and let her go.

"These are the Stone Things?" Ron Weasley held the crystals up against the light and studied them intensely. The group of conspirators had gathered in the Underground caves once again.

"They might be. Maybe not *The* Stone Things, but just Stone Things... They can't be the same as the ones in the epic: those were destroyed," Hermione lectured.

"Do we have all the ingredients now?" Kingsley asked. He was none the worse for wear. All three would-be spies had escaped their ordeal mostly unharmed, although the knee in Moody's good leg had been painfully twisted.

"We still don't know what to make of the sticks and the mud," Ron said.

"They are old, old magic, mentioned in the oldest African Ifa divination poems, in fact, and they don't always have to be taken literally. We overlooked this connection because we were so focused on the spell Voldemort used for his resurrection. It may not have anything to do with that, after all," Hermione mused, but didn't sound convinced.

"I think that there must be a connection to the Dark ritual." Severus knew that he was right, but he was reluctant to claim that he 'just knew'; the effect of The Locked Room still unsettled him. There had to be a logical explanation for all of this somewhere.

"If blood, flesh and bones are mud, stick and stones, then the bones are the equivalent of the stones. This would mean that it's not the father's bones, but the mother's bones that are needed for the potion, and not literally, but quite figuratively," he continued to sum up what they knew.

"The flesh of the servant would be the equivalent of the sticks. But in our version, it's not servant but brother, and what does flesh have to do with sticks? I can understand the connection between mother and father, but brother and servant? And what about the mud? Mud is blood? Foe is foe in both versions.

"In more modern divination texts, mud is often described as a bit of soil. Sacred soil, meaningful soil. Maybe a bit of soil from my magical herb garden would do?" Severus suggested.

"I think you're right," Hermione said with a small smile. She seemed to be just as reluctant as Severus to announce that 'she knew it in her heart' that this was the right thing to do. The influence of the room seemed persistent and reliable. Severus wondered how long that would last. He seriously hoped that it would stop meddling with their

hearts as soon as the potion was brewed and the rituals performed.

"We'll have to think about the sticks later," Minerva interrupted. "We have to talk to the Goblins first. They don't like our suggestion for a banking boycott."

"But they've always wanted more rights and that would be a way of getting them. What else do they want now?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. We'll just have to talk to them." Minerva shrugged. "In fact, I was hoping that maybe Severus and Hermione would go..."

Severus sighed, looked at Hermione, and they both nodded. "We'll go. But what about the house-elf strike? I suppose their resistance is even greater?"

"Yes. But we never really expected them to go against their masters, did we? We'll need to lead them to the idea of freedom gently and slowly. For now, they consider freedom to be unwanted and uncomfortable. They need to learn to think and care for themselves. Without our help and that of elves like Dobby and Alouette, there won't be any progress." It was Percy who explained.

Severus was surprised to see the young man taking up the banner of the elves. Hermione's ill-advised, but good-natured, SPEW campaign must have made more of an impression on her fellow students than he'd thought.

"All right, back to the Goblins. What exactly is it that they don't like?"

"I don't understand these things," Minerva said. "You'd better ask them yourself. Perhaps they've heard that Arthur is about to step down..."

"But Luna and Rita haven't published it yet."

"Gossip travels fast, and the disappearance of Arthur and four Ministry employees all at once would be subject to a lot of gossip."

"How is Arthur, anyway?" Kingsley asked. He had come out of the triple Imperius Curse only the day before.

"Much better, but still very confused," Minerva replied. "He still repeats phrases Umbridge must have whispered into his ears. But he's on the way to being his old self again. He knows he's made many mistakes, but he can't figure out why he made them. The good care of his children and the absence of that horrible woman will surely improve his condition even further."

"Speaking of Umbridge... Has she still not reappeared anywhere?" Hermione asked.

"Not a trace," Kingsley replied.

Severus felt sick. He didn't really want to know what The Room had done to Umbridge. The same could easily have happened to Hermione or himself. If The Room hadn't tested them individually... Umbridge was the other extreme on the love scale. The love she had within her was entirely for herself with no regard whatsoever for other people. There had been no way of knowing which type of love the room favoured and in which way it would respond.

He remembered how Albus had always described The Room: no one could get in, and no one had been known to get out. And no one on the outside had known about the way The Room judged people.

A glance at Hermione showed him that she must have been engaged in similar thoughts. All colour had drained from her face, and she was biting her lips.

They really had been extremely lucky to get out alive, never mind being awarded the Stone Things. They had lost their wands, but that was a small price to pay. He wondered if they would have been able to access The Room at all if it hadn't been for Hermione's desperate pleading for his life when Umbridge was on her mad killing spree.

It was lucky for them that The Room reacted to mature love. Severus may have been lacking in self-love, but he loved deeply, and Hermione loved him back. Their love for each other was strong enough to compel the room to help them and let them go.

Hold that thought, Severus thought. This is important. The room could be compelled by true love. The love between them was true. This wasn't a one-sided manipulation, but an interaction. They'd affected the room as it had affected them. There was no compulsion there; it was more of a guide, a tool that helped them to understand what they already knew. Seen that way, he found the whole experience a lot less creepy.

A room that could interact with a person's thoughts and desires wasn't as unique as it had appeared at first, either. There was the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts, after all, which was another brilliant example of architectural magic, although it seemed to lack the sense of purpose that The Love Room seemed to have. The Room seemed to have swallowed Umbridge, and if he and Hermione hadn't measured up... no, it wasn't all that simple. That wasn't just another Room of Requirement: this was something else. It was another brilliant magical artifact, but nothing mystical.

Severus smirked slightly. Hermione would be relieved to find a rational explanation for the workings of the room. He wondered if the Room of Requirement could have produced the Stone Things with less hassle, but was interrupted in his musings when Minerva held out the Portkey that would get them to Griphook's office at Gringotts.

"But if we withhold the service, wizards will start their own banks," Griphook wailed. "That's not to be borne..."

"So?" said Hermione. "Why not? You get wands, and competition. That's how a free market works... You can't have your cake and eat it, too. If you want to enjoy the same rights and freedom as magical humans, you'll have to obey the same laws, and of course, you'd want to be represented in the Ministry and the Confederation of Wizards... You'll have to trade fairly. No more reclaiming of heirlooms; there'll need to be transparent contracts."

"We'll have to think about it. But is it even necessary? We hear that Minister Weasley plans to retire? With a new Minister, things could get back to normal."

"Do you really want to keep the old status quo?" Severus asked. "There'll be more rebellions and threats. Wouldn't it be about time to not only be allies in war, but also friends in peace? We are magical brethren, after all."

Severus heard Hermione gasp. His eyes darted to her face. She was staring wide-eyed at Griphook.

"He is right," she said carefully. "We must all be related. There are Goblin-human marriages and they produce children. Professor Flitwick was essential in bringing Goblins and the Underground together, wasn't he?"

Severus nodded.

She raised her eyes to Severus and gave him a meaningful look. "Goblins aren't our servants; they're our brothers and sisters."

Now it was Severus' turn to gasp. It felt as though veils were falling from his eyes. *But of course...* He turned to Griphook.

"Maybe we should leave this discussion for a later time when our Underground economists are available, and we know what the Ministry's policy will be under a new Minister."

Griphook nodded solemnly.

"One last thing, though."

"What is it?"

"How do you feel about helping Harry Potter?"

"What do you mean?"

Hermione explained to the Goblin what they knew and guessed about Harry's state.

"You want a drop of blood from me, and my flesh? I don't think..."

"No, that doesn't sound right," Severus interrupted. "A drop of blood, perhaps... although I'm certain that Dobby would only be too willing to provide it, but I think it'd be better if it came from a Goblin."

"Why is that?" Griphook asked. "That ridiculous fountain in the Ministry shows house-elves or centaurs..."

"Because Goblins seem to be more closely related. Who's ever heard of a child with a centaur and a human as parents? Or a house-elf human mix?"

"I see what you mean," Griphook said. "And that makes the way wizards suppress Goblin rights even worse, don't you think?"

"It's certainly something that needs to be addressed by the Ministry," Hermione agreed, nodding vigorously.

"But this is neither the time nor the place for that discussion." Severus brought them back on topic. "We don't have the authority to promise anything, either. All we can do will be done, though. The Quibbler will only be too glad to write about this."

Griphook nodded.

"Better than nothing," he mumbled. "If it is true. Goblins can't trust wizards. Wizards cheat."

"Are you still not over that business with Ludo Bagman?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"It was a lot of gold, and he hasn't paid it back. Do you call this just?"

"Of course not. But we're not him."

She paused when she saw the Goblin's suspicious sneer.

"I know; history is against us. Each side thinks the other cheats, but this isn't what we're talking about. We want to help Harry, and Harry certainly never harmed any of you."

"Harry Potter can be trusted." Griphook nodded. "And the Underground can be trusted, too. We helped before; we shall help again. I will give a drop of blood. But I will be there when the potion is brewed. I want to see that the blood really goes into the potion."

"Excellent!" Hermione beamed. "That's even better than just the drop of blood."

"I will not give you my flesh," Griphook growled.

"It's not what we need. But I think that your presence while we brew will be good for Harry. We haven't quite figured out the connection yet. Between flesh of the servant and the sticks."

"Goblins don't have sticks." Griphook said. "But if we had wands..."

Severus started to cough, and Hermione blushed furiously.

"The blood will be enough, thank you," she said quickly. "We'll figure out the rest."

"Sticks and stones bind the soul together. They're Tjuringa," Sabrina said when Hermione and Severus had returned to the Robin Hood cave. "It is a belief of the Australian Aborigines. Very spiritual, they are." She beamed.

"That could be an explanation for the connection to the soul, indeed," Severus mused. "Some people never made the strict separation between magical folk and Muggles and between magic and religion. Magic is often interwoven into their beliefs and rituals. The Tjuringa would fit the pattern. It is very ancient magic."

"That still doesn't tell us what the stick is," Ron interrupted the theorizing.

"Right," Hermione said. "Any ideas?"

"I think you are taking the biological brother interpretation too far," Luna said. "I think that all the magical brethren should be involved, not only the Goblins. Does it really matter that they are more closely related to us than the others? Isn't that discrimination against the other two?"

"You could be right," Severus agreed. "Dobby would be more than willing to help."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Hermione. "He'd willingly give a pound of flesh for Harry."

"Instead of wild guesses, why don't we invite a representative of each and discuss the problem with them?" Minerva suggested.

This was generally agreed upon, and the meeting came to a close.

Dobby, Firenze and Griphook were the representatives of the magical brethren who were invited to the Underground council.

While Dobby and Griphook felt quite at home in the cave they had signed the same contract the Underground members had a while ago Firenze was feeling extremely ill at ease. He pranced around nervously, flicking his tail from one side to the other, and no one dared to stand too close else they'd be whipped or trampled. Signing the contract was the least of his problems; he felt trapped in the underground passages, and even the large central cave area did nothing to make him feel comfortable.

Severus wondered if they should have enchanted the ceiling as had been done in the Appin cave, but the post-war Underground hadn't considered the caves permanent dwellings as they'd had to be during the war, but more of a refuge, a shelter, to be used for a short time only.

Technically, it wouldn't have been necessary to meet here. Arthur had stepped down two days ago, giving his poor health after the prolonged exposure to the triple Imperius Curse as his reason. He gave an exclusive interview to the Quibbler, where he told his story of grief, hope and betrayal. He publicly apologized for the treatment Underground members had received, and proclaimed that Hermione and Severus weren't undesirables nor being considered lawbreakers any longer, but instead should be rewarded for their services to the wizarding world.

Severus would have laughed had he not been so sorry for Arthur. The poor man was broken and very likely would remain so. Molly had been the light of his life, and after her death, the world had become bleak. And after Severus' own recent insights into the nature of love, he really couldn't blame the man. However, understanding for Arthur didn't mean that Severus automatically trusted him. The injuries imposed on them by the former Minister were too deep to be shrugged away lightly. Severus preferred security over publicity.

"Harry Potter needs my blood? I give my life for Harry Potter," Dobby piped up.

Severus barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes while Hermione smiled gently and explained to the elf that a drop of blood really was enough.

"But you needs flesh. The poem says flesh of the servant. It is a pleasure to serve Harry Potter. He can have my flesh."

"It isn't meant literally, Dobby." Severus could only admire Hermione's patience. "We're only taking the blood because it is considered the essence of a person's soul. We won't take flesh from anyone. That's dark, predatory magic. Harry wouldn't want to be revived by something like that now, would he?"

"So you want a drop of blood from each of us?" Firenze asked, baffled. "Why centaurs? We never were your servants."

"No, but you are our brethren. Magical beings with just as much or more intelligence as wizards and your own type of magic. I think the ritual wants to unite all magical beings in a peaceful, loving manner. That's why we've asked the three of you. You are all friends of Harry and would want him to be revived. You know that if it were our blood that was needed" She gestured at herself, him and the other members of the Underground who were assembled. "we all would give it gladly to get Harry back. But it isn't. All of this is more about kinship than friendship, I think."

"But He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named used flesh of his servant," Griphook added grumpily. "I'll not give more than a drop of blood."

"We understood that the first time you said it, thank you," Severus grumbled and was met with an impatient glance from Hermione and a dark look from Griphook.

"I asked all three of you to come here because I hoped that one of you would be able to give us advice on how to interpret the rhyme with the mud, stick and stones," Minerva interrupted the argument. "We've established that the stones are the bones of Mother Earth, and we've found the Stone Things already."

"The Stone Things?" Firenze's eyes had widened, and his tail flicked excitedly.

"Well, Stone Things, in any case. I doubt that they are *The* Stone Things from legend... and we've also figured out that the mud could be soil from a special place or somesuch. So Severus, being the former foe, suggested we take some magical soil from his herb garden. It seems a sound idea. Certain types of soil are often used in healing potions. What still puzzles us are the sticks."

"We don't have sticks," Griphook said defiantly. "We only have gold."

Firenze looked thoughtful. "We have sticks, of a sort."

"You do?" All eyes were on Firenze now.

"Our bows are made of blackthorn, a tree that is dear to us. And our arrows are made from oak. I have a few left from the holy oak we call Green George. I inherited them from my father. Green George does not often give us wood, and in my generation, no one was given direction to find him."

"Who gives the direction?" Hermione asked, doubts being written all over her features. Severus would have snorted had he not been so interested in Firenze's reply himself.

"The stars, who else?" Firenze said haughtily. "Of course, wizards have always been too impatient to see what the stars have to tell them, but to centaurs, they are an open book. And one in almost every generation is given the secret. He's the only one who understands, even clearly sees, the constellations. Green George knows how to defend himself."

"So you think wood from Green George would be the kind of stick we're looking for?"

"It might be."

"So we'll have to figure out how to find the tree and how to compel it to give us a bit of its wood." Hermione didn't look happy.

"Don't call him 'it', else you won't get anything. You won't even get close," Firenze said with a frown. "That tree is male."

"If you say so," Hermione said and threw up her hands placatingly. "It still doesn't tell me how to find him and how to get a piece of his wood."

"I shall give you one of my arrows. Do you doubt that I want to help Harry Potter?"

Hermione stared at him in surprise. "You would do that? Such a precious gift? Oh, that's wonderful. Thank you so much. We won't forget it."

"Just get on with it," Firenze muttered.

"It's even better than the blood," Luna threw in. She had followed the conversation silently, but very attentively."

"What do you mean?" Severus asked.

"Well, giving up something that is dear to your heart is a sacrifice, isn't it? It's an unbloody sacrifice, but no less potent, apparently. Only, the Death Eaters didn't understand that."

"I see your point," Severus conceded. "You think a sacrifice is required from the magical brethren?"

"Dobby gladly gives a sock for Harry Potter."

"Thank you, Dobby." Now Severus really did roll his eyes.

"Very good. And with Dobby's sock, Griphook's goodwill and Firenze's arrow, we seem to be complete, don't we?" Luna looked questioningly at Griphook, who fidgeted on his seat.

"If it must be a sacrifice, I shall contribute for my kind as well. Obviously, it needs to be something that is painful to let go."

"Uhm, in a way, it seems to be, yes," Hermione replied.

"Very well, then. I shall give you a small piece of Goblin Gold. It is dear to me like my own heart. Don't sully it, please."

"You're very generous," Hermione whispered, deeply moved..

"I may yet regret it," Griphook grumbled.

"We'll do everything in our power to make it worth your while," Hermione promised, and the other wizards and witches present nodded. Griphook looked, at best, a little less grim.

"I feel bad, you know," Ron suddenly said. "Magical brethren are making sacrifices, and from us, Harry's best friends, nothing is required. He is like a brother to me. I'd like to contribute *something*."

"Right, me too." Everyone in the cave murmured their agreement. They were all more than willing to give something of theirs for Harry. So much love. Severus sighed.

He didn't want to admit it, but he almost felt jealous. How could a young man like Harry Potter, admittedly a brave and heroic young man, but otherwise rather ordinary how could he draw so much love to his person? What was it about him that made people in the wizarding world love him so much?

It couldn't have been his fame, nor his intelligence, nor his magical skills. Was it his unwavering determination to go through with a task someone else had set for him? Was it his devotion, his disregard for his own life, all with the goal to free the wizarding world from its torturer?

That must have been it. Everyone looked to Harry as their saviour. As long as he was around and willing to shoulder a task that should never have been given to a child, everyone else felt that things were taken care of and no further action from them was required. It was a vicious circle since it created a laziness that could easily be abused by the next would-be usurper.

Luckily for the boy, he had found real friends, and quite a few, too. Their love was what made all the difference. They had given Potter the strength and stability to carry on even when he'd felt defeated. They had also provided the much needed distraction from a gloomy fate. Someone must have cast *Lumos* in Severus' head since he suddenly saw clearly that the ritual which would wake Harry must be successful because it would be carried out with so much love. The details would matter, but not as much as he had initially thought. He glanced at Hermione and wondered what she thought about the sudden flood of offers for sacrifice.

Hermione frowned and looked puzzled. She seemed to have felt Severus' gaze, though, since she suddenly looked up and directly at him. Understanding passed between them. Her lips quirked into a small smile before she turned to Ron.

"I think it's a great idea, Ron. I can't imagine that it'd hurt if we added a drop of your blood, and yes, one from both of you, too." She nodded at Dudley and Neville, who had offered theirs as well. "I want to add a drop of mine, too. I love him like a sister."

"So do I," said Luna.

"And me," piped up Sabrina.

"We'd better draw a line somewhere," Severus grumbled, suppressing a snort. "If all the Weasleys feel like siblings, we'd have to bathe Potter in a pool of blood. That'd get dangerously close to a Dark ritual."

Hermione grinned. "I don't think there's any danger of that. Ron can stand in for the Weasleys, and for everybody else. There'll be enough opportunity for them to show their love when Harry is awake again."

"When will the brewing start?" Firenze asked. "I would prefer to leave this depressing place as soon as possible, and if you don't need me right now..."

"I'd like to read up some more on the adoption ritual. How about we go through with it next week?" Hermione suggested.

They all agreed, and Firenze turned on the spot. Soon the clip-clopping of hooves was fading in the distance: the centaur couldn't get out of the constricting caves fast enough.

Severus looked around, intent on talking to Hermione, but she had left as quickly as Firenze. Disappointed, Severus accompanied Minerva to the Apparition point.

A week later, Harry's friends gathered again in the Robin Hood cave. A large cauldron had been half-filled with spring water and been heated up until the water had reached body temperature. Harry had been brought from his chamber and was now half-sitting, half-slumping against Ginny, who held him tenderly.

Minerva, wearing a long, wide coat crouched at Harry's back and enveloped him with her arms, closing the coat around both of them.

"Look here, everyone. I'm pregnant," she exclaimed and chanted the first part of the adoption spell.

Harry's eyes flew open, and he sat up on his own, but his eyes were vacant. His mind and soul clearly hadn't returned home yet.

Encouraged by the immediate effect of the ritual, Minerva stood up, dragging Harry up with her. Although he lacked the strength to walk, Minerva managed to get both of them to the cauldron and said, "I shall now give birth. This child will be my own, in my heart and before the law, and I shall be his mother. He shall have a mother's love and care as long as I live."

Everyone present answered, "We hear you."

Minerva wiped away a tear and smiled, holding out her left hand over the cauldron.

"Soul of the mother," Hermione recited and pricked Minerva's palm with a small silver dagger. A drop of blood fell into the cauldron.

"Love of the brother," Severus had taken over. He carefully pricked the palms of the magical brethren and those who felt like brothers to Harry.

"And the sister," he chanted with a smile, and added Hermione's, Luna's and Sabrina's blood.

Ron Weasley took the dagger out of Severus' hand, who held his own hand over the cauldron.

"And forgiveness of foe." Severus blood was added to the mix.

"Take the essence of each and let it flow," Hermione chanted, reverently took the oak arrow out of Firenze's hands and stirred the potion three times clockwise.

"Blood, flesh and bone are like mud, stick and stone," she continued and dropped the Stone Things into the liquid. Firenze scraped a few slivers from the arrow. Griphook added a small gold nugget, and Dobby threw a sock into the brew.

Finally, Severus added a handful of soil from his garden at Spinner's End.

"They must be together and not alone," Hermione chanted and stirred the potion three times anti-clockwise.

Now it was Minerva's turn again.

She waddled up a small platform that had been erected at the side of the cauldron for that purpose and squatted over it. Gently pushing Harry out of the cloak, she released him into the potion.

"Being born from the sea shall set Harry free," Hermione cried, and everybody held their breath when a dense fog arose from the cauldron and hid Harry from view.

Time seemed to stand still. Had the ritual been inefficient? Severus wondered. A glance to his side showed him Hermione nervously biting her lower lip.

Minerva looked up from the cauldron with a worried frown, then she took a deep breath.

"Harry Potter the Mighty, you are not of my womb,

But now I speak to you along with your sacred votaries.

Your friends, your brethren, your former foe..

I have taken Harry Potter for my son I have taken.(?)

She had hardly finished when a loud cry came from within the fog. It eerily resembled the first cry of a newborn.

The mist began to swirl and slowly fade, eventually revealing a very surprised looking, naked Harry, who was smeared with a sticky, reddish substance...a mixture of soil and blood, Severus thought.

Everyone laughed and clapped; a release of tension as much as from joy. Harry, only now realizing that he was naked, quickly covered his privates with both hands, which caused even more laughter.

"Look at my son," Minerva exclaimed, and everybody clapped and shouted congratulations. She took her wide coat off and draped it around Harry.

Harry watched them wide-eyed and more than a bit alarmed. "Have you all gone bonkers?" he asked, but was silenced by Ginny, who threw herself at him and kissed him.

Severus swallowed hard and wiped his eyes. The atmosphere in the cave was so full of the purest love that he couldn't suppress his tears. All the women present cried, and neither Weasley nor Longbottom seemed ashamed of their tears, either. Dobby sobbed noisily, and Firenze held a handkerchief. Severus couldn't even begin to guess where that had been hidden and blew his nose into it like a trumpet.

Severus realized that what they were now experiencing was what Albus had called the greatest power of them all. It was a term that had been discussed often, but had hardly been experienced by anyone. He felt fortunate, privileged, elated. It was a feeling he'd never forget. His chest felt ready to burst, and the tears in his eyes weren't sad ones. The others must have felt likewise since Luna and Hermione were laughing out loud, and Minerva was smiling through her tears. The love in the cave was tangible, just as it had been in The Room. But it was something you could only experience, and appreciate, when you opened up to it. It wasn't a coercion: there was nothing even slightly resembling force here. Love, and nothing else, had brought Potter back. It was that simple.

Once again, Severus marvelled at how Potter managed to get people to love him so much. He'd had the protection through the love of his mother. He'd had a part of her soul. Now he had a second mother, and the ritual they had performed had worked because of the love of all his friends. An uninterested group, brewing the same potion, reciting the same verses, would have achieved nothing. Potter, the neglected, lonely boy now had a big family.

Was he envious? Severus wondered. No, he certainly wasn't because at long last, he realized that after so many years of struggle, he had gained a similar boon. These people were his family, too. That was more than enough. Potter's and his choices, their fates, had been different, and there was nothing to be envious about.

He was pulled out of his musings by a tender kiss. Hermione had come to him and was smiling lovingly. Words weren't needed. A whispered *legilimens* on both sides, and their minds came together again, finally. How he had missed this. More fool him for having prevented this for so long.

Another kiss, long and deep this time, told him that he was forgiven and that they would be all right.

A week later, Severus packed his things and, as did all the other magical and non-magical guests, moved out of Paulie's house. They had been celebrating properly the night before, and it took more than one dose of Sober up potion to get rid of the goblin inside his head, who'd been swinging a large hammer against his skull. Paulie, though reluctant at first, had been delighted with his dose of the potion and proposed to make a fortune out of it if Severus ever wanted to brew it for a pharmaceutical company. He only needed a tiny reminder that he had signed a contract of secrecy, though. Paulie could be trusted; the Underground had learned that, and Severus had known that ever since they had been lads together.

Hermione had left again. After a stormy and wonderfully satisfying reunion the words 'marriage' or 'proposal' hadn't been uttered even once she had taken her leave to get her parents acclimatised back into their old lives. There would be a lot to tell and explain, and eventually, he'd have to meet them. He was both dreading and looking forward to that meeting. He knew that Hermione's parents had to be interesting people; she had been brought up with love and understanding, and not every parent would have accepted her dual nature as a Muggleborn witch with such grace. But he also wondered what they would think of their daughter's boyfriend, who was only a few years younger than they were. He sighed. They'd have to get along somehow, for Hermione's sake, just as Hermione had made an effort to get along with his own mother.

There, his trunk was packed, the last book stacked away. He was ready to leave. A pat on Paulie's shoulder with the promise to visit again soon, a last look around, and he disappeared.

The Apparition point in the Forbidden Forest was still the same as before the war. All the fighting, thankfully, had caused less damage than they had feared. With quick strides, Severus passed the gates into Hogwarts' grounds and glanced at Hagrid's hut, which had been rebuilt. There was no trace of the fire from the night he had thought he had killed Dumbledore. Hogwarts looked well. The damage from the war had been repaired; the castle hadn't been on the Ministry's list of undesirables, after all. It had been a while since he had last seen it, and now, at the end of summer, it looked as invulnerable as ever. A reassuring thought, although also a dangerously misleading one, Severus thought. Deep down, there was still the lingering fear of invasion; the Death Eater attacks' visible traces had been removed, but the damage in the hearts of the inhabitants couldn't be fixed easily. They had been attacked once. It could happen again. Constant vigilance wouldn't be the funny mannerism of an old Auror any longer: it would be something people would practice in earnest. And Severus would help them do just that.

When Minerva had owed him with the invitation of taking up the DADA position for good, he had been reluctant at first. Hermione, however, had been delighted, and after they had talked it over in detail, he had accepted. And now he was going to make his home once again at the place that had been his home for so many years, that had seen him humiliated and slighted, but also respected and feared. Maybe now he could even add 'liked' to that list. He shuddered. Did he really want to be 'liked'? Maybe valued and respected should be good enough; he wasn't a likeable man, after all. But teaching DADA was something he enjoyed, and he hoped to be able to pass on some of his fascination to the students.

After having taken tea with Minerva and the other teachers who had already arrived at Hogwarts, he settled down in his quarters. They were bigger than during his last tenure. If he had to live here, he wanted to have enough room to be comfortable, and to make Hermione comfortable since she would be living here with him. They had considered getting a house in Hogsmeade, but as he would be Head of Slytherin again, staying at the school seemed the wiser decision. Hermione loved Hogwarts, and she was looking forward to moving in with him. Since she had passed her NEWTs with flying colours while he had been unconscious, there wouldn't be any objection to them living there together.

A knock at the door shook him out of his musings.

"Professor, do you have a minute?"

"Miss Weasley? What is it?" He invited the young woman in.

"I'd like you to call me Ginny in private, if you don't mind." She smiled at him. He had seldom seen her smile so openly, so relaxed.

"Only if you call me Severus, in private, for the time being," he replied, and she nodded.

"So, what brings you here?"

"It's Harry. I was wondering if you would perhaps talk to him?"

Potter had moved to Hogwarts. Minerva wanted to spoil her new son, she explained, until he knew what to do with his everyone's really new found freedom.

"Why do you want me to talk to him?"

"I thought that perhaps you... er... I mean, you're both men, and both of you were kind of trapped in Hogwarts. He seems so lost. He should be happy, finally able to act his age, be free of responsibilities, shouldn't he? But he just sits around and mopes."

Severus' eyebrows shot upwards. "Mopes?"

Ginny fidgeted. "Well, yes, he mopes. He's almost like Moaning Myrtle, always sighing, never laughing. I hardly know him any more. He doesn't want to leave his room... doesn't want to do anything... he just sits. I..." She swallowed, frowning. "I don't think he really cares whether I'm there or not."

"I don't really think that I'm the right person to talk to him. Maybe someone from St. Mungo's, or one of your brothers?"

"Fred and George tried to make him laugh, but he hardly smiles. Ron, he's as stumped as I am. He tried to talk, but Harry just shrugs and looks out of the window. I thought, well, he's learned to respect you a lot, you know. And he's always reacted strongly to you..."

Perceptive, Severus thought. Anger was a reaction, and most of the time Potter had been angry when confronted with him. Severus had the nagging suspicion that he knew exactly what ailed Potter.

"Well then, let's get going," he said. "But I make no promises."

"Thank you, sir," Ginny beamed and led the way to Potter's quarters.

"You have a visitor, Harry," Ginny said, and then closed the door softly behind Severus who stood still, watching the boy-who-lived-twice.

Potter sat on a chair by the window, staring outside. He had barely turned his head when Severus came in.

"What brings you here, Professor?" he asked after the silence had stretched for several minutes.

"What a sight you are, Potter," Severus said in as scathing a voice as he could muster. His heart wasn't really in it, but old habits die hard, and the sneer felt good, in an odd way.

There, now Potter turned his head and frowned. Severus barked out a short laugh.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say that your saintly godfather has come back from the dead."

The boy's eyes widened, in disbelief, no doubt.

"How very like him you are. As soon as you can't show off your bravado, and stumble from one silly adventure to the next, you sit around and mope."

Potter's face had turned red, and Severus steeled himself.

"LEAVE SIRIUS OUT OF THIS!" Potter's spittle was flying, and his voice almost broke. "SILLY ADVENTURE? HOW DARE YOU?"

The boy jumped up from his chair and charged towards him. Severus wondered if Potter had his wand on him. Had it even been recovered? He didn't know. He was prepared to cast a silent protection charm at the slightest hint of attack, but it was just as likely that Potter would punch him in the face. Severus folded his arms and sneered down his nose.

"AND YOU... LOOK AT YOU, SNEERING LIKE THIS. AS IF..." Potter took a deep breath. "As if I didn't know that you know exactly how to push my buttons, don't you, sir?"

Severus' mouth fell open. He shut it quickly. Dammit. He'd lost his touch.

Potter had sat down again, but his face was animated now, and there was a small smile playing around his lips. He motioned to a chair by the fireplace, and Severus sat down.

"Talk to me, Potter. I know what's wrong with you, but I want to hear it from you."

"Do you?" Potter said mildly. "I wonder why that should be?"

Severus preferred a yelling Potter to that mild version. He wondered if he had appeared as pathetic during his own phase of yes moping. He sighed dramatically and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Because, just like me, you don't know who you are any more. You are convinced that you don't have a purpose any longer. Ever since you came to Hogwarts, your life had only one purpose: to meet Voldemort and to defeat him. That shadow hung over you like a dark cloud, and now it's gone. And you don't know what to do with yourself."

"Just like you?" Potter looked surprised.

"As unbelievable as that is, yes. As you undoubtedly know, my own life has been under a similar cloud, for more years now than I care to remember, and now I'm free, too."

"And how did you get over the, er, moping?"

"Who says that I'm over it? You don't think that a little talk miraculously solves all your problems, do you? But I'm on the way to mending, and I had help. Rather unexpected help, too. Miss Lovegood told me a few things that got me out of my snit before I could manage to make Hermione utterly unhappy, and myself, too. And I promise you, Potter, if you don't get your act together, I'll send Miss Lovegood your way."

Potter laughed. This was a first, Severus thought. He couldn't remember a time when he had seen Potter laugh at something he'd said. "I think I would like that. Luna is a good friend."

"She is," Severus admitted, smirking. "And she knows exactly how to cut away the flesh of the wound until it stops festering."

"Yeah, she does," Potter agreed and flinched. "Painfully so." He still looked sad, though. "But..."

"But. You wonder why Miss Lovegood is needed, or I, or your other friends, when Albus Dumbledore is alive, don't you? Where is the man who has moulded you and me into what you are, who has directed your life, manipulated everyone and, eventually, saw his plans turn out exactly like he wanted them? Isn't that it?"

Potter sighed. "All I got from him was a letter. I would have thought that he would at least visit..." He hung his head.

Severus nodded. "I would have thought so, too. But when I saw him before he left us, I understood. He is weak, and he isn't well. His life has been saved, and his injury healed, but he is convinced that he's living on borrowed time. And so he's left us. He's shown that he trusts us to finally solve our problems without leaning on him. Maybe it was about time. We would still be relying on him to fix everything, otherwise."

"But I thought he was my friend," Harry said very quietly. "I've heard what all of you did. All the love. I don't deserve so much love."

"Don't be foolish, Potter. Love isn't given because someone earned it. Love just is, or so I was told. It was freely and generously given, and you'd better learn to accept it and don't even for a moment think that the old man doesn't love you, Potter," Severus continued. "He does. But should we have dragged him here to watch a ceremony he couldn't have had a part in? We didn't even involve Lupin, as close as he feels to you. His isn't the love of a brother, though, and neither is Albus' and the love of a fatherly figure wasn't part of the ritual. In fact, we deliberately avoided it..."

"...because it would have resembled the ritual used by Voldemort too much. I see," Potter said with a thoughtful expression.

Severus nodded. "Exactly. I think you should go and visit Albus in Greece as soon as you feel strong enough. Take Miss Weasley and Minerva. Perry and Parvati will be delighted to have you around."

"That sounds like a good idea. I think we'll do that. And I think I'll have to apologize to Ginny and Professor, to my mother." He smiled brightly. "I have a mother. Isn't that amazing?"

Severus nodded. "The most amazing thing, yes."

"Thank you, Professor. I have a lot to think about."

Severus nodded and stood up. "If you need to do more shouting, you know where to find me..."

And once again, Potter laughed.

"That was a good thing you did, Severus," Hermione said after she had come back from her parents and learned about his conversation with Potter. "I'm so glad."

After a brief kiss for a greeting, she had started to nibble at his jaw. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back to give her better access.

"I don't know what got into me, but I suppose I'll have to be civil to Potter if I want to stay in your good graces."

"Indeed you will."

She laughed and slightly bit his earlobe while her hands moved up his chest to the buttons of his jacket. "I have no intention of letting you slip through my fingers ever again, I'll have you know."

His chuckle was silenced by her lips upon his. "Merlin, I'm so happy to have you back," she said earnestly. "I never want to be without you again."

He sighed. "You are so much younger than me. And I'm still struggling with who I am, and likely will continue to do so for a while. You'll tire of me soon enough."

"Oh, Severus," she whispered. "The age difference means nothing." She kissed him again. "Don't you see? We've both been robbed of our youth in a way. We both haven't fully grown up yet. Do you really think I know who or what I am, now, after the war? Or Ron? Well, I'm quite certain Luna does, but she is a special case... Our world is different now, better, but there still is so much to do. Let's grow up together, or maybe grow down first and have some fun."

She paused. She had succeeded in undressing him and now she was studying her handiwork. He was very aware of the effect of her eyes on him, and she couldn't be in doubt about his eagerness, but she neither got rid of her own clothes, nor let him help her undress. Instead, she got a quill out of her bag and a bottle of red ink.

"What are you doing?" he asked, confused.

"Marking my possession." She grinned and started to write 'Property of the Know-it-all' on the skin of his stomach. "Hold still," she admonished when he twisted.

"It tickles." He laughed. He couldn't help himself. "What a silly idea."

"Well, I'm a silly girl, am I not?" Her grin was cheeky. "And I'm having fun. I've never had much opportunity to be silly, you know? And now I have every intention of correcting that lapse. I'll be silly, I'll have fun, and I'll drag you along."

"Is that so?" He smirked, silently casting a vanishing charm on the ink bottle before he got hold of Hermione, flipped her over and started to tickle her mercilessly while he loomed over her.

She shrieked. "Yes, just like that. Stop. Stop. STOP."

"Only if you surrender and let me help you out of your clothes."

She surrendered. And they both continued teaching each other how to have fun. Neither of them was in any hurry to grow up.

A/N: Sober-up potion isn't canon, but it should be.

(2) I made that up. There are a few snippets from tablet XII in there, too.

Freedom to live

Chapter 29 of 29

While hunting for Horcruxes with her friends, Hermione learns surprising facts about Snape's past. Will that change the way she thinks about him? **Winner** Order of Merlin, Third Class, OWL Awards 2007 for Action/Adventure.

Chapter 29 Freedom to live

The hero bestows the boon to his fellow man.

(Joseph Campbell: The Hero with a Thousand Faces)

Thank you, Melusin, as always Thank you for your patience, your advice and for being a friend.

Epilogue:

"Lucius is doing what?" Severus almost choked on his coffee.

His wife of nine years smiled benignly and handed him a napkin. "He's running for Minister of Magic."

"You can't be serious."

"It's true. He's bought several pages in the *Morning Quibbles* and *The Quibbler* to advertise his campaign. Isn't it wonderful?"

"I thought you favoured Kingsley," he replied.

"He's a good Minister, but he is too honest," said Hermione. "He lets himself be bossed around by his staff, and most of them are old school. They're the sort of administrators who hate change and try to prevent it as much as possible. They'd never succeed with that if Lucius were minister. He has just the right amount of vanity, dishonesty and charisma."

"Good point," Severus conceded. "And since you are honest to a fault, you don't want to run yourself, isn't that it? But are you absolutely certain?"

"Just as sure as you are that you won't," Hermione countered, shuddering.

During the past nine years, they had both been asked several times to take up the position of Minister of Magic just as every other hero of the second war had been asked but they'd found that neither of them had the taste for politics.

Severus chuckled. "Being Headmaster is as far as my ambition goes, as you well know. And Minerva wouldn't be happy..."

"I know," Hermione said with a grin. "She wouldn't enjoy being grandmum to Harry's offspring half as much if she had to worry about a new Headmaster. She still cares, despite being retired. And anyway, Headmaster Snape sounds much better than Minister Snape if you ask me."

"Well, we'll keep an eye on Lucius if he wins. You know that he's a bit scared of you?"

"Really? That's good. I suppose he knows that he can't buy the *Morning Quibbles*."

Severus nodded, glancing at Hermione. Seeing her dig heartily into her breakfast made him once again thank Merlin, fate and whatever gods there might be for bringing them together. Nine years after the war, their life was good. The wizarding world was slowly changing. The magical government had opened up and become more transparent. People were even getting used to the revolutionary idea of general elections. This change of attitude had mostly been brought about by the press with no little thanks to Lola, who had resumed publishing her column in *Witch Weekly*, and Rita, who had published her own book about the war.

Hermione had become Luna's colleague and co-owner of *The Quibbler*. Luna ran the traditional edition, *The Quibbler Weekly*, and Hermione ran a daily morning paper, *Morning Quibbles*. After working at the Ministry for a few years, Hermione had decided that, although she liked administration, the bureaucracy at the Ministry was stifling her. Working as a journalist gave her a way of influencing people's views: there was a power there that couldn't be underestimated. Hermione had long known that the *Daily Prophet* needed a serious competitor, and with her *Morning Quibbles*, she had risen to that challenge. And now they were calling for candidates for the election.

The wizarding world of Britain enjoyed their first general election so much that they made a holiday out of it. Lucius won by a landslide. His role in the Underground had been made public, but his reputation among some of his peers of old, purebloods of the slightly more liberal type, led to a general acceptance by a wide range of the populace. And Lucius didn't disappoint. With an amazing prowess at diplomacy, he convinced the Wizengamot of the changes the Underground had deemed necessary so many years ago. Muggle parents and children were now introduced into the Magical world as soon as it became clear that the child had magical talent. There was no surprise visit from a Hogwarts teacher when the children turned eleven; the introduction happened much more gradually. Wizarding children, on the other hand, were introduced to Muggle culture through an exchange programme with the parents of the Muggleborns.

As spectacular as that change was, what was to come next would be the acid test for the new tolerant attitude of the wizarding world. Magical Beings had waited patiently for a change to their status and now wanted to have more than a few cosmetic concessions. They wanted to be on the same level as wizarding folk.

"I don't know," Lucius Malfoy said. "Maybe that step is too drastic. Maybe we should introduce these concessions more gradually." They had met in Malfoy Manor for lunch and a long talk.

"I don't think so," Hermione said passionately, ignoring Narcissa Malfoy's haughty sneer and waving her fork at Lucius like a wand. "They've been waiting far too long. They are like us; they need to be given the same rights."

"They aren't really like us," Lucius protested.

Severus sat back with a small smile. He knew what was coming and didn't envy Lucius. Hermione had poured all the passion that had once gone into S.P.E.W. into the campaign for equal rights for all magical beings.

"Of course they are like us. Have you forgotten that the term 'magical brethren' isn't an empty one? Without their blood, we couldn't have woken Harry. I can't believe that the average wizard and witch still doesn't know how closely related we all are. There's been continuous interbreeding, for heaven's sake."

"Still, I don't think that..."

"This isn't a matter of thinking; it's a matter of knowing," Hermione all but yelled. "I can't believe how ignorant people still are. How ignorant they are kept. You're still suppressing knowledge for power, Lucius, don't you see?"

"Actually, I don't. When I say that we are different, how am I suppressing knowledge?"

"Is anybody actually trying to find out about our differences and similarities in a logical, recorded, scientific way? No? See..." Hermione leaned back triumphantly. "It's because there is no scientific curiosity in our world. It's never been supported, has it?"

"That's unfair. I've always felt that a proper education is necessary. I always wanted Draco to be the best..."

"You wanted him to be the best for his status, but not for knowledge's sake. Don't any of you ever want to KNOW? How is it possible that scientific curiosity is so rare among wizards, that it's reserved for people who are seen as oddballs, like Luna?"

"And what does that have to do with magical beings?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "There is so little true curiosity about how magic works, about how the world works... Wizards seem restricted to very basic research about how wizarding magic works and nothing else. But how about the biology of our fellow magical beings? Why can we have children with Veelas, with Goblins? Are centaurs related to House Elves? Are Goblins related to dwarves? How does wizarding biology work? How does magic affect that biology? And how about Muggles?"

"We eat, we sleep, we make love, just like our non-magical counterpart. We have similar values, needs, wants, a somewhat similar society. Where, exactly, is the difference? We share a planet. We live under the impression that our magic is more powerful than any Muggle technology, but is that true? Could we defend ourselves against nuclear attack? What happens when Muggles destroy the environment? How could we live with ourselves if we don't intervene?"

Hermione had to stop to breathe. Lucius took the opportunity to get a word in.

"And if Goblins have wands, we'll have another Goblin rebellion on our hands."

"Do you really believe that? They will be busy learning how to use the wands, how to make them and to explore how their magic differs from ours. What do you think? Will they want to have a seat in the Wizengamot? Could a Goblin become Minister of Magic? A centaur?"

"I think what you really want is a University for Magic, Hermione. There, all these questions can be answered. For the time being, the ban on wands for anyone other than magical humans should be lifted, that much we can agree on. Likewise, they shall be granted the safe habitats some of them require."

"Safe habitats?" Severus hadn't heard about that yet.

"Centaurs, giants and merpeople want safe habitats. If we grant them that, and I'm inclined to support their request, they will become the protectors and keepers of forest, mountain and lake, and that should be acknowledged by all of us. They will set their own rules in their regions, but they will be asked to grant access, which they can withdraw if they feel the need to do so. The area granted will be based on mutual contract, not to be broken by either side without repercussions. They will be responsible for the roads that grant safe passage for all beings. They can either tend to these roads and keep hostels and staff and equipment by themselves...which would create a decent income, which in turn means taxes or they can contract it out to other beings. How they distribute their areas among themselves is their concern."

"You did put a lot of thought into that, after all." Hermione beamed at Lucius. "And how about house-elves? What have you cooked up for them?"

Lucius gave Hermione his most charming smile, and she wasn't immune to that charm. Severus noticed with amusement how she had warmed to her former enemy.

"The general tenor is that house-elves don't want to be free. Which is true, for some, because freedom is inconvenient and hard work at times. What we need to do is to work out a contract that will allow them to bind themselves to a family without this being slavery and an irreversible bond. They should be able to give the family clothes as well, as a group or as individuals. This will rarely happen when they are well treated, but can happen if the need arises. There should also be different types of contract for those elves used to the idea of being free and who want to take their affairs into their own hands, and for those who rely on a family to take care of them until they learn, if they are capable, to look out for themselves."

"This all sounds almost too good to be true," Severus said. "And hearing that from you... remembering how you used to treat Dobby..."

"People can change if they want to," Lucius said with a wide smile, all benevolent politician.

Or at least pretend to if it is in their own best interest, Severus thought, amused.

"Well, it's not something we can do in a month, or even a year. But with patience and the willingness to resolve these issues once and for all, we should get somewhere."

"So what about that university? Were you serious?" Hermione got back to the issue that had excited her the most.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I was," Lucius said. "Dumbledore bequeathed the major part of his fortune for just such a purpose, and he wants to see it used while he still lives. Potter is in favour, too, and he would lend his name and donate a portion of his money towards a thorough and safe exploration of the difference between benevolent and predatory magic. The Potter Faculty for Defence against the Dark Arts, if you will."

"Potter?" Severus asked, surprised.

"Yes. He's always been fascinated by this idea, but never admitted it," Hermione confirmed.

"All right, let's do it, then," Lucius proclaimed. "We'll establish the First Magical University of Britain with you and your friends as the founders."

"Founders. We are founders," Hermione whispered, much later, when they had gone to bed. "We're the founders of the first magical university in Britain. How's that for a career?"

"Not too bad," Severus mumbled, trying to kiss her ear, but getting hair in his mouth. "And why not?"

"I expect we'll see a lot of changes over the next fifty or sixty years."

Severus agreed. The world could completely change in that time. If Muggles could achieve that much change in fifty years, why not magical folk? And if it worked out for them, other countries might follow. But that was a problem for other people and another generation.

Thoroughly content and happy, Severus opened his arms to Hermione, who leaned back against him. *We've come a long way,* he thought contentedly before drifting off to sleep. .

The End.

A/N: Thank you, dear readers, for staying with me despite all the delays. Please keep reviewing stories you enjoy, because these reviews are huge motivators for writers and about the only award a fanfic writer gets. How else would we know if anyone actually reads what we write? Hit counts don't tell us that.