

Cleared of the Murder

by nata

At the meetings of the Order of the Phoenix, the members strive to figure out the circumstances of Snape's presumed treachery at the Astronomy Tower using the science of magic. Hermione, Ron and Ginny must learn to send messages through their Patronuses.

Magic Details

Chapter 1 of 8

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"Are you sure he is dead?" Mundungus Fletcher asked, strangely disturbed. His sneaky manner was gone for the moment, replaced by an impression that his whole person would collapse inwards if the answer to his question would not come fast.

"Mundungus, I certainly do not appreciate you questioning my competence at the moment." Professor McGonagall tensed her shoulder muscles slightly, sending tiny shakes down her arms.

"Minerva, please, excuse all of us for not quite behaving up to our standards tonight," came the soothing voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt. "The news you sent us has been a shock."

"I'm sorry, dear colleagues, you have the right to demand the results of my tests," Professor McGonagall admitted. "Albus is most likely dead. The diminishing curves of magic residues of his deceased body are standard. Although my magicmeter is a simple one, its results lack the precision of the speed of disappearance of magic, not the accuracy of decline or rise in the slope of change in the magic residues. I might rerun the test with Albus's instrument. His magicmeter is so much more sophisticated. A work of art almost. Yet, the results still could not compare to the details in magic background traces that Albus distinguished with his hands."

Minerva's voice broke, she sharply inhaled with a gasp and her exhale came as a tiny sob. After securing the most important issues in Hogwarts, and calling an emergency meeting of the Order of the Phoenix informing them that their member and important spy Severus Snape murdered their leader Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall was emotionally, mentally and physically drained. She was still holding on, but only with substantial effort.

"Now, Minerva, now." Kingsley Shacklebolt awkwardly patted her shoulder with the tips of his fingers.

Professor McGonagall focused her eyes on her clenched fingers on the table and continued, "So, Albus's diminishing curves of magic residues are standard, but not the Avada Kedavra curve. Its past projection should have peaked at the time when the curse hit Albus, but it does not."

"How could it be?" Mundungus lightened up with hope. "Wouldn't it mean that the Killing Curse missed and never hit him?"

"Not really. It could just have hit him earlier than Potter told us, hence making his report and especially his refusal to provide details of this evening events suspicious," Shacklebolt explained matter-of-factly.

"I projected the curse residues two days back," Professor McGonagall continued," just to check that possibility. I'm certain that Albus was alive those last two days as we repeatedly met. The past projection is continuously flat. All it shows is a strong, but diffused background noise approximately at the time that Mr. Potter indicated."

"Most interesting." Shacklebolt was leaning forward on his elbows, a thin line deepened between his eyebrows. "Very consequential. How can a Killing Curse without a distinct time peak result in a standard decline of residual curves of the deceased body?"

It was not a question meant to be answered, but Minerva McGonagall slowly shook her head and said, "I don't know."

"I will have Tonks look into it straight away. Mundungus, please, inform Molly and Arthur. Minerva, you should ensure the safety of remaining students."

"Yes, I should. Kingsley, Mundungus, thank you. I shall now return to Hogwarts." Professor McGonagall rose with support of her hands, regained her composure with a deep inhale and left the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

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"Let me get this straight, my dear," Molly Weasley addressed Nymphadora Tonks in a full kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. All members of the Order assembled to listen to Tonks' explanation. The rumour went that Dumbledore was dead, but nothing killed him.

"I don't have the Auror training and your science of magic is hard to comprehend. What you are saying," Mrs. Weasley continued, "is that Severus's curse killed Albus although any curse could end his life?"

"Precisely, Molly."

Two transparent cubes were floating in front of Tonks slightly above the table so everybody in the crowded room would have a clear and unobtrusive view of their insides.

"So, in these charts of yours, a strong healing charm will appear in this upper front corner, but a weak pain-inflicting curse would mark the lower back corner?" Mrs. Weasley was trying hard to understand the magical charts that, she hoped, would ease her pain of losing a friend and a leader.

"Indeed."

"And if the victim is hit by a weak pain-inflicting curse in the morning, you would find a mark in the lower left corner at the back of the cube. But if he was then healed by a powerful Healer in the afternoon, there would be an additional mark in the upper right corner at the front of the cube?"

"Yes, Molly, that is the principle how we track the succession, nature and force of curses of the victims on the sides of a cube chart," Tonks said and waited for others to process her lecture.

"If we now go back to Albus's death probability chart." Mrs. Weasley looked at the second floating cube. A queer opalescent shape filled its inside rather than two small marks in the opposite corners of the first cube. The shape started at the upper left corner at the back side of the cube, quickly spread downwards and as the surface approached the middle, it widened to completely fill the front half of the cube. "Two days before Albus's death, it would take a very strong pain-inflicting curse or an Avada Kedavra or a prolonged exposure to Cruciatus to kill him. Whereas later on, Albus was so severely weakened that even a mere hex could end his life?"

"More than that," Tonks emphasised, "any charm could cause his death."

"If someone tried to levitate Albus to help him on his feet, the Levitation Charm would kill him," Mad-Eye Moody interjected. "If someone tried to warm him, he would have died of a Warming Charm."

"And if someone tried to heal him, he would have still died from and due to the Healer's effort," Remus Lupin added with grieving finality.

The Order of the Phoenix was quiet until Minerva McGonagall asked, "Could Severus have known?"

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"Mrs. Weasley, it still does not make sense." Hermione Granger lowered her wand and turned to face the small, lively figure of a witch who was giving her, Ron and Ginny a lesson on behalf of the Order. "Why was Professor Dumbledore's body ejected over the railing of the Astronomy Tower if it was indeed an Avada Kedavra that killed him? When someone is hit by the killing curse, they just quietly drop down dead. Professor Moody showed us in the class."

"We are not going to discuss this any further, children," Mrs. Weasley said, clearly agitated. "The consequences of Professor Dumbledore's death were explained to you against my will. I strongly disagree that children should participate in a war."

"Mum, Hermione and Ron are of age. They turned seventeen months ago. And I will be shortly too."

"Ginny!" Mrs. Weasley shot a stern glance at her only daughter, then turned back to answer Hermione, but her husband intercepted her.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt could not explain that either, but it is of no consequence to our task today. The Order decided that you should master the Patronus Messaging for your better protection and so you will fully co-operate to learn it as soon as possible."

"Now, Ron, I want you to concentrate on the message you are to send," Mr. Weasley continued to instruct his son. "Remember that the message must invoke happiness in you. You must force yourself to be ultimately happy about the message you are to transmit."

"*Expecto patronum!*"

Ron's whitish, mighty Patronus shot out from his wand and leaped quickly to Molly. It ran around her twice and disappeared. Mrs. Weasley twitched as if trying to listen.

"Your Patronus did not say anything, Ron. Did you feel the message make you happy when you conjured it?"

"Yes, of course! I couldn't conjure a Patronus without a happy thought, could I?"

"But the message, Ron. You must feel the happiness of the message," Mr. Weasley instructed.

"Perhaps you should try again." Mrs. Weasley's patience was being tried. Trial after trial all three young wizards failed to transmit a simple message through a Patronus over and over again. Endless practice. She was no tutor, and moreover the Patronus Messaging was a complicated task to learn. It required lots of inner discipline and mental strength. The proficiency of her youngest children in conjuring Patronuses surprised her, and she was proud of their skills with such advanced magic. It certainly helped her to teach them to transfer messages using a Patronus. Nevertheless, it was no easy task even for a qualified teacher, but she understood that she and Arthur were the most logical choices to teach the children to communicate with other members of the Order. Hermione came to the Burrow after just a brief visit with her parents and so Molly and Arthur were the closest ones that could allocate the necessary time for tutoring.

"*Expecto patronum!*" Ron shouted again, and this time he grinned as he recognised that Mrs. Weasley was listening and actually hearing his message.

"Wonderful, dear, wonderful! Your Patronus is messaging!" Mrs. Weasley joyfully hugged her son. "Just you were supposed to send me 'It's a sunny day,' not 'How wildly I would fly on such a fine day.' Try again, please."

Ron frowned, wishing his parents would switch their attention to Ginny and Hermione again and give him a break since he just first made his Patronus to talk, when he

noticed how the sun shone through Hermione's hair, giving her an ethereal quality. That's something that made him happy about that bloody message!

"*Expecto patronum!*" Ron's Patronus merrily jumped straight to Hermione to deliver his message. Hermione looked up to meet his eyes and smiled for one short frozen moment. She quickly realised that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were watching, flashed a look in their direction and blushed.

"Dad, why did Ron's Patronus run to Hermione?" Ginny asked.

"He apparently," Mr. Weasley cleared his throat, "strongly associated the happiness of a sunny day with her, overriding his intentions to send the message to his mother."

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"Ron received a letter from Harry this morning confirming that he intends to stay at his uncle's until his seventeenth birthday," Arthur Weasley informed McGonagall, Tonks and Dedalus Diggle at a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix.

"It is very likely that You-Kn-...Voldemort," Mr. Weasley's audience twitched a bit, "will try to seize him as soon as Lily's protection expires. We should anticipate his actions."

"Alastor, Kingsley, Tonks and I should enter the house to retrieve him, while Minerva, Mundungus, Arthur and Molly cover the neighbourhood. We should bring him to Grimmauld Place, where he would be safe until the end of summer holidays," Diggle suggested.

"Perhaps, it would be a better idea to replace Molly with Bill," Mr. Weasley commented.

"Isn't Bill preparing for his wedding?"

"Not really. Rather Molly is very busy organising. She wants to join Fleur on her trip to France to bring her parents to the wedding. Whereas Bill would be pleased to get away from the preparations and opt for some action. Once Fleur's family arrives, he will attend to them, of course."

"All right," agreed Diggle, "so Bill will join Minerva, Mundungus and you in the neighbourhood protection."

"Thank you for Molly. Furthermore, I must add here that Harry also writes that he will not return to school this year."

"He hasn't given up on the idea then?" Minerva's voice was disapproving.

"I'm afraid that is precisely what he is doing, Minerva. He is giving up the idea of his classical education."

"We will just have to teach him individually, then," Professor McGonagall sighed.

"If he lets us," Tonks pointed out.

"He does not have much choice. He must take his Apparition test, otherwise he will have not only Voldemort, but also the Ministry officials at his heels," Professor McGonagall explained. "And while he is waiting for his appointment, I intend to have him learn the Patronus Messaging. By the way, how are the children progressing, Arthur?"

"Well, I suppose. All of them already managed to transfer a message, and they are now working on the details and specifics. Ron has problems with directing his Patronus Message to a specific person, and Ginny is unable to conjure any message that involves Harry. Hermione mastered the technique fairly well, and she is now working on intercepting Ron's and Ginny's messages. This should help them to learn to make the message very specific and to strengthen the direction of the message to a certain person. However, we will not know how proficient they are under pressure until the need arises."

"Oh yes, it is kind of fun to be happy about a fact that Voldemort is just attacking me," Diggle recalled ironically.

"It's a question of phrasing and perspective. You can be happy about 'I just ducked Voldemort's Killing Curse'," Tonks smiled, "but not about 'You-Know-Who just sent an Avada Kedavra in my direction'."

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## Coming Out

*Chapter 2 of 8*

The Order retrieves Harry from his last stay with the Dursleys, and Hermione launches into classical Snape defence.

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Harry's suitcase was packed, and he was sitting on it in the middle of his room at the Dursleys'. He was alert despite the late hour, his wand ready. Today, at midnight, he would come of age in the wizarding world and his mother's protection would cease. Harry expected that Voldemort would attack him then. Everybody had been expecting it actually. Order members had been guarding him uneventfully the whole month, and since yesterday they must have secured the whole of Privet Drive. Even Aunt Petunia presented some empathy, but certainly not in her attitude. Her and Uncle Vernon's demeanour had undoubtedly made Harry's last stay in their house as brutally unpleasant as usual. Oh, no, it was more subtle. Aunt Petunia showed Harry her concern by giving him extra-large portions of food. This year Harry's plate did not equal a quarter of Dudley's portion. This year Harry was entitled to eat half as much as Dudley. Since Dudleykins was no longer on a diet, Harry ate at the Dursleys' sufficiently for the first time. He had to smile at the thought.

The doorbell rang viciously.

Harry's small smile vanished in an instant. He jumped up, bracing himself for a fight, but only Uncle Vernon's voice came through the closed door.

"Get out, boy! Get out of my house, and don't return."

It was a minute after midnight. Harry Potter had come of wizarding age. So he levitated Hedwig's cage and his suitcase and sent them unceremoniously past the hovering, impressive figure of Uncle Vernon down the stairs. Uncle Vernon turned an unhealthy crimson colour at the sight of open magic from his nephew, but did not say a word. It was Aunt Petunia who quietly gasped as Harry passed by.

"Good luck against ... You-Know-Who."

Harry opened his eyes in surprise. "Thank you, Aunt Petunia. And good bye."

He turned to go, then changed his mind and added, "I might have to put up a fight here. You'd better hide."

Harry pointed his wand at the front door, vanished it with a non-verbal spell, immediately yelled, *STUPEFY!* and rushed down the stairs in horror.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I apologise. Professor, I'm so sorry..." Harry kept babbling to Mad-Eye Moody, who was again gaining consciousness, thanks to Tonks' prompt efforts. "I thought Death Eaters would be coming to get me. I was so convinced. Professor, I'm sorry."

"Would the Death Eaters ring the bell?" asked Moody from the pavement.

"Er, I suppose ... as a diversion tactic perhaps?"

"No, they wouldn't! Besides, the whole Order has been patrolling the neighbourhood for two days now. There is a major force spread around us at the moment."

Shacklebolt picked up Harry's luggage, Tonks helped Moody on his feet and Diggle replaced the missing door.

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Harry admitted shamefully.

"Then act accordingly." Mad-Eye Moody was still visibly upset when he nevertheless admitted, "But, boy, you are fast. You might have a chance."

The party gathered, Moody seized Harry's elbow and all Disapparated to Harry's house at Grimmauld Place.

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'No. I will not strip for you tonight, but I might let you strip me if you promise to kiss my whole body while undressing me' whitish otter told Ginny. Her eyes first widened in surprise, then narrowed with anger.

"You are transmitting sex arrangements to each other? I can't believe this! I'm supposed to intercept them!"

Hermione and Ron flushed deeply, dropped their shoulders and looked to the floor in embarrassment. They were practising their Patronus Messaging in eager wait for Mr. Weasley and Bill, or at least a Patronus from them for that matter, to bring them news about Harry's retrieval from the Dursleys'. They hoped it would go smoothly. With such a force of Order members protecting him, they were almost relaxed, but still had to know for certain.

"We are sorry, Ginny."

"You couldn't intercept any of our Patronuses the whole day, so we ... I thought ... I took the liberty ... to ask Hermione..."

"We felt this conversation was private. It was a mistake. We were overconfident in our skills at specifying the recipient of the message. We apologise," Hermione managed to squeeze out of herself quietly.

"I'm expected to try to hear your messages! I'm practising to intercept them. You are such jerks." Ginny, however, forgave them, but could not skip an opportunity and changed her tone to Ron. "So, no stripping, eh?"

"Shut up, Ginny," Ron hissed.

"And lots of kissing before the deed? Poor brother, such a disastrous message. You must be devastated."

Ron had had enough. He was far from comfortable with his newly discovered lust for his girlfriend to face his little sister mocking him in his humiliation. All emotions channelled to anger, and he burst out.

"You say one more word, Ginny, and I'll hex..."

"You won't even try, or Mum will be made to know."

"You will not discuss my private life with her. We are both of age, so it's none of her business."

"It's all of her business. This is her house, Ron. You are shagging your girlfriend in your parents' house!"

"You are just jealous because Harry didn't write to you!"

"He couldn't. It's dangerous. The owls..."

"And he won't even look at you twice when he gets here!"

They were so engrossed in their fight that they did not notice another Patronus approaching The Burrow. Hermione shifted her gaze, wishing to shrink and disappear, and the flying Patronus in the distance caught her eye.

"A Patronus!" she screamed and ran outside, Ron and Ginny rushing after her.

"It's not midnight yet, so it can't be good news. Dad said they would retrieve him only shortly after midnight."

"There is an attack then."

"Oh, my," Hermione realised, "it is Snape's Patronus."

"What is it doing here?"

"Did the Death Eaters win?"

"This is the end."

Hermione surprisingly easily intercepted the Patronus, finding that it was addressed just to whomever in The Burrow and took the message.

'Potter safe. Death Eaters attacking The Burrow at midnight. Run.'

"Death Eaters are coming here. We must escape." She hastened to get inside.

"Are you crazy?" Ron caught her arm in the front room. "This is Snape's message. You cannot believe it. It's a trap. He just wants us to do something stupid like rush to the battle to get us all in one go. Harry is the target, not us."

"He says Harry is safe, but they will be HERE at midnight!"

"We can fight them if it's true. We will be prepared."

"What if there are too many of them? Would you risk the Death Eaters capturing you and endangering Harry with the information You-Know-Who could get out of you?" Hermione refrained from saying the Dark Lord's name.

"We need reinforcements. I'll send a Patronus to Dad."

But Ron could not feel happy about the expected attack. In fact, he could not feel happy enough about anything at the moment to conjure a Patronus at all. Hermione was shaking with fear and Ginny did not even try.

"Maybe we shouldn't request help. They are protecting Harry. What if you are right, Ron, and this is a dodgy tactic to weaken Harry's guards? We should go to Grimmauld Place. That way we can save ourselves if something is truly coming and not jeopardise the Order's mission."

Crack!

Hermione squeaked and jumped.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

"Too many! The fireplace!"

Ginny ran for it, knocked over the jar as she grabbed a handful of Floo powder, jammed it into the fire and was already stepping inside and yelling the Headquarters address when Ron and Hermione caught up with her.

Ron scooped up a bit of powder from the floor, threw it into the flames and gestured to his love.

"Hermione!"

They heard the front door give in to the concentrated assault.

"No time, I'll Apparate. Go!" She pushed him with all her strength into the fireplace and immediately started to concentrate on her Destination, Determination and Deliberation.

The door exploded.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

The curse hit her in the chest, but she was already loosely deliberated. Her body resisted as she was pressed through the Apparating sensation. She hit the floor in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place hard.

Hard as a stone.

"Hermione, luckily, you are here too." Ron was just stumbling out of the fireplace. "Hey, you shouldn't have pushed me so hard."

"Ron."

"It must have been a rough Apparition for you too, if you fell. I hope the Death Eaters leave before Dad and Bill return." He regained his balance, turned his back to the girls and started to brush ashes from his clothes.

"Ron."

"We must warn them before they arrive just into the Death Eaters' hands."

"Ron! Would you, please, stop grooming yourself and look here?" Ginny was kneeling beside Hermione and finally caught Ron's attention.

"Hermione! Did you splinch yourself? Or did you hit your head?"

"She looks whole to me. She might have hit her head, but it wouldn't be serious, I think." Ginny was examining Hermione to her best knowledge. Her friend's eyes were vivid with anger and helplessness. "It rather looks like the full Body-Bind to me."

Hermione slowly closed and again opened her eyes to acknowledge Ginny's conclusion.

"She will be her self in a short time again. I'll warn Bill and Dad, and you make her a bit more comfortable," Ginny unnecessarily added when Ron was already lifting Hermione's stiff body in his arms, eager to touch her rather than levitate her form in an attempt to take her over to a couch.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Hermione was unceremoniously dropped back to the floor as Ron and Ginny joined forces to protect her body and sent hexes towards the intruders.

"Protego!" Mad-Eye Moody's shout echoed in the now over-crowded room.

"Incarcerous!" Ropes flew out of Dedalus Diggle's wand and bound Ginny and Ron.

"What do you think you are doing? First Harry, now you? Think before you hex someone." Moody's magical eye was piercing Ginny and Ron.

"The Death Eaters attacked The Burrow while we were all expecting them to march upon Harry, right? That's why you are all jumpy here instead of where you're supposed to be and Hermione is bound," Tonks deduced.

"Yes. There were so many of them! They just kept popping in ..." Ginny shuddered as she remembered. "We must warn Dad!"

"I just did," Professor McGonagall said. She made her way from behind the crowd to tend to Hermione. "I sent him a Patronus that you were all here and safe as soon as I saw you while you were busy fighting Alastor."

"Thank you. I hope it reaches them before they return to The Burrow." Ron sighed, a little embarrassed once again that evening, and helped Hermione to stand up after McGonagall countered her curse.

At that moment a Patronus materialised through a wall. Mundungus Fletcher took the message.

'Dark Mark above The Burrow. Seems empty. Need to search.'

Before Mundungus could refer the message to the awaiting assembly, there sounded yet another double-crack. This time, it went without an attack, although Mr. Weasley and Bill still faced a forest of aimed wands.

"I just got your message. What did you find?" Mundungus asked.

"Nothing. Shortly after I sent off a Patronus, Dad received Professor McGonagall's message. We Apparated directly here. Thank you for the reassurance," Bill addressed McGonagall. "It was quite a sight to see the sign about my old home knowing my little siblings were in there." Bill messed Ron's hair, much to his annoyance.

"Ginny, Ron, Hermione, we are very glad you are all safe." Mr. Weasley embraced the young escapees.

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"Harry, he saved our lives!" Hermione was fuming over Harry's stubbornness.

"Oh, yes? Then how can you explain the fact that you were bound? It could have easily been a Killing Curse that hit you, for all that matters." Harry refused to let go.

"No. Potter's friends would be more valuable to them alive," Ron whispered, not meeting Harry's eyes.

"Even so. Even if they wanted you alive to get to me." The edge in Harry's voice forced Ron to look up. "How far do you think she was from being caught?"

"Close."

"Precisely! Millionth of a second. If she would have been bound before she started to Apparate, she wouldn't have gone anywhere."

"But we hesitated after we got the message. She wanted to go, but I stopped her."

"*Clever*. Now, what do you think would have happened to her if she were caught?"

"Harry! Drop it, please." Hermione stepped in. "*She* refuses to hear what could have happened. *She* can imagine quite vividly without you. Thanks."

"But it's relevant."

"To what?"

"To Snape's deception!"

"Deception?"

"Harry, he saved us!" Ginny backed up Hermione.

"He warned us, so that we could get away."

"No, Ron, he didn't!" Harry raised his voice. "Don't you see that he gave you just such a short notice to ensure that you did get caught? Then, if at least one of you survived and returned to the Order, you would have pledged that Snape is on our side, he would get the spy status back and could continue to supply Voldemort with our intentions."

"If you put it that way ..." Ron lost his resolve.

"See?"

"But what if he did not know before?" Hermione was pondering an alternative. "Your hypothesis assumes that Voldemort filled him in on his plans beforehand. He does not appear a trusting fellow, Harry. I doubt he tells his Death Eaters about his plans in detail."

"Snape might be close to him now that he killed the only wizard Voldemort ever feared. Or he might even have designed the plan." Harry shrugged.

"All right. Voldemort might have entrusted Snape on his tactics, or Snape could have come up with it," Hermione admitted. "But what if Voldemort thought of the idea to target us instead of you last night and did not trust any of his Death Eaters to share it with them? What if Snape learnt of the plan just moments before they were to go and only had time for a quick blind warning? And can you imagine how much danger he put himself in for conjuring a Patronus in front of all those Death Eaters?"

"Then how did he know that you could receive a Patronus message? I can't. Now, Hermione, how could he know?" Harry opposed her.

"He couldn't," Hermione admitted.

A relief of victory flushed over Harry's face.

"But he also couldn't expect that we would be left in The Burrow all by ourselves without any Order member. We never were before."

Harry's victorious feeling sank.

"Hermione is right, Harry. Snape would have expected at least one person here who could receive a Patronus message. The Order was just so sure Voldemort would try to get to you last night. Too sure." Ron's voice sank.

But Harry still stood to his place. "Then he would have also expected at least one person who would fight the Death Eaters back long enough to enable at least one of you to get away to tell others of his 'noble' intentions, but short enough to get at least one of you captured."

Harry had a point. Harry certainly had a point. But so did Hermione.

"Harry, you are paranoid."

"Wouldn't you be, if the most dangerous wizard of our age and his army were after you since you were one?" he shot at her. "And if he and his cronies already managed to kill so many people that were there to protect you?"

"Yes," Hermione's cheeks flushed a little pink, "I guess I would be."

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*Author's notes: Thanks to KD for beta reading this story and to saschia for pointing out my mistake in the orientation of the tracking cube charts. The concept should work so that the time is recorded on the axis from left to right, the nature of a spell on the axis from front to back and the force of the spell on the vertical axis up and down. Please read and review; plot bunnies feed on reviews, and they need a lot of nourishment.*

# An Uninvited Wedding Guest

Chapter 3 of 8

Hermione and Ron try to sneak away from Bill and Fleur's wedding reception.

*Warnings: All warnings for this story refer primarily to this chapter. Please, beware that there is abuse, torture, character death and a bit of language.*

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When Mr. and Mrs. Weasley entered the kitchen in Harry's house a while later, they were so tired from lack of sleep the previous night that they didn't notice the abysmal atmosphere between Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny.

"When can we return home, Dad?"

"Not for some time, Ron." Mr. Weasley rubbed his eyebrow and sighed. "No visible damage is apparent on the house, but we couldn't detect any magic either. So we must all stay here meanwhile."

"Strange."

"Why?" Hermione and Harry failed to see anything strange, much less unsafe, about not detecting any spells on a home. To them, lack of damage and lack of spells translated to lack of danger.

"Magical houses are always charmed." Mrs. Weasley sat down and poured her husband and herself a cup of tea. "Transfigured furniture, enlarged cupboards, changed wall colour."

"You refurbish by magic?" Hermione was amazed.

"Often. And repair too."

"So if we can't detect even spells we placed on the house ourselves, that must mean that the Death Eaters are trying to hide something that they did to it." Mr. Weasley sipped his tea.

"Kingsley and Tonks managed to focus their magicmeters enough to see a large strong mark placed around midnight last night. Its nature isn't very harmful by itself. Kingsley says that it is in slightly uncomfortable range. But we couldn't say what it turns into when triggered, and hence cannot assess the danger until we break the Anti-Detection Wards." Mr. Weasley tiredly sighed. "It might take a while."

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"Hermione, come with me." Ron stretched out a hand to his girlfriend with sparks in his eyes. She took it with a sensual smile, and they quietly sneaked out from Bill and Fleur's wedding reception.

Given the war time, the wedding was surprisingly large. Fleur insisted on glamour, and Bill was determined to give it to his veela bride. She was only part veela, but he was fully enchanted. Hence, the Order of the Phoenix had to grant security, and at the late hour all members were easily distinguished from regular wedding guests by uncommon soberness.

Ron and Hermione watched Tonks as she patrolled around the reception area and waited until she walked up to Lupin. They met for a chaste kiss, but when Lupin tried to pull away, Tonks slid her arms around his neck and deepened their kiss. Lupin glanced around before he committed fully to cherishing Tonks' inviting mouth. He caressed her lips with his tongue and gently bit them. Tonks' hair burst in change, and Hermione breathlessly watched the rainbow colours slide down the length of her hair in waves of growing passion. She experienced waves of her own as Ron's hand found its way to her chest, pinched her nipple and caressed her breast.

She leaned to his touch and moaned, "I want you, Ron."

"Come."

They ran further into the dark, hazed by too much butterbeer and lust, until they stopped, panting, in a small hidden alcove. They crushed into each other's arms, their lips meeting in a fierce kiss. They hungrily tasted each other, finally giving in to the desire that had burned them from the inside the whole day of meeting half-dressed, faces flushed from hurrying, bare shoulders of Hermione's dress robes, tightness of Ron's robes and stolen intimate touches.

Ron's robes were too revealing, his erection blatantly evident whenever he saw Hermione. He needed her. He was intoxicated. How could he have survived so many years next to her without touching her, holding her? He actually suspected that his mother had gotten him those damned robes on purpose, to keep him composed and behaving. He was taking dose after dose of Deflating Draught to avoid his mother's suspicion of the extent of her youngest son's maturity, until Hermione was concerned that he might overdose and never recover. Well, if she was so worried, she was about to deal with the consequences. Ron hadn't taken the Draught since the ceremony started, and his erection was now pressing hard against Hermione's belly.

He traced her neck with kisses, eliciting sweet moans from Hermione. He held her pressed tightly against him and slid the strip of her dress down her shoulder, tracing its path with his tongue. She rocked her hips forward to meet his hard cock. He exposed her breast, and she moved her hand to his buttocks to ease his access and arched back. Ron sucked her nipple fiercely, caressing the small of her back with one hand and roaming across her ribs to tease her other breast. He freed it and stepped back to admire the view. Hermione whined at the loss, but decided to play the game. She slid her hands up her hips, shifting her weight from leg to leg slightly, and slowly brought her palms up to cup her breasts. Her cheeks were slightly pink, her swollen lips bright red and her shining eyes deep brown. Ron could not stand it. He rushed to her and attacked the clips holding her robes to her form. He did not finish.

A white little terrier interrupted them.

'Mum is looking for you! Return!'

Hermione was coldly unamused by the cheerful dog, whereas Ron openly gritted his teeth and groaned.

"I bet this message made her deady happy! She surely could've died from bliss. 'Mum is looking for you!' 'Mum is looking for you!' That unfucked bitch! That must have been such an easy Patronus to conjure!"

"It's your sister you are talking about."

"But she interrupts! And she relishes it! I want you. I want you so much. I don't care anymore what my sister does or with whom, as long as I can make love to you." Ron grabbed her shoulders, and pulled her closer to him.

"She is trying to help. Don't make it harder than it is. Your Mum." Hermione slid her hand down his back, across his arse, and moved towards his groin. Ron closed his eyes and groaned with expected pleasure.

"Am I the one making this harder?"

"Yes, you are. Now, take this." Hermione's hand found his pocket. She stepped back and handed him yet another vial of the Deflating Draught. Ron grunted in frustration, cupped her hand with the vial in both of his, blew on the sensitive skin on her wrist and pulled her close once more. He planted a chaste kiss on the valley between her breasts, whispered, "I'll be back," and covered her chest with her robe.

"I'll dress myself rather." Hermione shivered. "You are driving me insane. Just take the potion and get back. I'll be right behind you."

Ron knocked the contents of the vial in, took a deep breath, and disappeared towards the lights.

Hermione watched his silhouette blend in with other people, embraced herself and sighed. Another interrupted attempt. So much for making love to Ron. She shivered and rubbed the goosebumps on her upper arms. Without Ron, she was chilly. She felt a slight breeze from beside her and reached back to cover her shoulder with her hair.

Her hand brushed against some fabric.

She startled, turned, and saw a hovering, black-hooded figure in a white mask.

She screamed and reached for her wand.

Two things failed to happen.

No voice came from her throat.

And she had no wand.

"Too late, sweetie." The Death Eater laughed harshly as he waved her wand in front of her.

"Silenced, my dear." He flicked his wand towards her and laughed. "Silenced, restricted and at my disposal. You hot little chick. You must be soaking wet. Let's make some use of it if he deserted you like that. Let's make this duty a bit pleasanter."

He threw Hermione's wand into the dark, ripped her robes open, and shoved his hand between her legs.

"Yesss. Ready," he hissed.

Hermione could still move, but her limbs were heavy. So, so heavy. She strained her muscles to lift her arms and push him away.

"Oh, sweetie wants to fight. Yesss. Fight. I like it rough."

Hermione wanted to run. To make a dive for her wand. It must be somewhere close. She fought to lift a leg, but it was too heavy, and she lost her balance. He fell with her, grinning. She was slow. So very, very slow.

~~~~~

Professor McGonagall entered the full kitchen back at Grimmauld Place.

"Hermione regained consciousness at St. Mungo's. More than by her injuries, she was threatened by extreme exhaustion. The Healers say that she will recover."

"Thank you." Ron's eyes filled with tears as all his pain and guilt rushed to the surface. He had returned to search for Hermione after she hadn't come back to the wedding, only to find her at the same spot. Naked. Bleeding. Unconscious. Professor McGonagall took over and strictly prohibited Ron to accompany her to the hospital.

"Physically, at least." Minerva McGonagall felt her own grief pressing her chest and prohibiting her to breathe. "St. Mungo's refrains from Memory Charms until their patients recover enough to decide for themselves to what extent they want to have their mind altered and in what situation they want to find themselves in after the procedure. As it is, Hermione refused to let anyone tamper with her mind when she awakened. She has full recollection of what happened to her until she fainted."

"My poor, brave girl," Mrs. Weasley sobbed. "My poor, brave girl."

Faces of others were similarly downtrodden. Lupin tightly held Tonks and placed gentle kisses on her grey hair; Arthur Weasley stood behind Ron and squeezed his shoulders; Hagrid blew hard into his huge handkerchief; and Mad-Eye Moody took out his magical eye and slowly polished it.

"Can I visit her?" Ron hoped. He needed to see her. He wanted to tell her he loved her, to let her know he was sorry for letting that happen to her, to tell her that he still wanted her.

"I'm afraid not, Ron. She is hysterical even if male Healers are in her room, let alone if they try to approach her. She will need time."

"Tomorrow then?" Ron didn't let go.

"Much longer, I'd say. Weeks, perhaps months," Professor McGonagall clarified.

"But we were planning to leave right after the Apparition tests in two days to... to..." Harry managed to refrain from revealing his search for Horcruxes even in such distress.

"If you must go, then go without her." Professor McGonagall saved him from confusion, deciding not to press the matter of Harry's intentions again.

"But we need her with us!" Ron sounded desperate.

"Leave her behind. Let her recover. Please," the stern, strict, firm Hogwarts Professor of Transfiguration pleaded.

~~~~~

"My Lord, you wished to see me." A Death Eater knelt before Lord Voldemort in a subordinate, respectful position.

To return the polite greeting, the Dark Lord flicked his wand, and a stone flew from the pavement into the Death Eater's face with such force that it flipped the man in a somersault.

"Give me a report of your duty last night, Yaxley." Voldemort's slit nostrils flared.

"I patrolled the blood traitors' wedding, My Lord. A young couple came out, and attempted to fuck, but didn't."

Voldemort extended his wand and held it at arm's length. Yaxley watched his fingers in horror, his face twisting with pain. His nails snapped off one after the other, and he clutched his hands in his armpits, trying hard to suppress his whimpers.

"And?"

"The bloke left the chick in the alcove half naked. I silenced her, restricted her, and gave her a lesson, My Lord." Yaxley clutched his throat. Voldemort suffocated him with tender circles of his wand until his face turned purple.

"A lesson?"

"I fucked the bitch, My Lord, and left her dead."

Voldemort pointed his wand at Yaxley's groin, his trousers vanished, and a ring appeared on his cock, semi-hardened from the choking sensation.

"She is not dead. You were thinking of your own pleasure and failed to verify."

The ring tightened.

"You not only failed to search for me when I first disappeared sixteen years ago, but you've betrayed me again now."

The ring tightened more.

"My Lord, I didn't..."

"You failed to bring me the prisoner."

The ring snapped shut.

Yaxley yelled in agony as his cock fell off. "I didn't know you wanted captives, My Lord!"

"You failed to bring me Hermione Granger!"

All Yaxley's hopes for survival drowned in realisation.

"*Crucio!*"

~~~~~

Hermione lay in a hospital bed, strangely content and apathetic. She realised that her calmness was only and exclusively a magical reaction, but she didn't care. One of those potions that the Healers kept pouring down her throat must have been responsible for it. Yes, she remembered everything. Yes, she still felt dirty, worthless, hateful. But she didn't care now. The potion detached those feelings from her consciousness and attached them to some other character that was still within her, but not quite herself.

She had even managed to endure Ron's visit a while ago.

Professor McGonagall said he had been adamant about coming to see her. He said a lot of nice things that she didn't listen to. As a matter of fact, she didn't really hear them. She was concentrating so hard on using her logic to fight the swelling, nauseating emotions of having Ron next to her. She loved him. Why the urge to throw up?

It had been she who had sent him away. It had been both of their desires that drove them past security. It had been her lust too that interested the Death Eater. But then, directing the guilt to herself was so unbearable that she couldn't deal with Ron coolly. She loved him.

And she sent him away.

She could see the pain in his eyes as she cut short his proclamation of love and told him to leave. She could see his despair when she yelled and got sick despite the Calming Draught as he tried to hold her hand to persuade her.

She used to love Ron dearly in her previous life.

In this new life she had nothing.

Just this potion-induced dumb emptiness lightly penetrated by guilt and hate.

Hermione opened her eyes as she felt rather than heard a surreal sound. Immediately she wished she had kept her eyes shut. She had seen another Death Eater's Patronus. She didn't want to be reminded of Death Eaters. Ever again. It was sure to deliver a message to her. She didn't want to hear it. She certainly didn't want to hear what Snape had to tell her. Yet, she reached for her wand and retrieved the Patronus message.

*'Miss Granger, Dark Lord tortured Yaxley to death. I'm sorry to say, he didn't die because of what he did to you, but because he didn't bring you to the Master.'*

Strange message. A consolation from Snape. Somehow it had managed to lift a little bit of hate from the other person within her. She pondered how queer Snape must have felt when he made himself ultimately happy about the words 'I'm sorry' as she drifted to dreamless sleep.

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A/N: Thanks to my beta, KD, for her suggestions and support. This chapter is meant to be intense and I hope I succeeded. Your opinions would be very appreciated.

The Science of Magic

Chapter 4 of 8

Hermione finds an alternative project to occupy her while she recovers.

Harry levitated a piece of bread and watched it turn brown as Ron toasted it with heat from his wand. They were preparing their outdoors breakfast in the confines of a charmed tent. They tried to disguise their whereabouts from everyone, Death Eaters and the Order members alike, and so refrained from using help from the Order of the Phoenix. They never checked in to hotels or camps, but preferred to build their tent on private Muggle properties and use a Muggle-Repelling Charm.

A small post owl flew into the tent and extended its leg to Harry.

The young men exchanged a surprised look and lowered their wands. The hot toast dropped down, but Harry's Seeker reflexes were fast enough to catch it.

"Ouch!" The toast flew up once more. "Hot!"

"No doubt," Ron grinned. "Look at the letter."

Harry cooled a piece of toast and offered it to the owl. He untied the letter from it and began to read.

"It's from Hermione. She wants to see us. Er ... me."

"May I?" Ron took the letter and read.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for letting me live in your house this summer. I appreciate it very much. I feel better now. I have spent some time with Professor McGonagall and Tonks, and it was very interesting. I think that I might return to Hogwarts in September. I'm looking forward to it, but it will be different without you two. I miss you. Would you visit me sometime? Maybe we could catch up on each other.

Please, give my regards to Ron, as I might not be able to see him.

Love,

Hermione

Her words stabbed right into Ron's heart. She begged Harry to come to her, but refused to even glance at him. It hurt. He knew that she had known that it hadn't been his fault. He understood her and was willing to wait for her to get better. And she was apparently getting better, as she considered returning to Hogwarts in a couple of weeks. Yet, her refusal hurt.

"She is giving us clues, Harry."

"Yes, I know. She is still unsure about meeting you, and she must be more uncomfortable to meet me than missing me so much. She is up to something important. What do you think?"

"Well, first off, she is specifically mentioning only McGonagall and Tonks, no one else, although she must have met repeatedly practically the whole Order. Moreover, my whole family is still living there, and she would have been bumping into them as well," Ron contemplated.

"She gives hints that she is still not comfortable with other people," Harry continued, "so she might be avoiding a great many encounters at Grimmauld Place. Yet, something very strong must drive her to the crowded Hogwarts. Perhaps something to do with McGonagall. But why Tonks?"

"Knowing Hermione, her driving force could be just her thirst for knowledge," Ron added with a frown.

"Very true." Harry smiled, remembering their homework schedules.

"And she is clearly eager to know how we advanced with the Horcruxes. How much will you tell her?" Ron asked.

"Hermione is our closest friend, and her ... misfortune couldn't have changed that. Let's go to find out what excited her so," Harry suggested and started to pack and shrink their belongings. Shortly, everything was set; they removed the Muggle-Repelling Charm and Disapparated with two loud cracks.

The landlord heard shooting in his forest and rushed to catch whoever dared to trespass his property. He didn't find the hunters, nor any bullets or culled game. He just stared, perplexed at tracks that led nowhere.

~~~~~

Hermione was sitting at a small desk facing the door when she heard a shy knock. "Enter," she called.

"Hello, Hermione." Harry slowly came in and quietly closed the door behind him. He saw her for the first time since his thoughts skipped a beat the wedding. She was pale, and he noticed large, dark circles under her eyes. He didn't know how to act around her. But at least she was smiling.

"Hello, Harry."

Her smile was a little uneasy, but it was genuine. So maybe she was all right after all and was just tired from her pursuit of a new problem. The pile of books and notes on her desk surely indicated she had been busy. Harry felt a warm relief spread over him and a sudden irresistible urge to hug her in joy. She was back from the void!

"No!" The panic in her voice startled him. "Don't. Just ... please ... sit down." Hermione transfigured a particularly large tome into a chair and levitated it to the opposite side of the desk.

"So, how have you been?" Harry awkwardly asked after he seated himself, hoping he had chosen a proper question.

"Let's not talk about it just yet."

Apparently, his choice of action was wrong again.

"*Muffliato*." To Harry's great surprise, Hermione cast a privacy spell from the Half-Blood Prince's Potions book, to which she objected so much last year, and she continued without so much as a wince.

"Rather tell me about your search for Horcruxes."

"We haven't located any yet," Harry admitted. "We went to Godric's Hollow, and it was very strange. Ron couldn't enter. He saw the ruins all right, but that's all. He said he couldn't bring himself to *want* to enter, and when I tried to drag him by force, he couldn't go in."

"It's the Fidelius Charm that is still active, isn't it?" Hermione guessed correctly.

"Must be. I was in on the secret since I'd been a baby, but Wormtail never told Ron, so he couldn't enter, and Godric's Hollow is still protected."

"But then Hagrid couldn't have retrieved you from the ruins. He hadn't known the secret, had he?" Hermione was intrigued.

"We wondered too. It must have been Sirius. He gave Hagrid his motorbike, you know. So he must have handed me in too," Harry explained.

"I see," Hermione acknowledged.

"Anyway, there wasn't anything there," Harry sighed. "And if there was, I wouldn't know. Dumbledore could find the magic in the cave just by sliding his hands over a wall. I can't do that. I don't feel it like he did. Hermione, how could I ever destroy the Horcruxes if I can't even find them? And even if I ever found the cave, I would have never found the entrance the way he did!"

Harry was desperate. He had such an enormous task ahead of him, yet he hadn't had a clue how to proceed.

"Well, actually." Hermione made a pause with a clandestine smile to build up the tension. "I might have something that could help you to detect magic."

"Really?" Harry hesitated to feel the relief.

"Do you remember when Mr. and Mrs. Weasley explained to us how they found out the consequences of Professor Dumbledore's death by science of magic?"

"Er, what?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Ah, of course you don't. You were still at the Dursleys'. Anyway, the science of magic uses various devices to measure magic. I had a chat with Tonks about it. You know, she was the first Auror who was taught the science of magic during her training. It's completely new. But the whole Department is now learning it." Hermione was beginning to get into the heat. "Rufus Scrimgeour invented it a few years ago when he was appointed the new Head of the Auror office. Well, he didn't actually invent it, the magicmeters were known for ages, but he implemented it to the Aurors' duties and then..."

"Hermione, please, what's the use? Not the history." Harry rolled his eyes.

"Yes. Sorry. Generally, old magicmeters measure the strength of a specific spell through time. As Tonks said, Scrimgeour's alteration made it possible to the Aurors to analyse a victim of a dark wizard with respect to pain as well. They don't have to test for each spell individually now, but they can quickly find the range of pain in one measurement. They can read when he was hit by a curse, how painful it was, and how strong. All in one go!"

"Cool. But I really hope I won't be a victim. Nor Ron," Harry frowned.

"That was uncalled for." Hermione looked hurt. Harry took a moment to realise what he had done this time. Wrong words again. He felt uncomfortable with her. She seemed herself, chattering, explaining, studying, reading, yet she had these moments when she retreated and was surrounded by icy coldness.

"Sorry, Hermione, but I don't see your point."

"My point is that it should be possible to alter a magicmeter further. It might be possible to locate strong emissions of magic, such as a Horcrux and its protecting curses. What do you say?" Hermione asked excitedly, but didn't wait for an answer and went on. "Professor McGonagall brought me Professor Dumbledore's magicmeter from Hogwarts to test. But it doesn't work as it should. If I tune it to general magic, not a specific spell, it always gives soaring values. In Hogwarts, it's logical. The whole castle is permeated with magic. But it inflates the values even more here. It's strange because we discarded pretty much all magical items with Sirius."

"Couldn't it be the Fidelius Charm?" Harry was getting interested.

"I thought so too. So I tuned the magicmeter to each spell I could think of that might be active here. It seems to work all right in the old way. I don't see why it would fail to measure all magic... Well, anyway, I summed the individual values from each measurement. It's still only about half of what I get if I measure the general magic. Here, let me show you."

Hermione summoned a silver device, and Harry inhaled sharply.

"Dumbledore had lots of these gadgets in his office!"

"Yes, yes. He was testing some of Snape's ideas..."

"Put it away! DON'T TOUCH IT!" Harry jumped up and cast a Shielding Charm between Hermione and the magicmeter.

"Snape meddled with it! It's dangerous!"

"Stop freaking out, Harry! This is Dumbledore's magicmeter!"

"But Snape meddled with it!"

"It is safe!"

"Do you know who Snape is? He is the Death Eater who killed Dumbledore when he thought he was safe!"

"If I can face a Death Eater and live with it, you can put up with a Death Eater's magicmeter and use it to destroy them!" Hermione was blazing.

Wrong action yet again. Harry was about to contemplate and consider an apology when the door burst open, and Ron ran in with drawn wand.

"What's going on? Why are you shouting?"

"GET OUT!" Hermione screamed.

Harry grabbed Ron's elbow, spun him around and unceremoniously dragged him out murmuring, "Sorry, Hermione, bye, thanks..."

~~~~~

Dear Mum and Dad,

Thank you for your letter. I'm glad to hear that your owl stayed with you this time in a non-magical household. I'm sorry I didn't reply earlier, but I had a magical accident. Don't worry, I'm better now. I was unconscious for a while and had to spend a few days in hospital. It gave me an opportunity though to reconsider my plans. You would be for sure happy to hear that I'm following your advice, and I will return to school for my final year without the break.

I'm actually very excited because Professor McGonagall offered me a chance to work on a challenging long-term extra-credit project. She has been elected Headmistress now and thus officially replaced the late Professor Dumbledore who I told you about.

The project is on the new field of Science of Magic. I will develop some of Professor Snape's ideas and hopefully contribute some of my own. Unfortunately, Professor Snape will not be able to help me, as he had to leave school for personal reasons, and he will not be back any time soon. However, Professor McGonagall promised to supervise me and to grant me access to Professor Snape's laboratory and his experiment protocols.

I'm sending you a magicmeter to give you an idea of what I will work with. It is a device that reads the magic around you. I set it up to show high values. Please, let me know how you like it when you send it back.

Love,

Hermione

~~~~~

Dearest Hermione,

Your mother and I are very sorry to hear that you have had an accident. You have always been so careful as a child, so it is hard to imagine that such a misfortune could befall you. Your mother has been most upset to learn that you had even lost consciousness, but she has calmed down now. There is nothing one can do. Accidents sometimes happen.

We are pleased though that the accident gave you the perspective to see reason and return to school. Education is paramount in life. More so than some vague experience you might gain on elusive expeditions and travels.

Your extra-credit project sounds fascinating. Thank you for the magicmeter, but it seems to have broken on the journey. It does not hold your set up high values, and the indicator needle stays on zero. It only jumped high when your mother came in to kiss me good-bye before she went to work. The jerk was, however, caused by the fact that she hit the table with her bag, because the instrument indicates zero again.

All in all, I think you should not rely on this particular instrument in your project because the results will be flawed. It seems to be very sensitive to movement, as the needle flared a bit again when the owl flew by, returning from the night's hunt. I'm sending it back, but, please, for the sake of your project, have it repaired.

Love,

Dad

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*A/N: And the praise goes to my wonderful beta, KD, for her detailed work! Please, let me know how you like it. I love hearing from you.*

## Patronus Messaging

*Chapter 5 of 8*

The Order considers a question of trust and reaches a dangerous and dubious conclusion.

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"Welcome back, Miss Granger." Professor McGonagall warmly hugged an ash-covered Hermione as soon as she stepped out of the fireplace in the Headmistress's office.

"Good morning, Professor. Thank you for allowing me to come ahead of other students. I appreciate it very much." Hermione returned her greeting.

"You are welcome." Professor McGonagall smiled. "Why don't you go unpack in your dormitory and come back later. I will show you the laboratory then. For now, I have a very urgent order from St. Mungo's that I have to deal with."

"An order from the hospital?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Yes. A potion order. Last year Professor Snape developed what he called a Life Thread Potion. It is a draught that is administered to patients on their deathbed. It opens a channel in their suffering through which the Healers can give the cure directly to the source of the problem rather than deal with the pain and other effects of the problem. It is very important for patients close to death because in them the cause of their suffering inflates the effects so quickly that by the time the Healers eliminate the effects, the patients often already die. It has already saved several people in emergency in the past months.

"Why, you were given this potion as well! You were too exhausted to process the Pepper-up and the Blood-Replenishing Potions at the same time.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Hermione," Professor McGonagall stopped herself when she noticed Hermione turn green. "I didn't mean to cause you discomfort."

"It's all right, Professor." Hermione took a few deep breaths. "It is a very important potion. When should I return to give you enough time to brew it?"

"No, I will not brew the potion. We still have a small stock left, and the Healer is just momentarily coming to retrieve it. In any case, we haven't found the recipe yet, so we couldn't brew it ourselves. I'm afraid Professor Snape might not have written it down," Professor McGonagall replied.

~~~~~

Hermione sat in a comfortable armchair in Snape's laboratory. She was carefully studying his experiment protocols and lab notes. She flipped a page, and a small, opaque pink cube jumped from the next page. By this time, she was used to his three-dimensional results charts materializing above the parchment, but it had startled her a few times earlier.

The notes read:

Silver pointer: 20 feet undetected. 10 feet change in probability of death detected only when tester cut himself at 1300. No change earlier when blood loss less than ¼ pint.

Before Hermione could contemplate what Snape meant and whether his "tester" relieved himself of a quarter of a pint of blood willingly, she jumped as the armchair suddenly stiffened beneath her, lifted her up and straightened her back.

She sighed and with a flick of her wand renewed the transfiguration spell. She was confined to his laboratory if she wanted to read his protocols; the wards would not allow any of his possessions to leave the designated area. He must have spent his time here too in the same way. How could Snape voluntarily sit on such uncomfortable chairs

also in the privacy of his own laboratory? No wonder he was so sour.

But he was no doubt brilliant. He was apparently trying to modify the magicmeter in such a way that it would detect the health and condition of a person of interest in the distance. Hermione could clearly see how such a device would ease the insecurity of the families of those that disappeared in the war time. It would let them know whether there was still hope for their loved ones.

There was no doubt a parallel with Mrs. Weasley's famous clock. But where Mrs. Weasley's clock detected a chance of an unfortunate encounter or even an assumption that her family, as blood traitors, might be targeted by Death Eaters, Snape's modified magicmeter would precisely and accurately inform her of the acute and immediate physical well-being of her family members.

Not only family members, Hermione thought! Warriors as well. The magicmeters, if detecting the death probability over large distances, could report of any mission, or rather of any warriors on a mission. Tonks wouldn't have to worry about Lupin among werewolves if she had a magicmeter at her disposal. She could check from a distance how he had actually been.

In a full circle, Hermione was back to the usefulness of the device for family integrity.

Snape already tried to change several materials of different parts of the magicmeter and their combinations that could detect the death probability from the distance, and Hermione flipped quickly through the proceeding pages. She noticed that he was unsuccessful for a very long time, and she appreciated his endurance in the face of repeated failures. He got his first successful attempt when he replaced a metal used to construct a pointer. Then he used random metals with magical properties to increase the distance and sensitivity. She was so engrossed in following his logic that she almost skipped a nearly blank page in Snape's notebook with annoyance. There were no notes, but a cauldron jumped up from the page instead of a cube chart.

A cauldron!

In Snape's science notes!

But, of course! Snape and deception were one. Of course, it would be where no one would look. In between his very dull and completely non-magical essays on metal properties.

She felt so happy that her Patronus jumped from her wand almost of its own accord.

~~~~~

Severus Snape was just taking off his mask and collapsing wearily into an armchair when an overexcited otter ran into his room. He watched it circle him a while and frowned when it didn't spontaneously disappear. People were practising to conjure Patronuses these days everywhere. With the Dementors increased breeding, he couldn't blame them. He didn't know this Patronus, but apparently it was not someone's practice, but it carried a message too determined to ignore. He frowned and took the message.

*'Found the Life Thread! Need password!'*

How fitting, he sneered, for Granger to roam through his personal belongings. Just what was she doing in his private lab reading his Distant Probability experiments in Hogwarts before the school started?

He thought for a moment, considered his options and then conjured a reply.

*'Granger. You are forbidden to copy the recipe, let anyone else read or hear it, or be present while you brew it. The Headmistress exclusively is to handle the orders from the hospital or infirmary. One dose at a time, only for immediate use. You may give a dose a week to Potter and Weasley and take one yourself.'*

The Life Thread Potion was a cure as well as a weapon. The Dark Lord must never know of all its properties or have a way to test it. He was free of one master, he wanted to get rid of the other too. The potion could save lives that were close to ceasing from both directions in time. It opened a channel to the human core through which additional cure could enter. But it also kept a channel of life active if a healthy person was unexpectedly expected to die. It was exactly what the Dark Lord would want. If a person took the Life Thread and was hit by a full Killing Curse, he would stay alive long enough for the curse to wear off, just like any hex. It could keep Voldemort's life on indefinitely, longer than Flamel's. Snape was not sure if staying alive on a death bed with an incurable disease or being too old to function would be a life, but the Dark Lord was willing to opt for less when it came to staying alive.

In a too short while, the annoying otter was back.

*'Fully accept your conditions. Send the password, sir. Please!'*

Snape smirked menacingly and sent his Patronus straight back to Hogwarts with hope that he would have a few days of rest until she figured out his password and attacked him with more demands. She, of all people, wouldn't have expected it.

~~~~~

Hermione was eagerly poking her wand at the image of the pinkish cauldron and trying any revealing charm she could think of. Nothing worked. Or actually, everything worked the same. From a simple probe with a tip of her wand to the most complicated revealing charm, everything triggered a request for a password.

She didn't have to wait long, and a Patronus swished past her.

'You have it. Don't ask again.'

What?

I have it?

What is he playing at? She was agitated.

Hermione tried to calm down and think like Snape. How does one think like Snape?

She pulled out a piece of parchment and started to list things she knew about him. Leave out superstitions, filter out assumptions and list only facts. She soon figured out that she could not list much. Double spy, Death Eater, Head of Slytherin House, Potion master, half-blood made it to the top of her list. Then, of course, there was his discovery of a very important life-saving potion and attempts to track the wellbeing of another person.

She discarded those though because the other facts on her list cried out 'deceit', and she wasn't sure how his two discoveries could aid Lord Voldemort. Snape was secretive about the Life Thread Potion, and she could imagine something dark done with the tracking.

If cunning and deception were his main attributes, what kind of a password would he choose? One that people were unlikely to guess, but one that had a meaning to him and was easy to remember.

But if it was hard to deduce, how could she guess it? Did he want her to guess his important password? She doubted it. She tried to recall what his Patronuses exactly

said. The last one said that she had the password. That she *had* it. If she already had it, the first Patronus must have brought it. A riddle then. She frowned, leaned deeper into the armchair, pulled her knees up, rested her chin on them and thought. What password? What password.

Hermione widened her eyes in surprised realisation, poked the image cauldron with her wand and whispered, "Granger."

The image disappeared, and the page illuminated with shiny letters of a recipe for the Life Thread Potion.

Her name! For all the books in the world, Snape's most secret password had been her name! But why? Was he surreptitiously in love with her? Hermione shuddered and quickly rejected the thought. Surely, he wasn't. Probably, Potter would have been too obvious a choice. Snape very likely noticed her enough to remember her, and disliked her enough to make her name hard to deduce. Very clever. Very Snape.

Hermione started to gather the necessary ingredients to prepare the potion. Her hands were shaking with anxiety. Such an important potion! And she was to brew it by herself!

Halfway through the list, she paused. The ingredient read: *3 drops of dragon blood (willingly given for enhanced effect).*

Which dragon would ever give up his blood willingly?

She sent another Patronus for help.

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Severus Snape had just dozed off when the otter arrived again.

*'Where can I get willingly given dragon blood?'*

Ah, she had solved it. Snape smiled to himself that his former student was smart enough to figure out the logic of his messages, and that she actually remembered his message so well. But he needed to sleep more than he wanted to contemplate on Granger's achievement at the moment.

*'Never tickle a dragon. Use the blood in the storage room. Tomorrow. I remember having asked you to refrain from further communication.'*

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"Gentlemen, several issues surfaced at my meeting with Miss Granger today that I wished to discuss with you," Minerva McGonagall addressed the quickly assembled Arthur Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Dedalus Diggle and Mad-Eye Moody. "First, Miss Granger says that she found the recipe for the Life Thread Potion in Severus's laboratory."

The men got excited and started to murmur appreciatively, but McGonagall dismissed them with an impatient wave of her hand.

"Moreover, she claims that she can brew it because Severus has been tutoring her."

"What?"

"He cannot dare to come near Hogwarts!"

"Of course not," McGonagall silenced her colleagues. "But this brings us to the second and third point. Miss Granger says she communicates with him through Patronus Messaging. So, second, the Life Thread must be tested as it might not be the same as before with his distance tutoring in his current situation. And third, we haven't yet considered that Patronus Messaging might be breached. Is it still safe to use it for our internal communication?"

"What is your opinion, gentlemen? How should we approach these issues?" McGonagall sat down to wait for suggestions.

"First, the recipe is not to be trusted. Hence, second, Miss Granger is to be prohibited to brew the potion. And third, the Patronus Messaging must be considered a method freely available to Voldemort now. Stupid of us to overlook it for almost three months," Mad-Eye Moody recited and clapped his wooden foot for emphasis.

"While your points are a fair representation of the worst case scenario, Alastor, I wouldn't dismiss it so quickly," Diggle objected. "The Life Thread is an important potion, especially at war. It saved my cousin and niece several weeks ago, and I think we should consider the options in more detail."

"I agree, Dedalus," Mr. Weasley took the word. "Hermione is a very responsible and gifted young lady and could very likely perform her task by herself. We should, however, supervise her while she brews the potion to protect her from further accidents."

"She wouldn't allow it, Arthur," McGonagall countered. "She says Severus set her rules for handling the potion, and she fully intends to follow them."

"Alastor, can you see through warded walls?" Shacklebolt asked thoughtfully.

"It depends on the type of wards. I cannot see through a wall warded against sight penetration. What did you have in mind?" Moody was curious.

"I thought that we could have watched Miss Granger through the wall to ensure her safety and perhaps to copy the recipe too."

"Weren't you a Slytherin, Kingsley?" Professor McGonagall asked, very disturbed.

"Yes. Why?"

"If Miss Granger does not voluntarily want to share her knowledge, I'm fairly certain that she wouldn't appreciate being spied on." The Professor pierced the Auror with a glare that almost matched the intensity of Moody's magical eye.

"Oh. Yes. Of course. Sorry," Shacklebolt babbled. "Then it all comes down to trust, I guess. Whether we trust Dumbledore's murderer or not." Shacklebolt was purposely rude and watched McGonagall take in a sharp breath with satisfaction. He chose his words carefully to hurt her for her small victory as much as he could while remaining professional.

"Absolutely not, Kingsley!" Mr. Weasley failed to acknowledge the intense exchange, keeping his focus on Hermione's welfare. "We will thoroughly ward Hermione, so that a miscarried potion wouldn't hurt her. Further, we will have her report to us at regular intervals, given the potion's time schedule, to make sure she is all right. And we will acutely test the final product for performance before allowing patients to use it. The potion is important, and we need it profoundly, but there is no use rushing into the unknown without preparation!"

"My words precisely." Moody was content.

"I agree as well. Dedalus? Kingsley?" Minerva prompted the others. After giving their consent, she continued, "And what about safety of Patronus Messaging?"

"Definitely breached. I must insist on this point," Moody accentuated. "Even if we accept that Snape might not have revealed the communication channel earlier, such blind faith cannot be elucidated anymore. We have blatantly ignored this issue."

"On the contrary, Alastor," Mr. Weasley disagreed. "You yourself insisted many months ago that we experiment with intercepting messages addressed to someone else."

"Yes, I'm aware of it." Moody frowned. "We learned to breach our own system, and we recklessly taught it to Snape too."

"But this training also taught us to protect the messages from being revealed to an unauthorized person," Mr. Weasley said.

"True. But it all depends on the skill of a wizard. And You-Know-Who is pretty damn skilled and possesses unmatched power."

"Certainly," McGonagall shuddered, "no magic is infallible."

"I personally suggest that we continue using Patronus Messaging, but maximize our specificity in direction. We should, however, limit the extent and sensitivity of Order messages transmitted through Patronuses," Diggle concluded.

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"Professor?"

"Yes, Miss Granger? Please, come in," Professor McGonagall welcomed Hermione into her office.

"I have brought you the sample of the Life Thread for testing." Hermione played with the vial nervously, but did not hand it to her Professor.

"What is it, Miss Granger?" McGonagall rose from her chair, sensing Hermione's hesitation, and clasped her hands in front of her.

"Professor Snape does not agree with the extent of testing that you requested," Hermione admitted shyly. "He will not allow me to hand you more than one tester dose. All others must be validated emergency cases for patients' use only."

Professor McGonagall looked strictly at her student. "Miss Granger, let me remind you that Severus Snape is in no position to place requests and that his intentions are highly dubious in all cases."

"Yes, Professor, but..."

"Hence, I would suppose that a woman of your intelligence would realize that the Life Thread Potion is a product of the Headmaster's murderer, and that it cannot be granted safe without profound evidence."

"I understand." Hermione dropped her shoulders and looked at her toes.

"Then you might want to provide me with additional testing vials. Immediately."

"I can't, Professor. I'm sorry."

"We've just been through this, Miss Granger, and you agreed with my reasoning. Don't try my patience."

"Sorry, Professor, but I'm under the impression that Professor Snape does not wish for all attributes of the potion to be known."

"I've noticed that much. With his history of actions, we cannot afford this kind of secrecy for security reasons."

"I think that security is Professor Snape's reason for secrecy here, Professor."

"Security?" The earnestness of Hermione's voice made Professor McGonagall try to view the issue from a different perspective. "His or ours?"

"I don't know. It is just my perception. He vehemently refuses to discuss the properties of the potion. It is a question of trust again. Professor Dumbledore approved the use of the Potion for medical purposes. It has worked reliably for almost two years now. If the Potion I brewed has the same medical properties, looks and diagnostics, we should not insist on knowing the full extent of its power, but rather trust Professor Snape in this matter."

"I hope you understand my hesitation in trusting Severus Snape. It might be exceptionally dangerous."

"I do, Professor. But in this case, the importance of the Life Thread Potion might be balanced by our insecurity of what else this new batch might do."

Minerva McGonagall did not reply straight away, but a vertical line formed between her eyebrows as she scrutinised pros and cons of Hermione's ... er Severus's conditions.

"Very well, Hermione," the Headmistress admitted in the end and took the only test vial from Hermione's hand.

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*Author's notes: Please review. Reviews are the treat of writing.*

## The Last Magicmeter

*Chapter 6 of 8*

Hermione understands Snape's final results and tries to act on her suspicions to their consequences.

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"Tonks, what is so urgent?" Arthur Weasley looked up from his breakfast to greet the newcomer.

"Here, have a cup of tea to calm down, dear." Molly Weasley looked with alarm at Tonks' hair, which was threatening to burst orange through her usual bubble-gum pink.

"No, Molly, thanks. I think I've got it!" Tonks rushed into the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, tripped over a chair, and her hair finally gave in to her internal struggle and flamed bright orange as she lost her balance. "Oh, bollocks!" Tonks exclaimed, rising from the floor and replacing the chair. "I think I know what they did to The Burrow."

"Really?"

"Yes! It's a simple Portkey Charm!" Tonks was beaming and self-consciously proud of her discovery.

"A *Portus*?"

"Yes," Tonks confirmed.

"Interesting." Mr. Weasley rubbed his chin and frowned.

"Well, it makes sense, Arthur." Mrs. Weasley looked less troubled than her husband. "We should have thought about it earlier. Kingsley said right in the beginning that the charm was in an uncomfortable pain range. Travelling by Portkey is certainly uncomfortable. If the Death Eaters did not catch anyone during their attack, they would want their prey to fly to them as soon as we returned home."

"Actually, darling, that's not what is worrying me. We expected the uncomfortable charm to turn into something nastier when triggered. And while travelling to Death Eaters' hands is nastier than the journey itself, I have a nudging feeling that there might be more to the issue than meets the eye."

"Tonks," Mr. Weasley continued, "do you think you would detect the additional charm placed on our house if the Death Eaters never blocked the magical signal?"

"Yes, if the charm was harmful. No, if it were a Portkey Charm as it turned out to be that only causes discomfort. I wouldn't mention it. Perhaps, I wouldn't even notice. I might suppose that you transfigured cushions into kitchen chairs or something like that. You are right, Arthur. They could have made it less apparent, and we wouldn't have noticed."

"And their trap could have worked. Hm," Mr. Weasley hummed.

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Headmistress McGonagall was grading the seventh-year essays on dangers of blood clotting during human transfiguration, late on a Friday night. She would keep her N.E.W.T.s level classes along with her other duties until the new Professor of Transfiguration got settled.

She looked at her watch as if she was expecting someone and sighed. After a while, she straightened the pile of marked essays, got up, walked out of her office, down the stairway, past the gargoyles and descended to the dungeons. She knocked on a hidden doorframe and entered as soon as she was admitted.

"Good evening, Professor. It's past curfew. I know. I apologise. I lost track of time." Hermione nervously bit her lower lip.

"Good evening, Miss Granger. Don't worry. I'm not going to deduct house points from Gryffindor. We agreed that you might work longer over the weekends, and I'm keeping my side of the bargain." Minerva McGonagall winced.

"Thank you, Professor."

"However," the professor raised one eyebrow and clasped her hands in front of her robes, "I am concerned that you choose to work this late every allowed evening. I've been waiting for your signal longer than usual tonight. I understand that you are fighting our war here, but you are straining yourself, Hermione. If you don't rest sufficiently, I will be forced to remove this privilege from you."

"No, Professor, please, I feel I've almost solved it. Please, I just need a bit more time." Hermione's eyes framed by dark circles welled up with tears. She lifted her slightly shaking hand and quickly wiped an escaped drop.

Professor McGonagall calmly approached her and asked, "What is giving you such a hard time?"

Hermione weakly smiled, sat down next to the Headmistress and began to explain. "To sum it up, Professor Snape tried various modifications of magicmeters to ensure that they would be able to measure probability of death of a certain person over a distance. The only modification that worked was altering material of the pointer. The problem is that the metals do not work predictably according to their magical properties. So he tried all metals, and he listed them with respect to their performance in the blood loss tests." At this point, Hermione shuddered, thinking of all Dumbledore's willing injuries, but continued, "This is the table. I understand it is the metal performance in Distance Probability tests, but there is something vaguely familiar about it. I just can't grasp it. And this name underneath. Mendeleyev. He is not in any reference book I looked into. It must be someone Professor Snape knows personally who has some kind of information about this table. I cannot get any further although I feel the solution is somewhere in my mind."

Hermione let her hands hopelessly fall into her lap and leaned deeper into the transfigured armchair. "I just can't reach for it."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You could have said something earlier." Professor McGonagall was considerate. "Mendeleyev was a Muggle chemist. We don't teach chemistry at Hogwarts, so you wouldn't find him in the reference books in our library. He ordered the elements with respect to their mass and..."

"And properties! I remember!" Hermione screamed and jumped up. The professor looked displeased by her behaviour, but she was interrupted again before she could retort. "I apologise for interrupting, Professor, but I'm so excited. I've read about it before I received the letter from Hogwarts."

Professor McGonagall nodded.

"And Professor Snape's experiments show," Hermione excitedly continued, "that a magicmeter is able to measure probability of death from greater distances if the pointer is made from metals with heavier nuclei."

Professor McGonagall smiled warmly. "With more protons, actually. According to Mendeleyev's table."

"Then," Hermione paused for a moment and thought, "if the last experiment with gold detected even a minor blood loss over seventy-three miles, then according to this table we need a mercury pointer for increased distance. But mercury is liquid." Hermione's spirit faded.

"I see." Professor McGonagall uncharacteristically grinned. "That's why Severus asked me to transfigure his vial of mercury into a solid form. I thought he needed a different consistency to stabilise a new potion." She filled in the last piece of the puzzle.

Hermione promptly returned to eagerness. "Did you make it?"

"Yes. I gave it to him."

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Hermione toyed with a shiny, dark, silvery piece of metal and blankly looked at her parchment, her quill forgotten.

"What do you have there, Hermione?" Ginny asked her over a Potions textbook.

"What? Sorry, Ginny, I didn't hear you. I'm working," Hermione apologised.

"You are not. I've been watching you. You are playing with that thing. What is it?"

"Oh, this!" Hermione lifted her hand. "I'm not doing my homework, but rather I'm thinking about my project."



"Well? You haven't answered my question," Ginny prompted her again. "What is that thing?"

Hermione sneaked her hand under the table, took her wand and murmured, *'Muffliato'*, under her breath before she continued, "This is Snape's solution to Distant Probability tracking! It's a piece of mercury, and according to Professor Snape's theory it should measure the probability of death over great distances."

"But shouldn't mercury be liquid?" Ginny was surprised.

"Sure. At room temperature. Professor McGonagall transfigured it to solid," Hermione replied matter-of-factly. After a few days, she was used to the idea of holding solid mercury.

Ginny, however, was perplexed.

"Why are you looking like that? It's not as if she was changing one metal to another. She doesn't have the Philosopher's Stone. She just changed the consistency. It is never done because no one needs it, but it can be done," Hermione explained.

"If solid quicksilver is so normal to you, what's bothering you so much?" Ginny asked.

"Professor McGonagall gave Professor Snape this piece of solid mercury days before Professor Dumbledore's death. So he had time to construct a magicmeter with this pointer, but he never did it. Although there are usually only a few days between his experiments, I have to wonder why he chose to have a longer break when he was so close to final success. What kept him from finishing this?" Hermione shook her head.

"Why do you think he never made the modification?" Ginny continued to probe.

"We cannot find it. It's not among his other experimental magicmeters, nor anywhere else." Hermione shrugged. "Plus he said he could be of no further help and stopped replying to my Patronus messages. That's what bothers me even more, I guess."

"But, Hermione, that does not mean that the magicmeter doesn't exist. Who knows what Snape is thinking when he refuses cooperation? In fact, who knows what Snape is thinking anytime? You are concentrating too much on what might have stopped him, whereas you should also ask why the last magicmeter isn't in his laboratory," Ginny pointed out and held Hermione's sight. At first, she was mildly annoyed and irritated, but then her eyes widened in apprehension and understanding.

"Thank you, Ginny! You are brilliant!"

Hermione joyfully hugged her friend, tossed her schoolwork into her bag and rushed out of the Gryffindor common room. Ginny just shook her head and smiled. Few people ever praised her for criticism.

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For the next two days, Hermione spent every free minute in the laboratory. She begged the Headmistress to allow her to stay in late at night, but Professor McGonagall forced her back to her dormitory at curfew on each school day.

On Friday she was nonetheless finished.

"Congratulations, Miss Granger, you have successfully completed your project," Professor McGonagall complimented her student with pride.

"Thank you, Professor." Hermione was beaming. "Shall we try it?"

"Of course." The Headmistress smiled, and both women walked out of the school.

Hermione carefully carried a magicmeter tuned to measure general magic and fitted with a mercury pointer that enabled the device to register all magic in the distance. Hermione hoped with all her will that the instrument could make a miracle and help Harry find Voldemort's Horcruxes, without Dumbledore's knowledge and skills.

"This will do." Minerva McGonagall stopped in the middle of a meadow and turned to Hermione. "Let's see how it works."

Hermione tapped the small magicmeter with her wand, and an opalescent chart appeared. She began to turn slowly, and the line of the reading jumped up and down as she moved around. When she turned towards Hogwarts, the line shot up so high that it disappeared in the darkness of the night.

"So much magic," Hermione said in awe and continued to finish her turn.

"Wonderful, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall exclaimed. "I sincerely hope that your magicmeter will aid Mr. Potter in the task he started with Professor Dumbledore. Are you sure you won't tell me what he needs this skill for?" she tried.

"Sorry, Professor. That is up to Harry to decide," Hermione declined.

"I understand. We are finished here then." The Headmistress began to return to the castle when Hermione caught up.

"Professor?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Ginny, I mean Ginny Weasley, suggested that if we cannot find Professor Snape's last magicmeter with the mercury pointer, he might not have been stopped from constructing it, but rather finished it and hid it out of Hogwarts."

"I thought about such a scenario too, but it's not viable." The Professor paused to organise her thoughts and proceeded. "He has not left the castle since I gave him the mercury piece; the wards would now alert me of his comings and goings. Unless he carried it with him into the battle, he couldn't have taken it out. I'm sorry, Hermione, but I don't see it happening."

"But can we just quickly check, please? Perhaps he somehow managed," Hermione pleaded. "We could now just retune the magicmeter to track your transfiguration spell that solidified the mercury rather than the general magic and see if it shows us the direction."

"That could work," Professor McGonagall accepted, "but it will take too much time at the moment. We will try it on Sunday. No, Hermione, certainly not now, and tomorrow you should take a break and enjoy your Hogsmeade visit."

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The next day, when the students passed Mr. Filch on their way to the only entirely wizarding village in Britain, Hermione Granger sneaked out a magicmeter in her robes. She briefly stopped at Honeyduke's, let herself be seen in Zonko's, had a quick butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks and hurried to find a secluded place to try to track Snape's magicmeter that might have measured Dumbledore's probability of death.

She tapped the magicmeter with her wand and worked for a while to tune it to the magical trace of solid mercury. She pointed the magicmeter towards Hogwarts, but her device did not give a reading. With mixed feelings of anxiety and satisfaction she began to turn slowly and carefully watched the results chart.

The reading jumped high when she faced southwards.

"It exists!" she squeaked. "And he took it out!"

She slipped her hand into her pocket and took out a vial of potion.

He said, take one a week, so this could as well be the one.

Hermione drank the potion, looked at the horizon, broke plenty of school rules and Disapparated south. At the hill she found the course of the signal again, looked at the respective horizon and Apparated.

Hogwarts towers soon vanished from sight, but the magicmeter showed that the other spell that solidified mercury was still further. Hermione cast a Disillusionment Charm on herself and tried her best to suppress the noise of Apparating. She always paused just for a few moments to find her path and let the magicmeter lead her on.

Just after she Apparated across a vast valley, her magicmeter showed her next course directly where she had come from. A bit puzzled, but largely relieved, she looked into the valley.

Finally! The Distant Probability magicmeter must be somewhere down there.

She would know soon.

Hermione selected a small loch surrounded by a few trees and Apparated to its bank to find out which way she should continue.

As she hit the ground, her body was immediately ejected back to the air by a set ward spell, and she was falling in a wide arc into the water.

She screamed, "*Protego!*" just in time for a red curse to bounce back from her shield.

She dived deep into the loch, composed her powers and emerged ready to fight whatever trouble she got herself into. But the dark wizard on the shore stood there calmly, his hands peaceful by his sides. From what she knew about him, this was not a reassuring sight as he was fast enough to best her in any duel. Even if his wand was not yet drawn.

But it was.

Hermione swallowed. She expected to find the hiding place of the magicmeter, not of its owner. He looked paler than she remembered him, and his frown was more menacing in the open sunshine than in the dimness of his dungeons.

"What did you think you were doing, Miss Granger?" he asked so quietly that Hermione wasn't sure whether the chills running down her spine were from his voice or the cold water.

"I'm looking for..."

"Did you expect you could Apparate back and forth within my wards and I wouldn't notice?"

"I wasn't... I didn't mean..." Hermione was trembling.

"I'm a convicted murderer and a known Death Eater. Haven't you had enough experience with Death Eaters to warn you not to dawdle here?"

"NO!" Hermione blazed. "Let me finish! I'm looking for your last magicmeter, not you. You weren't supposed to be at the same place. It is dangerous. Voldemort could have found what it shows!"

Snape looked at his former student in silence. Then he hissed through his teeth, "Don't mention that name. Get out of the water and dry yourself. There is tea in the cottage," he said, then turned and walked away.

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Author's Notes: *The idea of the Portkey Charm placed on a house was inspired by notsosaintly's story Soothing Hands on Ashwinder. Thanks a lot for that wonderful story, notsosaintly! Please review. Reviews are what keeps the writer friends with the Muse.*

## Discussions and Arguments

### Chapter 7 of 8

Hermione has a conversation with Snape and they forge a plot.

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Hermione took a cold mug from Snape with a barely audible "Thank you". Well, of course, he said there was tea. He never mentioned anything about fresh tea. She took out her wand and heated the liquid in silence. Satisfied with aroma of the rising steam, she looked around for a place to enjoy her drink.

There was a chair, a table and a berth in the cottage. And Snape. With her. He was leaning against the cupboard and looking past her out of the window. She judged her choices and decided to occupy his chair.

He had no objections. In fact, he remained standing, impassive and frowning. Hermione expected that he would fire questions and insults at her, but she waited in vain. She fidgeted and braced herself for his berating, resolved that he would first let her agonise in insecurity.

He didn't move. He didn't so much as change his expression. He just stood there, blankly looking out of his window.

When he finally blinked, she couldn't restrain herself anymore.

"Aren't you going to ask me why I thought you wouldn't be here?"

"No."

"Nor why I suspected that the magicmeter was so important?"

"No."

"And why..."

"Miss Granger." He finally looked at her, and at that moment she wished he hadn't. His eyes were cold and his stare piercing that it sent shivers down her spine. "You are supposed to drink your tea, not annoy me with your thoroughly unnecessary wondering. You already answered those questions, and I have no intention of participating in this discussion."

"But don't you want to know what gave you away? To help you cover your tracks in the future, perhaps?"

He growled.

"Your conclusion was correct. Hence, knowing what you entertained yourself with recently, I understand the route that led you to said conclusion. I do not intend to dwell on the nuances of your thought processes."

Hermione gulped and lowered her eyes back to her mug. Snape's mug, actually. She ran her finger over its design, perplexed. Snape surely wouldn't choose a flower for himself. What happened to the owner of the mug?

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

"The answer to that is obvious," he sneered.

"Excuse me?"

"Your ability to think logically is apparently limited to a once-a-year frequency."

A pink colour crept into her cheeks, and her lips trembled in anger. That was a valid question!

"You have several options..."

"I had," he snapped.

"...and not all of them end with my survival," she continued, seemingly undisturbed. "Naturally, I'm concerned."

"Don't insult me with your preposterousness," Snape barked. "Use that *admired* brain of yours and tell me which of my options are still legitimate."

Hermione looked at him with a strong sense of déjà vu. She was again supposed to have an answer to something she most certainly wasn't aware she knew.

"You are not going to kill me because you would have already done it by the lake," she thought aloud.

Snape lifted one eyebrow and said, "Next."

"You are not going to hand me over to Voldemort," she saw him flinch, "because I still have my wand, and I'm your guest."

In a silent instant her wand flew out towards Snape, circled him and landed in his palm behind his back. Hermione startled.

"Don't. Say. That. Name."

"Sorry, sir," Hermione humbly apologised. "Does my lapse change my disposition?" she asked, scared.

"The debunked option is correct, the reasoning is not. If you give me the correct argument, I'll return your wand," Snape smirked.

"On the first try," he added quickly.

Hermione didn't quite believe him. He was acting too much like a teacher now for her to consider his threat serious. Yet, she wouldn't risk her luck trying him.

"The same as before. You wouldn't bring me to You-Know-Who because you would have already done so."

"Partly correct. Do better."

A deep line formed between Hermione's eyebrows. "And you would have saved yourself this conversation."

"Adequate."

Hermione's wand abruptly landed on the table in front of her. She eagerly grabbed it, feeling too much warm gratitude.

"Next," he prompted.

"You are not going to Obliviate me because... you would have already done so to save yourself this," she pointed her finger between the two of them, "burden."

"You are reading too much into me not enjoying our little discussion, *Hermione*," Snape smirked.

"I think you want something from me," Hermione straightened her back, "or rather, you want something from the Order, and you are going to use me to get it."

"Indeed?" he drawled.

"Indeed."

"If that is the case, with what options does that leave me?" he asked.

She thought for a moment and then said, "You don't have to leave this house because I won't tell anyone of your whereabouts."

Snape frowned.

"I'm a Gryffindor! My word counts."

Without warning Snape pointed his wand at her and said, '*Legilimens!*' Images of her Apparition points flashed in front of her eyes first in fast succession, then slowed down until he let the whole scene of their fight and subsequently her walk to his cottage play in full length.

He slowly came back into focus, and Hermione lowered her eyes.

"I was wrong. Whoever with the ability to look into my mind can see it, even if I don't tell anything. I could not block you even when you relaxed your search through my memories. You have to move. I'm sorry. It's such a... cosy cottage."

Snape nodded.

"Why did you have the magicmeter turned on throughout the day?" Hermione asked after a while.

"That, Miss Granger," Snape almost smiled, "is the first relevant question you have uttered. You might eventually be worth the move."

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"Go ahead, Ron, take the message. It's not for me and it is too specific to intercept." Harry shrugged and let his friend handle the Patronus.

Ron took the message from Hermione's whitish otter easily and with great relief. Perhaps they still had a chance if she had sent him a private message and was even willing to meet him already. He felt as if he were invited for a date rather than a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix.

"She is saying that we should go to Grimmauld Place for an Order meeting," Ron said with a huge grin and added, "both of us!"

"What?"

"Er, she said, 'Please take Harry to his house to meet all our friends.' I guess that's what it means."

"Do you really believe that?" Harry was sceptical. "We've never been invited to an Order meeting. They always tell us some bits only afterwards. You know how your mum is about us *participating* in the war."

"Maybe they are realising they should count on us. We are adults now, you know." Ron unnecessarily squared his shoulders. "Maybe they finally noticed."

"Yeah? Then why is Hermione the one telling us to go? What kind of position is she in to do that?"

"Perhaps she has a grand plan of how to get us to the meeting." Ron defended his ex-girlfriend, too blissful to let Harry spoil it.

"Ron, you are so smug about that Patronus. Get over it and make some use of that brain of yours. She might have gotten permission to go to Grimmauld Place over the weekend, if McGonagall decided that that was a better place to meet us than Hogwarts with students. She could have made progress with the magicmeter. Maybe there's no Order meeting at all."

"Oh. Well. That's good news anyway, isn't it?" Ron contemplated, still confused.

At that moment, another Patronus entered the clearing. Harry took the message with exasperation.

"Please come home for dinner and bring your friend"

"It's McGonagall." Harry turned back to Ron. "You were right. Hermione has a grand plan and it's working. We are going to the meeting."

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"Ron, Harry, could I please have a word with you before the meeting?" Hermione asked her friends at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Of course. You don't have to ask for permission to talk to us, Hermione." Ron grinned widely at her.

"Special circumstances require special treatment. We need to talk in private." Hermione smirked and nodded towards Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, who were setting a tea service for way too many people.

Harry and Ron exchanged a curious glance. "Let's go to Sirius's room then." Harry invited.

When the door closed behind them upstairs, Hermione cast a series of wards. Cold chills ran down her spine when she realised that she had just locked herself in a room with two men. She had to remind herself quickly that these two men were the ones she loved and cherished the most in her life. It was ridiculous really, since she had recently returned from a very private meeting with a Death Eater in Snape's fortress.

"What do you have in mind, then?" Ron asked her hopefully.

"Several things, actually." Hermione began to count. "First, I have finished the magicmeter."

"See? Told you!" Harry happily nudged Ron.

Hermione glared at them and went on without interruption. "It works reliably for a specific spell that I tried. It led me directly to Snape's hiding place. Second..."

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed, full of irrational fear.

"Did the Aurors get him?" Harry hoped.

"No, of course not!" Hermione started to get upset. They did not have time for this.

"Oh, yeah, the *Ministry*. Then the Order has him."

"Just for your information, there was no Order there either."

"Did that bastard escape again?" Harry's eyes glazed over with hatred.

"No, there were no Aurors and no Order." Hermione was visibly angry.

"Hermione, are you all right?" Ron asked and tentatively put his hand on her arm.

"Of course I am!" Hermione jerked away. "I'm standing here!" Her fury topped over the edge, and Harry and Ron realised they were in trouble. "You two will sit right there and listen to me until I'm finished. This is hard enough for me without your chastising. We don't have much time here, and there is an important Order meeting shortly. It will all be about Severus Snape, and you two had better keep your mouths shut there. I found him, but it was purely an accident. Harry, don't you even think about interrupting me!" Hermione pointed her finger accusingly. "I was looking for his last magicmeter. He solved the problem of the Distant Probability tracking, and that was the proof. He wasn't supposed to be at the same place. If Voldemort ever came there and found his magicmeter, Snape would be... dead, I think."

"What does it show that is so dangerous?" Ron couldn't best his curiosity.

"I'll show you at the meeting." Hermione wanted to continue, but was interrupted again.

"Did you leave the school without supervision?" Harry couldn't understand how Hermione had met Snape without backup.

"Not school. Hogsmeade," Hermione snapped. "And without permission too. I'm facing a conditional expulsion for it, and I have a hearing with the School Board on Monday. But it was worth it."

Ron sharply inhaled and Harry rapidly blinked several times. Meeting Snape was worth conditional expulsion from school to Hermione Granger?

"But enough of wasting time on my trip. Where was I?" Hermione thought. "Yes, first, the magicmeter is ready. Second, there is a very strong concentration of magic in this house. In that direction. We will look into it in a minute, but meanwhile, I want you to drink this first." She handed the boys two vials.

"What is it?" Ron wanted to know as he uncorked his dose.

"The Life Thread Potion."

"Isn't it Snape's famous discovery?" Harry enquired.

"Yes, I brew it for St. Mungo's patients now," Hermione replied, already calmed. She could handle this.

"Why should we take it if we are not dying?"

"Snape wants each of us to have a dose a week," Hermione explained simply.

"No." Harry returned the potion to her.

"What is this supposed to mean, Harry?" Hermione was fuming again.

"I don't know *why* he wants us to drink it. His order is not enough. *Why* does he want us to drink it? What does it do to people who don't need it?"

"Oh, Harry, if you are so adamant, just ask him." Hermione reached out and tried to soothe his temper.

"Yeah? And how? Hey, Snape, why do you want to poison us?" Harry mocked her without a hint of humour.

"Like this." She concentrated and said, *"Expecto patronum!"*

"Did you really send that to Snape?" Ron asked.

"Naturally," Hermione admitted. "I suspect it is for some kind of magical power enhancement, so I took a dose on my way after the magicmeter a few hours ago. I don't feel any change, so I don't know what it does."

They waited quietly for a moment until Snape's Patronus brought Harry's answer.

"Go on, it's for you," Hermione encouraged him.

He slowly took out his wand and listened to the message.

Ron and Hermione eagerly watched as Harry's face changed from sceptical to surprised, excited and finally shocked. When he lowered his wand, his face was white, eyes dilated and his breath shortened. He couldn't find words at first and only opened and closed his mouth. He swallowed and finally said, "That thing is a weapon. Hermione, guard it with all your might; Voldemort may never learn about its full powers. Snape created a weapon that might easily change scores in this war."

"Harry, you don't make much sense," Ron frowned. "What does it do? Does it give you special powers?"

"It basically makes you immortal!"

"Fine. That's exactly what we need to face a Horcrux."

If Harry and Ron thought they were saturated with surprises for one evening, Hermione's statement proved them wrong.

"I think we should investigate the strong concentration of magic here. It's too strong to be anything else. I hope. Now, if you would take the Life Thread before we go?"

Harry and Ron exchanged a gaping look, drank the potion and followed her downstairs. Hermione stopped in front of a cabinet and tapped her magicmeter.

"See? It gives excessive magical signal for this place."

"You two, cover me." Harry pushed past his friends and opened the doors. To his astonishment, he stood in front of a pile of dirty rugs.

"Looks like Kreacher's lair to me," Ron sniffed.

"There is still a lot of magic there." Hermione checked her results while Ron joined Harry in sorting out the mess.

"Look, he stole family jewellery and hid it here." Ron lifted a heavy golden chain and showed it to Harry.

Harry immediately recognised the item Dumbledore died for.

"It's not Black family jewellery, Ron. It's Salazar Slytherin's locket."

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"Good evening, all," Minerva McGonagall welcomed members of the Order of the Phoenix to their headquarters. "Thank you for coming to this last-minute meeting. We have only one point on the agenda today, but its importance is paramount, and we will need to make a decision together. The question is whether we will readmit Severus Snape to our ranks. I know it seems like an invalid, pointless debate," McGonagall raised her voice and tried to quiet the uproar of murmur with a peaceful gesture, "but Hermione Granger obtained new evidence which convinced me that the case at least merits reevaluation."

"Hermione? How is she?" George Weasley enthusiastically asked, surprised himself to realise how he had missed the witty comments of the girl in the last three months.

"You will have a chance to ask her shortly," McGonagall replied. "She needed to talk to Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley, who have also returned here to take part in this decision. Let's give them another minute. Alastor, please leave your objections for discussion after Miss Granger's demonstrations," McGonagall sternly addressed Mad-Eye Moody.

After a few moments of whispered conversation, the door opened, and Hermione, Harry and Ron entered, very excited and a little breathless. Harry kept his left hand in his robe's pocket as he silently greeted the gathering. He noticed Mundungus Fletcher playing with a spoon, drew out his wand and charged.

"You! Leave it!" He barked at befuddled Fletcher. "Nothing! Nothing will leave this house! Ever again! Do you hear me?!"

"Harry, calm down, please." Remus Lupin stood up and quickly strode over to Harry.

"He is stealing from here!" Harry defended his action, but his voice nonetheless wavered.

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it can be resolved with a civil discussion." Lupin placed his hand on Harry's wand arm.

"It's just an ordinary teaspoon, Harry," Arthur Weasley joined in.

"How do you know it's ordinary? We just found..."

"Harry!" Ron and Hermione shouted in unison, but the damage was already done. Everybody's attention shifted to Harry's hidden hand, and unwanted questions began to sprout from all sides. Harry sealed his lips, firmly grasped the locket, cursed himself for reckless prattle and searched for a safe way out.

Professor McGonagall came to his rescue. "Mr. Potter, perhaps now would be a good time to tell the Order what your quest actually encompasses."

"Tell them a bit, Harry," Ron whispered. "Alienating them now isn't a good approach. And you did overreact."

Harry nodded, his features softened, and he turned to face the Order members to explain. "Professor Dumbledore and I have been working on a strategy to defeat Voldemort. Unfortunately, he was murdered before we finished. Ron and Hermione are now helping me to gather certain powerful items that are crucial to carrying out his strategy."

"What is the strategy then? What items do you need?" Tonks attentively asked and added, "We could all help. That's what the Order is for."

"No, I'm sorry, Tonks." Harry shook his head. "Professor Dumbledore insisted that no one else may know the details until the right time, and I can't tell you more at the moment."

"I guess it's all right, Harry. Come sit by me an' let's hear what Hermione has ter say," Hagrid suggested.

Everybody settled in, and Hermione levitated a magicmeter above the table for all to see. She began to explain, "Last school year, the Headmaster asked Professor Snape to develop a magicmeter that would track the probability of death of a certain person over a distance."

"Why, Hermione, that's what my clock does," Mrs. Weasley pointed out.

"Yes and no. Distant Probability is actually a bit different, Mrs. Weasley. Such a magicmeter would show the immediate overall fitness of the person. Whether they are injured, or being tortured and the like, whereas your clock also shows a possibility that a member of your family might be attacked. Not that he really was attacked."

Mrs. Weasley visibly gulped.

"That's tough." Dedalus Diggle shuddered as he thought of his niece.

"In a way, yes." Hermione shifted her attention. "It brings certainty and diminishes hope. But on the other hand, this device enables us to forge a rescue mission when and where necessary."

"How do you fancy you can estimate the 'where'?" Kingsley Shacklebolt tapped a corner of his mouth with his index finger.

"I tuned the magicmeter I constructed recently to a specific, rare spell used in Professor Snape's magicmeter, and it showed me the direction," Hermione said. "I suppose the same could be accomplished if the wizard on a mission wore a uniquely charmed item."

"What was the spell you used?" Mad-Eye Moody looked at Hermione while his magical eye scrutinised the floating magicmeter.

"The pointer looks new, Alastor," Shacklebolt said.

"Indeed, it is," Hermione admitted and exchanged a fleeting look with Professor McGonagall.

"It's solidified mercury," Minerva revealed.

"Solid quicksilver!" Bill Weasley burst out. "It gave me such a hard time in one Egyptian chest!"

"Yes, unexpected spells can be intriguing," Tonks contemplated with an inward sigh.

Hermione took the floor again. "Right. Back to the Distant Probability tracking. Professor Dumbledore was the tested object in the development of the method. He would inflict injuries on himself, with increasing severity, at varied distances from Hogwarts so that Professor Snape could estimate if his magicmeters detected any increased probability of death, and at what distance."

"That... that... traitor! Hurlin' 'im over and over 'til he killed 'im!" Hagrid slammed his fist on the table so hard that all cups rattled, and one even broke.

Mrs. Weasley tried to vanish the mess, but missed through her sobs, and the jet of magic broke a saucer of milk.

"Molly, please compose yourself," Minerva McGonagall appealed while she tried to stop the spilled tea and milk from soaking into Fletcher's trousers. She wasn't too successful as the Weasley twins suppressed giggles with their wand arms under the table. "He did it willingly."

"Albus would never succumb to such nonsense. He would have used guinea pigs. He was too smart, and he knew how valuable he was to us to weaken himself. He was much more vigilant than that," Moody argued. "Hermione, don't oppose me! You didn't know him well enough. He wouldn't injure himself willingly."

"Alastor, your posture only shows how little *you* knew him recently. If he believed..." Minerva didn't finish.

"Surely, Minerva, your judgement cannot be that clouded!" Moody sneered.

"Enough! I believe her."

"You, Harry?" Lupin asked, surprised. "*You* believe that Albus Dumbledore injured himself for the sake of *Severus Snape's* research?"

"Yes." Harry met Remus's gaze. "He did the same for me. And he wouldn't waiver. I believe her. He would injure himself if he thought the task was more important. Hermione, please continue."

Hermione nodded and went on. If they fought so hard against every sentence she said about Snape, it was going to be a hard day. "Eventually, Professor Snape found out that a solid mercury pointer enabled him to detect probability of death over the largest distances. Professor Dumbledore never tested the final magicmeter, but he asked Professor Snape to have it turned on the day he died."

"Miss Granger, what you are implying here is very dire. I hope you realise that?" Diggle asserted.

"I realise the consequences, sir," Hermione answered.

"Do you really realise that Snape must have known that Albus was weak and dying, as Mr. Potter here reported," Diggle turned to Harry briefly, "before he reached the Astronomy Tower?"

"I do. He knew about it."

The room gasped.

"Miss Granger, your reasoning is full of holes," Shacklebolt objected.

"I agree. I'm not finished yet. The significance of Distant Probability tracking..."

"No more of this. Let *me* finish now!" Shacklebolt interrupted her. "What is your evidence that Dumbledore asked Snape to turn on the magicmeter on that specific day?"

"He told me."

"With all respect," Shacklebolt smirked, "I don't see Albus confiding in you."

"Pardon, sir. Severus Snape told me."

"You are insulting my dignity, Miss Granger. I would appreciate if you cared to explain how you came about having intimate conversations with your Professor at the end of your sixth year."

"Kingsley!" Hagrid, Lupin, McGonagall, Harry and the Weasleys rose to defend Hermione's honour.

"Mr. Shacklebolt," Ron charged, "Hermione is not..."

"It's all right, Ron," Hermione soothed him, although she was blushing deeply. "We can sort this out." She turned to address Shacklebolt. "He told me yesterday. Yes, yes, I know, more questions. This would all make more sense if you let me explain everything properly according to my plan." She sighed.

"Hermione, just forget about your precious notes for now and tell us about your talk with Snape," Bill Weasley suggested.

"I hope that would be the worst news first and who knows? Maybe it would render us speechless long enough so that you could use the silence to fill our heads with your original plan," Fred teased.

"OK, most shocking news first," Hermione contemplated.

"So, I met Severus Snape yesterday. We had a tiny fight. Then he politely invited me to his house. We had a talk about magicmeters, Dumbledore and Voldemort."

The Order of the Phoenix was indeed speechless.

"Huh, Hermione, you got me there!" Fred leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms across his chest. "Now, I would really love to hear how that came about."

"Yeah, Hermione, please do share," George added and mimicked his brother's gesture.

"Fine. Where was I?" Hermione flipped through her notes. "Here. Solid mercury pointer works. Hence, we could use the new magicmeter to monitor our warriors on missions. Remus and werewolves, Mr. Fletcher and the underground and the like."

"I don't want to be monitored!" Fletcher objected.

"It was just an example, Mundungus. No one is after you. Let her continue," the pink-headed Auror assured him.

Harry flinched, but kept quiet.

"Next, with Professor McGonagall we could not find that last magicmeter, and we considered it highly uncharacteristic of Professor Snape. According to his notes, he never delayed if he suspected he was progressing. So then I..." Hermione gulped and blushed.

"Miss Granger came up with an idea to try to track the other solid mercury pointer, and she recklessly followed it by herself," McGonagall helped her out. "She is subject to a disciplinary hearing."

"Oh, Hermione," George whined.

"You shouldn't get caught," Fred added.

"Quiet, you two!" their mother snapped.

"In any case, Miss Granger's state of education and school rules are irrelevant to the topic we need to decide on today," McGonagall squashed the rising argument. "Miss Granger followed the direction of the magicmeter and found Severus as well."

"Minerva, we heard that already," Diggle interrupted her. "However, I would really appreciate hearing Miss Granger's reason for trying to find the missing magicmeter in the first place."

"I thought it showed that Professor Snape knew of Professor Dumbledore's condition, and as such it was exceptionally valuable," Hermione stated.

"What you are saying is the consequence rather than cause, young lady," Dedalus Diggle said quickly, irritated and losing patience. "You told us that Snape told you Dumbledore had asked him to have the magicmeter turned on. You also cared to confirm that you talked to Snape only *after* you set off pursuing his magicmeter. My question again is: Why on Earth did you attempt to find Snape's magicmeter?"

"I told you. It was missing and..."

"Don't give me that academic nonsense!" Diggle shouted.

"But it's true!"

"Whose side are you on?"

"What? I..." Hermione burst into tears.

"Dedalus, that was entirely unnecessary," Tonks chastised him.

Ron tried to comfort Hermione, but she pulled away. Nonetheless, she accepted a tissue from him.

"Still, Hermione, it's a valid question," Harry admitted. "You surely have a good reason, but I'm not getting it either. You are nuts about knowledge, but you normally

wouldn't just leave school like that."

Oh, Harry wanted her to explain something. She had plenty of practice with that.

"Harry, first," Hermione wiped her tears and began to count on her fingers, "from Snape's notes I learned that he always moved on with his work as fast as he humanly could. Second, he knew solid mercury might be his answer. It was all in his notes, except for the final test. Third, Professor McGonagall transfigured the mercury for him and gave it to him. Fourth, the last magicmeter was not in Hogwarts. Fifth, Professor McGonagall said he never left the castle between the time when she had given him the quicksilver piece and his flight after the battle. Hence, my working hypothesis was that Professor Snape created the last magicmeter. Professor Dumbledore did not test it the usual way, but unorthodox in action. So in the evening, the magicmeter showed such sensitive information that Professor Snape didn't risk leaving it behind, but carried it with him into the battle, and subsequently he must have hid it securely out of Hogwarts."

"I believe he corroborated your assumptions in the full extent?" Shacklebolt sought confirmation.

"Not fully," Hermione opposed. "I was wrong assuming that Professor Snape hid the compromising magicmeter and joined Lord Voldemort himself. A big mistake that could have had even more grievous consequences."

"But instead of suffering, you had a cosy tea with your Potions master in the privacy of his house," Bill smirked.

Hermione sharply inhaled, but changed her mind about being offended and calmly replied, "Indeed."

"In that case, I trust he wishes to renew his cooperation with us," Mr. Weasley said.

"That's what he said."

"Is he going to spy on You-Know-Who for us or is he going to spy on us for You-Know-Who?"

"Arthur, do you really expect a Slytherin of Severus's calibre to tell you that in face?" Shacklebolt disdainfully sneered.

"No, I wouldn't dream of it," Mr. Weasley chuckled, "but I'd like to hear Hermione's educated guess."

"As I see it, he never stopped working for the Order," Hermione slowly considered. "Pending murdering the Headmaster, of course. For example, he taught me to brew the Life Thread Potion when he couldn't himself."

"Through Patronuses, not personally," she quickly added after seeing Diggle's scowl.

And he told me about Yaxley's execution, she thought bitterly, but didn't voice that.

"He also warned the children about the attack on The Burrow," Bill Weasley reluctantly admitted.

"Watch your tongue, Bill, or you might get our baby brother upset," George laughed.

Ron turned bright red and rose quickly from his chair.

"George, this is not the time! Ron, sit down right now," Mrs. Weasley tamed her brood.

"If he was at The Burrow that night, he must have erected those extra anti-detection wards around your house, right, Arthur?" Tonks asked Mr. Weasley. "Without them we wouldn't have realised the threat of the Portkey Charm."

"Now that you made me think about unusual events," Remus Lupin remembered, "last month's batch of Wolfsbane came from Voldemort's direction, since I didn't bring it. Yet, it was unconditional. Until now, that is."

"You make him sound like a charity," Moody finally broke his resolve to control his will. "I'd prefer to see some hard evidence in Albus's case. I demand reproduction of the results from the famous magicmeter, and I want a thorough comparison with the timing of Minerva's diminishing curves of magic residues of his deceased body. And of course the past projection of his death probability that Tonks presented here in July. Unless all those results match, my answer is a strict 'no,' regardless of what other tales you bring up."

"We are ready for such presentation, naturally," Minerva McGonagall said and levitated the second magicmeter above the table. "Tonks, if you would, please." She motioned for Tonks to join her.

"No, stop!" Shacklebolt interrupted them. "I want to invoke the charts. We need to make sure that they are genuine originals all concerning Albus."

The Auror performed an intricate wand dance at each magicmeter. Three floating cubes appeared above the devices. Tonks's magicmeter filled in with an opalescent shape that gradually retreated towards the upper left corner at the back side of its cube. It represented the gradual worsening of Dumbledore's health as in the hours preceding his death weaker and less harmful spells could end his life. McGonagall's chart rapidly declined from left to right, indicating that magic disappeared from Dumbledore's body, and he indeed died. The Order of the Phoenix held their breath when Snape's magicmeter began to unwind the time line. A thin line at the upper left corner continued straight ahead for some time, then it jerked down a bit, and Harry gasped.

"That's when he cut himself!"

"Harry, shh." Hermione embraced him.

They watched the chart unwind further and fill the whole cube. Shacklebolt then merged the three charts, and their timing fit perfectly.

Everybody watched the process in awe. Their faces screwed up one by one as the realisation dawned. Severus Snape knew precisely and accurately just how severely Dumbledore's fitness was deplored. He knew that any attempt to heal or even move him magically would kill him. Did it validate his action? Was he the cold-blooded murderer? Or was he backed into a corner? Should he have tried to save him? Could he, with the Death Eaters around him? Yet, how could he justify a Killing Curse? That could not be justified! It just could not. He couldn't do anything to help him. Or could he? He could have given him the Life Thread Potion. Surely, there was an alternative to murdering him. But could he have administered the potion with the Death Eaters behind his back? Could he? Does the inability to save justify a contrary act? Which one is compassionate?

"How do you deal with this, Hermione?"

"Deal with what, Ron?"

"The ambiguity of his decisions."

"I don't deal with it."

"How can you? This is not ethical!"

"This is war, Ron. You just do what you must to survive. I don't question his motivations, I accept the outcome of his deeds. This is not about what is right or wrong. At this time, some choices are taken away from us. He couldn't save Dumbledore, so he saved himself. We needed the Life Thread, he gave it to us. We were in danger, he

helped us. If what he does benefits me, I'm willing to use him."

"Hermione, you sound just like him."

"Maybe I have changed. Maybe you should also realise that some choices and chances were taken away from us."

"Hermione..."

"Ron, let's just strive to end this war. If it takes using a Death Eater, so be it."

Then she smiled a bit, and Ron felt as if his world was turned upside down when she said, "And after the War. We will see what chances all wizards would pursue after this is over."

~ fin ~

Author's notes: *Big thanks to my beta, KDTheRavenclaw, and saschia for helping me solve my problems with the fact that this Order meeting did not end the way I planned. The characters just would not allow it. They have minds of their own. They are too stubborn, and at first I refused to comprehend them.*

Thanks also to Caeria, who let me alter her idea of a HG/SS conversation so beautifully portrayed in her Pet Project.

Another exceptional person who leaves a remarkable print on this fandom, Southern_witch_69, prompted me to write almost a year ago. It has been a wonderful experience and I thank you very much, Southern.

And finally, the most important gratitude thanks to all my readers, who left a review. I deeply cherish every one of them. Only feedback from readers enables writers to improve, and I would like to deliver you the best stories I can. I hope you enjoyed this little story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Epilogue: Job Interview

Chapter 8 of 8

Hermione sends Snape a job application letter. Snape wouldn't want to associate himself with an irritable, annoying know-it-all on a regular basis, would he? He can do nothing but decline, can't he?

Irritated Severus Snape fervently strode to answer an obnoxious knock on his Spinner's End front door. He roughly pulled the door fully open to reveal a slightly alarmed Hermione Granger standing with a raised hand and reddening knuckles in his doorway.

"What do you want?!" Snape asked as he pocketed his wand.

Hermione blinked a few times and cleared her throat. "Oh, sorry. Good day, Professor. I thought you wouldn't open."

"Spit it out, woman," Snape hissed. "What possessed you to grace me with your company without a prior appointment the usual way?"

"I sent you a letter..."

"Haven't you received my reply?"

"I have."

"Haven't you read it?" Snape lowered his head slightly and leaned forward barely noticeably initiating a cramped feeling in Hermione of being thoroughly dominated.

"I have," she squeaked.

"Then you surely have noticed that my answer is no."

"But, sir..." Hermione stepped back to regain her personal space and composure.

"There was no room for further discussion in my reply. Henceforward, be so kind as to remove yourself from my doorstep," Snape said in an icy-cold voice.

He attempted to close the door, but Hermione called, "You've been sleeping less than four hours recently," and launched forward.

Snape hesitated for a split of a second before he resumed his motion. Hermione used the time to briskly slip inside. The door loudly shut behind her, but she found herself pressed to it by a firm body of her ex-teacher with the tip of his wand pinned into her throat.

"What have you done to my wards?" he whispered into her ear.

"Nothing," she said with a very shallow breath through her constricted throat.

"Don't lie to me!"

"Nothing, sir. I did research for my job application and calculated the time you spent working."

He intently looked at her and eased off. Her wand arm was however still firmly clutched in his grip, and his wand still pressed into her skin.

"Continue."

"I researched potions market for a possible career for myself and found that your company produces the most interesting range of potions."

"I've read your letter. On with it."

"Well, it's an impressive list!"

"All four feet of it, Miss Granger." Snape slightly increased the pressure of his wand.

"Ehm." Hermione cleared her throat and tried to pull away from the wand. "I tried to imagine myself brewing such exciting potions on daily basis, and as I lost myself in daydreaming..."

"Get to the point," Snape barked.

"It takes an awful lot of time. The apothecars told me you always supplied on time, you were exceptionally reliable with urgent, unexpected orders, and..."

"Enough!" Snape stepped back. "I see where you are heading."

"All times put together, you sleep four hours a day, less on busy days. You eat..."

"Quiet! I said I saw you point!"

"Well, you do need help." Hermione frowned in exasperation.

"Miss Granger, my answer is no as you have confirmed you had read in my generous reply to you. How many times must I repeat everything I say until it penetrates your skull and gets registered?"

"Not once. You know that. We've worked together during the War!" Hermione raised her voice.

"You stayed at Hogwarts while I stayed with the Dark Lord. That hardly qualifies as *workingtogether*." Snape sneered.

"You know I'm capable of following your instructions precisely," Hermione tried to explain frantically.

"Yet, you still insist on your job obsession."

"If the instructions are reasonable," she added. "This one clearly isn't. Look, I've finished my advanced schooling in Potions with..."

"With special training in Arithmancy," Snape interrupted her. "I've read your CV as well. Thank you very much."

"The point is," Hermione sighed, "that I'm qualified, willing, and you know how I work from before. Plus, my research and work helped you to regain your position in the Order and then in the society," she said accusingly.

"I have served my sentence!" Snape charged.

"But nine months for killing, instead of life sentence for murder!"

"And you call that a favour I should pay back by employing you to nourish your insatiable urge to have fun during working hours?"

"No! I'm merely pointing out my stable role in your life and offering you valuable services of highly suitable personnel. Just imagine the research you could do if we shared the ordinary burden," Hermione exclaimed.

Snape groaned. The girl had a nerve. Calling his volatile, dangerous substances an ordinary burden.

"But I don't *want* an assistant. Much less you."

"You are being unreasonable!" Hermione threw her arms wide in frustration.

"That's it, Miss Granger," Snape shouted. "Shall I bodily remove you from my house, or will you leave by yourself?"

"I'm the best option you have to get some sleep. Look how grumpy you are!"

As soon as the words left her mouth, Hermione realised that this time she pushed him too far. He grabbed her neck and Apparated them both to the other side of his entrance. Casting a silent Disillusionment Charm to prevent unwanted attention, he pulled her close to him and whispered, "Don't you dare come here again, you insolent little chit."

Hermione trembled and fell to the ground as he forcibly pushed her away from his porch. She took a deep breath and said as fast as she could, "The antidote to Vacuum can be improved by substituting charcoal with quartz."

Snape paused with his back towards her and a hand on his doorknob. He slowly turned his head.

"Why?"

"Quartz is composed of silicon while charcoal is carbon. Silicon is heavier than carbon, but belongs to the same group according to Mendeleyev table."

"You are forgetting oxygen forms quartz together with silicon, and magical properties of carbon and silicon are not complimentary. Moreover, charcoal in the antidote is chemically an absorbant; quartz has no such qualities."

"This approach worked for Distant Tracking, so the idea merits at least some testing in Potions."

"Distant *Probability* Tracking." Snape corrected her.

"Your way. Distant Tracking my way. They are separate patented procedures. The Aurors establish 'how' their colleagues on duty are your way and 'where' my way," Hermione fluently explained.

Snape gritted his teeth. "You are insufferable."

"So you say." Hermione smiled at him sweetly. "And I've found your weakness."

Snape only inclined his head and lifted an eyebrow.

"If I say something intriguing, you stop shouting, and your brain gets the time to think and reevaluate."

This time Snape positively smiled. At least that's how convention would simply describe the slender uplift of the corners of his mouth and slight narrowing of his eyes. Hermione watched him, thunderstruck.

"This arrangement is only temporary. Start applying for your other jobs straight away. My free advice for your future job applications is to shorten your letter to four inches. I will test your ludicrous idea while you handle the *ordinary burden*. Today, you will brew Felix Felicis, Wolfsbane, Draught of Living Death and remaster the brewing of Beautifying Potion, which is now doubtlessly ruined by your untimely visit."

"Yes, sir."

"And the cost of fixing the Beautifying Potion will be deducted from your pay. I don't intend to spend my money on such frivolous mistakes," Snape shifted his weight in discomfort as if he was caught in disgrace for associating his name with brewing a Beautifying Potion. "It is your sole fault that it needs fixing."

"Naturally, sir."

"Naturally?" Snape quirked one eyebrow, and the tiniest of smiles threatened to break on his face again.

"Well, you could've admitted straight away you needed me and the potion wouldn't..."

"Quiet! Get up and get to work. I'm not paying you for sitting around in dirt," Snape said disdainfully and disappeared into the dark recesses of his house.

Hermione shook her head as she stood up, cleared her clothes, tried to tame her hair, straightened her back and marched after him.

Author's notes: As per your request, I'm adding an epilogue in hope that it closes the story to your better satisfaction.

A mention of Vacuum is a tribute to one of my favourite stories Walk Through the Fire by WonderfulChild. She describes the effects of Vacuum in her third chapter as: "It somehow dampens the magical core for three minutes so that any spell or potion applied during that time will bind to a witch or wizard's magic. Whatever that spell or potion is, it lasts for the rest of their lives." It is truly a dreadful potion as 'Fire' eloquently depicts.

Once again, thanks to KDTheRavenclaw for beta reading my story, and I'm grateful to admins at the Petulant Poetess for selecting this story as a featured one for April 2007. It is a great honour for me.