

Fallen

by unwoundfantasy

Hermione Granger finds herself in need of saving, and there's only one person who could possibly help her now. With murder on her hands, who else could she turn to but the recently acquitted Severus Snape?

Chapter One: Trapped

Chapter 1 of 4

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PROLOGUE

She was having the nightmare again.

The same dream that Hermione Granger'd had for months was plaguing her once more -- dark visions of a night that felt like it had been years ago, reliving those events, condemning herself once more to the pain she felt now . . . It was as if someone had cursed her to see those same things over and over and over again as a form of torture or perhaps to make her regret her actions.

She never stopped to think that maybe it was her own conscience that was punishing her.

Thrashing once, rather violently, she shook herself out of sleep and sat up; blinking and rubbing her eyes, she evaluated her surroundings and reoriented herself. She wasn't in the dream. She was safe -- as safe as one could be here, anyway.

Hermione twisted around on her firm bed, untangling herself from the plain white sheets that had wound themselves about her legs. Leaning back, she almost relished the feel of rough stone pressing against her back. The slight pain of it kept her grounded; it made her remember that she was awake now, where none of those visions could haunt her.

Breathing in, she could almost taste the stale air around her. It always smelled the same -- dark, dank, unchanging. The only slight difference now was the hint of her own sweat in the surrounding area, giving her something just slightly different to smell. She never smelled fresh air now, never saw the sun, never felt anything aside from what she was confined to in this tiny room.

She was in Azkaban physically, mentally, emotionally. Trapped.

□

CHAPTER ONE: Trapped

Hermione's days were, in a word, *dull*.

She'd always been a fan of organization and order, but even she couldn't stomach the monotony of each day within the wizarding prison. She craved something different, longed for excitement, pleaded with whatever Gods existed to allow her some sort of change in her days to make them more bearable. But the change never came, and

she always went through the same routine.

In the mornings, the *Daily Prophets* were delivered to those who were allowed a copy. Some of her fellow inmates were jailed for lesser crimes, temporarily there to sit in the corner and think about what they'd done. Those were the ones who had the pleasure each morning of having the bound newspaper slid through the bars of their cell. Those lucky few were also under strict orders to not share their paper, nor pass along information from the various articles.

There had been an explanation some time ago when she was first charged. She couldn't remember it all now, as most of their reasoning had faded the more bitter she became, but it was something to do with hidden information being slipped in by outside spies. Information intended to aid those that were trapped, speaking in code of break out dates and the like.

Not that it was important for her -- she was in no danger of being rescued by those who were once her friends, nor by those who resided in cells next to her. Everyone would be out for Hermione Granger's blood, should she ever escape.

An hour after the *Daily Prophets* were issued, they were collected once more; those that were lucky enough to read the paper were also lucky enough to be let out of their cells at that point, gathered and led down to the mess hall where they could eat breakfast and socialize with one another about various things; whatever inmates socialized about, Hermione neither knew nor cared. The others that were left, those deemed too dangerous to let out, were given their food through the bars. They were fed like dogs.

Hermione was again part of that group.

The food wasn't too terrible. She could at least admit that much. It certainly wasn't in any sort of league with the Hogwarts food of her childhood, but it was decent enough. She supposed no magical institution could really go wrong where something as simple as food was concerned. A quick spell here, a charm there . . . perfection every time. It was merely the fact that they didn't bother making things perfect that made the food less-than-delicious. But it sufficed, and she was still healthy in a manner of speaking.

Once breakfast was finished and the luckier prisoners ushered back to their cells, the true 'hard time' began.

She now had to endure hours of nothing. No papers being brought in, no conversation filling the empty space . . . *Nothingness*. Hermione found within her first week that this was what prison was all about: being bored out of her mind. Aside from the nightmares, which served to punish her adequately, this was by far the worst part of it all. *There was nothing to do.*

Sure, she'd had a few things in the beginning to keep her occupied. There were books she'd been allowed to bring in, things of that nature. She was more than welcome to read a novel that never changed, after it was inspected for charms used in communication and the like. But now? Now she'd read them all, multiple times, and had grown weary of the plots and characters. Even a bookworm such as herself couldn't handle reading 'Wuthering Heights' four times within a two month span. What made it all the more difficult was the fact that she could easily have new books to read, new things to keep her occupied, should someone merely visit and bring her such things.

But no one visited Hermione. No one brought her books. No one wanted to speak to her. She'd done something unthinkable, and she was certainly paying for it now.

It wasn't until lunchtime that the monotony broke, only slightly. But even then, it was the same routine as breakfast -- some stayed, some left, all ate. Eating wasn't that exciting.

A few hours after lunch, Hermione had her heart broken daily. From two until four, visitors floated in and out of the corridors of the prison. Convicts had people they loved coming to see them while Hermione sat near the bars of her cell and watched. It was the only time of the day that she ventured out this far -- all other times, she kept to the back wall of the small chamber, not wanting to be out in sight to anyone but the passing guards and the neighboring inmate across the way.

But during those two hours, she endured more attention and pointing and harsh words than in a week's worth of staying to herself. She put herself there, clinging to those cold bars, staring up and down the corridors each time some new visitor would round the corner. Her heart would rise, swell, pound quickly, only to sink and be let down each time a stranger appeared. She'd spent five months in the wizarding prison, and her visitor count still remained at zero.

She wasn't sure why she allowed herself to hope. It certainly wasn't worth the pain when she was disappointed, nor the words of passers by. 'Look there, isn't that Hermione Granger? Dirty bitch should rot.'

And that, sadly, was one of the more kind things someone had said about her.

When she'd first arrived, she still had her spirit, her *temper*. But that had quickly been broken after the first time she'd shouted something back at one of those hateful people. She'd reminded them that she had bloody ears and that they weren't exactly whispering about her. The visitors were *frightened* of her, leapt back with utterly terrified expressions, and one of the guards immediately punished her.

Her free will and stubborn mouth weren't appreciated here. She supposed it never really was, anywhere.

When the last of the visitors were gone, Hermione always sank back to her shadows to go through the rest of her miserable day. Another short period of nothingness, followed by dinner. Dinner was, at least, more substantial than the other meals. Not in the portions, but in the flavours -- she supposed portion control was important, lest all of the prisoners end up being large and immobile. No, the dinner meals were always better *tasting*, even if she didn't have the option of gorging herself on it. On Sundays, there was dessert following dinner, and that was always a small treat to look forward to.

Dinner passed a bit more time than the other meals, but once it was over, Azkaban fell more silent. A large number of prisoners fell asleep soon after eating, but Hermione had never been able to turn her mind off so early in the evening. She usually sat there for a while longer, contemplating any random thing that wound its way into her head, before finally growing weary enough to climb into her firm, less-than-comfortable bed. The blanket was itchy and heavy, but as soon as she could settle herself, it didn't bother her.

So began another night of dreams, followed by yet another boring, dreary day of being a prisoner of Azkaban.

Of course, not all of her days were so boring. No, just the typical ones. Some days were slightly different, such as today. Today, she was forced to stand in the corner of her cell while a guard held her at wandpoint. Another guard moved around inside, changing the bed linens and sweeping the cold stone floor. Cleaning day! That was always something different, she supposed. It did always frighten her, though, when she thought of how excited she became over something so dull as *cleaning day*.

"No mail for me?" she asked, finding her own voice sounding foreign to her. It was perhaps because she so rarely spoke, but she didn't think it possible to forget the sound of one's own voice.

The guard outside the cell glared at her, but his face turned a touch softer. "You know there's no mail, Hermione," he replied. That voice was foreign, too. It should have been familiar, warm, comforting -- Neville Longbottom wasn't capable of sounding cold, was he? But yes. he did. Her old friend now sounded like a stranger, holding his wand up at her and giving her a look that told her he'd not hesitate in hexing her, should she try anything.

She never *did* try anything. She didn't know why they were so bloody afraid of her.

But then again, she didn't remember much about the incident. She remembered everything leading up to it and everything after it... but she supposed she could have been absolutely mad when they apprehended her. She could have tried to curse every single one of them, for all she knew. That would certainly explain their fear of her. And these ridiculous measures.

"I just thought..." she trailed off, sounding almost *conversational*. She looked back to Neville, though, who shook his head and diverted his gaze, and knew that conversation wasn't an option. She didn't get visitors, and the guards weren't there to chat with her, either. That was that.

She sighed and leaned more comfortably against the stone wall, waiting patiently for the cleaning to be finished, when the sound of important footsteps drew close. Looking up, she spied another guard coming to a halt beside Neville, nodding a formal and almost soldierly greeting. Perhaps they'd fought together in the last war, had some sort of brotherly bond. She pondered this, coming up with a brilliant story in her mind -- something she did often. She put random things and people together and developed a long plot for them so that she could occupy her mind.

She could see it clear as day in her imagination. Neville crying out when this other guard was hit with a spell -- oh, but it wasn't fatal! Neville boldly and bravely carried him to safety, and now there was of course an unshakable bond between the two of them. The sort of bond people share when one's life has been saved by the other.

Her novella was interrupted when the new guard barked her name, however. Attention back to the present, she looked up and waited, not even bothering to speak.

"Your hearing has been scheduled for tomorrow afternoon," he informed her. Just as though he'd told her that... her Sunday pie was delayed. As though the hearing in which she learned her fate was no more important than whether or not she received her dessert on time. "You're to be delivered to the Ministry at three o'clock. Be sure that you're ready by two. Robes will be sent to your cell this evening." He nodded once to her as if asking if she understood, and she gave a small nod in reply.

She understood; she wasn't simple. She just wasn't very happy about it.

As dull as her days were here in captivity, she'd rather spend her life here than being sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss. Or, as some visitors had suggested, death.

The guard was speaking softly to Neville now, and Hermione paid him no mind. Her thoughts were concentrated on herself, pondering just what her fate would be. What if she was sentenced to death? Would they use the Killing Curse? At least then it would be painless... She didn't think she could handle something like a hanging or any sort of Muggle execution. But what of the Dementor's Kiss? Wasn't that worse than death? She wasn't so sure.

The guard that had been cleaning was now exiting, locking the cell once more before giving a nod to Neville. Her former friend lowered his wand and gave Hermione an almost sympathetic look as he relaxed his posture. "Hermione," he stated simply, without goodbye or good luck. Just her name, and a nod, before he'd turned and headed down to do his business at the next cell.

As if suddenly remembering that she could move, speak, think, Hermione scrambled to the bars and leaned close, peering down to catch a glimpse of him. "Neville!" she shouted, gripping the iron bars tightly and praying that he'd not ignore her.

He did.

Hermione paused, frowning as she watched him. He twitched slightly, as if contemplating acknowledging her; but his own desire to do his job won out, and he merely stiffened once more and watched over the inmate next to her while their cell was cleaned, as well.

"Neville, please, just.. Ask Ginny to come? To the hearing? I only want to apologize."

To her surprise, he acknowledged her then. His head tilted, eyes moved to rest on hers, and his lips set themselves in a rather firm and stern line. She felt her blood run cold; he wasn't giving her an understanding gaze, no. He was looking on her as if he would like to hold the noose himself.

"It's Mr. Longbottom," he replied coldly, saying nothing else of her request.

The Hearing

Chapter 2 of 4

Hermione attends her hearing, only to find a surprise witness and an even bigger surprise -- her very own representation by Severus Snape.

CHAPTER TWO: The Hearing

The robes they had brought Hermione were less than flattering. She didn't need a mirror to see that much.

Standing in the center of her cell, she tugged at the fabric and tried to drape it all in some sort of pleasing manner; she wanted to at least look nice, even if she was being condemned to death. These robes, however, looked as if they belonged to someone twice her size and half her height. They were wide and baggy, but fell only to her ankles. She thought of her father and how he sometimes would wear trousers that were too short for him.

That thought, of course, sparked the constant reminder that her parents were dead, which then led down the inevitable train of thought that led her to a conclusion that always made her blood run cold.

She'd killed them.

Perhaps she did deserve the death sentence, or even the Dementor's Kiss. She'd certainly done things horrible enough to warrant such a fate, hadn't she?

Forgetting about her ill-fitting robe, she sighed and lowered herself onto her bed to wait for her escorts to take her away. Despite it all, she was actually looking forward to today; if nothing else, it was an excuse to get out of the prison and into the sunlight. To breathe in that fresh air that she'd been missing, to feel free, to move her legs. If it was to be her last day, she would at least feel freedom once more.

"Granger," a voice called, and she looked up to see that a group of guards were now standing outside her cell. She blinked in surprise, realizing that she'd not even heard them approach. Knowing the drill, she stood and moved to the corner, waiting for them to unlock the large iron bars and push the door of sorts open. "Remain there," the head guard instructed, making his way into her cell.

She tensed as he moved closer, realizing that no one had been this close to her in five months. "Hold out your hands," he demanded gruffly. He had a voice like a drill sergeant -- stern, clear, commanding. She did as she was told, then watched with slight horror as he bound her wrists together with a silvery rope. It itched against her skin, and her fingers felt cold as the blood supply was nearly cut off to her hands. She wriggled to test the tightness, finding that there was, in fact, no room to wriggle at all.

They were definitely not taking any chances with her.

The guard's hand then gripped her elbow firmly, leading her out of the cell and into the main corridor. They walked quickly, past the other inmates that Hermione had come

to watch in her time here. Some of them she recognized as those that were allowed out, as they walked past her cell on those occasions. Others she'd never seen, and she assumed they'd all done something as awful as her.

They stood at the end of the corridor waiting for a rattling lift to ascend. The silence was awkward, and Hermione shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She hated this feeling -- going somewhere, but seeming as though she'd left something behind. Perhaps it was just because she didn't exactly go anywhere these days. It wasn't as if she was forgetting her purse or something equally as odd.

"Do something with her hair," another guard barked. She glanced around, finding half of them staring at her in disgust. No one seemed willing to touch her, save the guard with his hand still firmly on her elbow. "For fuck's sake," the man growled, shoving past two other guards and reaching up to yank her head back with a tug at her hair.

It hurt, but she was slightly grateful; she was sure that her mane of hair was wild and unruly, whatever he was doing to it was sure to make it look slightly more presentable -- even if she was sure that he only did it to make the guards look better. As if they were actually taking care of their prisoners.

Ha.

Her scalp was aching now, but she could feel a sort of knot at the nape of her neck. He'd either twisted it in a low, messy bun, or had used an elastic band to gather it in a ponytail. At least it wasn't wild and curling around her head in a wiry mess anymore.

The lift rattled to a stop, and the grip at her elbow shoved her forward to step into the elevator. She stumbled at first, but quickly regained her balance and moved inside, turning around to face the door as the other guards filed in beside her. As uncomfortable as the grasp on her arm was, she was finding it almost nice. The touch, the human... *feeling*. It was better than sitting alone, talking to no one.

Hermione took a deep breath, then watched as the corridor of cells slowly disappeared from her view as the doors closed.

The hearing room was large, circular, and *ominous*.

Hermione had entered it, expecting a very small room where she would be addressed by a small board of wizards. But no, she was faced with a very open and full chamber, wizards chatting here and there, everyone out to see the fate of Hermione Granger. The Wizengamot sat regally at their long, curved desk, waiting for the case to be presented.

As the last of her guards entered the chamber, the wizard in the center of the purple-robed line lifted a gavel and pounded it three times. The sharp, loud sound caused a silence to fall over the room, and all eyes were now turned down upon Hermione.

"Please restrain your prisoner," the wizard said coolly, waving a hand at the guards. They obeyed, and Hermione found herself being forced down into a chair. Chains snaked around her ankles and elbows, her hands still bound together in front of her. She was uncomfortable, and afraid, and worried that she was thinking far too much about her comfort in the long run.

The guards then fell back behind her, out of her peripheral vision. She didn't like that; she'd at least felt more at ease with the men she recognized from what had become her home -- now she was being looked upon by hundreds of strangers. Bearing that thought in mind, she hopefully looked up through the crowds for a familiar head of red hair, hoping against hope that perhaps Neville had delivered her message. She was finding that there was no such luck.

Disappointed, she tried to relax back into the chair, swallowing hard as she looked up at the judging panel.

"Hermione Jane Granger, brought here under charges of murder. Who will represent the deceased?" The Chief Warlock glanced about the room, and one lone witch stood regally before giving him an affirming nod. "Very well. Who will represent the prisoner?"

Hermione took a deep breath in, surprise evident on her face. Who will represent *her*? She wasn't aware that she needed someone to do so! Furthermore, it was a feeling of utter hopelessness. No one even came to visit her, no one sent her letters -- who in their right mind would actually stand before the Wizengamot and--

"I," came a voice that sounded *very* familiar.

All eyes, Hermione's included, turned to find the source of the response. A figure stood, near the upper left-hand corner of the spectators, and then slowly began to descend down the steps. Surprise made its way through the crowd as more and more people spied the mysterious man, connected the voice with its owner, *realized who it was*.

Still unable to make him out, Hermione peered curiously up at the man until at last he came into view. Limp, black hair that was beginning to show speckled bits of gray, a lumbering walk that was not lacking in confidence, and a decidedly Roman nose -- Severus Snape had stepped forward to represent her.

"Severus Snape, you are a newly freed prisoner, which makes you unavailable to vouch for the witch presented here to us today--" the Chief Warlock began, obviously not pleased with this turn of events. The board of Interrogators looked on the scene with disapproval as well, but nodded in agreement with their leader.

"I am a decorated war hero with a full return to citizenship," Snape replied quickly in a near-bark. "I am well in my rights to defend and represent whomever I so choose."

Decorated war hero? Hermione thought, frowning as she glared at him. He wasn't wearing any such decoration. But she supposed that wouldn't suit him, anyway. She couldn't rightly imagine him adorned in medals and looking happy about that fact. No, he'd likely be the sort to hide them away. Her mind was whirling with a million other questions, though; he'd been put on trial and released just days before she'd killed... well, before the incident. How had he been released? He'd killed *Dumbledore!* None of it made sense, but it gave her hope that perhaps she could be set free, too.

The room was abuzz with soft whispers and grunts of disapproval. But the Chief Warlock paused before nodding once and gesturing for each side of representation to take their place on the floor.

The tall witch stepped down first, gracefully and so sure of herself; Hermione was sure, looking between the two of them, that she was doomed. This woman looked very confident and well-liked. It didn't hurt that she was obviously attractive. Hermione's eyes turned back to Snape, who was now closer and more clear to her, and she felt a pout coming to her lips. No, she was *definitely* doomed.

Snape looked rough; his eyes were more sunken, skin more sallow, lips more drawn. She didn't think it possible for him to look more unhappy than he had while she was in school, but there it was, right in front of her. The epitome of *misery*.

"I'd like to present a witness," the witch said, her voice very concise and clear as she gestured to the left of the room. To Hermione's horror, Draco Malfoy stood and gave a nod of acknowledgement before stepping down and taking a seat near her. He faced the Wizengamot, face solemn and posture erect. Fuming, Hermione fought to not tear out of her seat after him -- witness, indeed! He was no witness! He was Voldemort's puppet and had only been present that evening as an *aide to him!*

Hermione looked up to Snape, as if to tell him that this was all wrong, but his expression stopped her dead in her tracks. He was watching her very carefully, and he gave a very deliberate and commanding shake of his head. He was telling her silently to be still and not say a single word regarding Malfoy's reliability as a witness. She seethed, but held her tongue and turned her attention back to the blond in question.

"State your name, boy," the Chief Warlock barked, looking as displeased by this witness as Hermione was. Draco shifted a bit, as if he wanted to inform the man that he was no *boy*, but kept himself calm before doing as he was told.

"Draco Malfoy, sir," he replied, that slithering voice making Hermione cringe. She'd loathed that voice and honestly never wanted to hear it again. Funny how things worked

out.

"Proceed."

The witch nodded, then addressed the Wizengamot with a short speech about the accuracy of these sorts of 'delicate' situations, and then she spoke on how very important it was to have a first-hand account of the events that transpired. Hermione could hardly pay any attention to the woman's prattle, mostly because she wanted nothing more than to leap up and inform everyone there that Malfoy was not there that night as any sort of friend. He'd been there under Voldemort's command.

"Please, tell the Wizengamot what you saw, Mr. Malfoy," she said at last, turning to give Draco a pleasant, sickly-sweet smile.

Draco nodded, then took a deep breath before he began. "I'd heard about a possible ambush," he started, shaking his head and putting on a relatively good act of feeling *grief*. Hermione's eyes narrowed with hatred at that fact. "In Hogsmeade, a couple of months after school began this past year." He paused, as if having difficulty retrieving those painful memories.

"Potter and I had never really gotten on, but... well, to be honest? I wanted in on the action. I was tired of competing with him; I thought that maybe, if something *did* happen, I could help. Things could be mended, that sort of thing." His voice was short and precise, still holding on to that disgusting drawl he'd always had. He spoke as if his word was law, and half of the people present seemed to be *eating it up*.

"It was all so quick -- there was an attack in the Three Broomsticks. Madam Rosmerta had tried to ... it was awful. So many ... *bodies*."

Hermione's breath was coming quicker now, chest heaving up and down as she listened to him recount that terrible evening in his own twisted way. He'd not even begun to accuse her yet, and already she wanted to rip out his throat.

"Potter had some sort of amulet with him, something he'd found earlier that day, or something, I don't rightly know the details behind it. They were after the amulet, and he was about to destroy it. Granger ended up stopping him, said to give it to them. Then she pointed her wand at him, forced him to let them have it. It was absolute insanity; she was mad." He shook his head, then paused with a furrowed brow. "Might I have some water?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, then watched as that dreadful witch acquiesced and conjured Malfoy a tall glass of sparkling clear, iced water. She felt her own mouth tense with desire for it, but forced her craving down.

"The Death Eaters, they tried to take Potter, then. I honestly think they had business to discuss with him and were afraid Granger would kill him. We were *all* afraid of that. And with good reason."

He turned his gaze on Hermione, the side of his mouth that wasn't visible to the Wizengamot curving upward in a cruel smirk. "She used the Killing Curse on Potter."

The room erupted into a collective gasp, as if they'd not heard this story a million times already. The Boy Who Lived, killed by his own best friend, his most trusted ally. Oh, the tragedy of it all. Hermione swallowed, then struggled with her bonds as she fought to get at Malfoy, to rip that lovely blond hair from his fat, inflated head.

A hand on her shoulder stopped her, and she was sure that the guards were there at her side once more -- to calm her, to restrain her -- but no. It was the cool grip of her former Potions master, and he was looking down at her with that reprimanding glare once more. As if she'd sliced her daisy roots a hair too thick again.

"If Mr. Malfoy is quite finished," he drawled, letting his eyes flick from Hermione to the witch who was representing Harry's death. His *murder*. "I've a couple pieces of evidence I'd like to submit."

Evidence? Hermione looked around the room, obviously surprised. What evidence could he possibly have that would make this verdict sway toward her? She wasn't even aware that any existed, and she was the one on trial!

"Very well," the Chief Warlock replied, giving him a nod of his head. "Go on, then."

Snape nodded politely in reply before delving one pale hand into his robe pocket. A soft chinking noise accompanied his movements as he pulled out two amulets. Hermione froze, knowing exactly where he was going with his 'evidence'.

"This," he started, holding up the amulet that Draco referenced, "is the amulet that was found on Harry Potter's body. This," he continued, holding up the other, "is the amulet that Harry Potter believed he had, confiscated from Hermione Granger upon her arrest."

Hermione closed her eyes, inwardly groaning. She was sure this would make her look even worse than she already did. She'd *hid* it from Harry. This was his job, and she'd followed an inner nagging she'd had. It was right, but . . . well, look where it got her.

A Decision

Chapter 3 of 4

Hermione's hearing comes to a close, but how long until she knows her fate? An unlikely person comforts her through a tough time.

CHAPTER THREE: A Decision

"Miss Granger, tell the Wizengamot what you were doing with this amulet."

Snape turned to address her, holding the real amulet out in front of her. It swung lightly, and she inspected it for a brief second; it was the exact amulet he spoke of. The one she'd had on her person during the ordeal. A bit terrified to speak, she swallowed and inhaled shakily. "That was one of the last Horcruxes," she replied, voice grainy and unsure of itself.

"One of the last?" he repeated, one brow rising smoothly. "Many say that it *was* the last. Do you disagree?"

Hermione watched him, feeling as if she would cry; he didn't seem to be helping her at all. She wondered if he'd only taken on this civic duty in order to make her sentencing more decisive by digging her into a deeper hole.

"I do," she replied, nodding slowly.

"Then what was the last Horcrux, Miss Granger?" he asked, leaning down to speak more softly, to watch her rather intently. She almost admired him, almost approved of his role as lawyer -- he certainly was intimidating enough. But now, now she hated him for what he had made her say aloud.

"Harry."

The crowd collectively gasped again, and Hermione hung her head low in shame. She hated that she was facing these demons here, now -- in front of all these people. However she didn't have to speak again, at least not immediately, as Snape turned to address the Wizengamot as he pulled out something else. It was a small vial of glimmering solution. A potion? She wasn't sure. Peering closely at it, she could see an almost threadlike substance swirling about in the glass vial.

A memory. Whose, though?

"I obtained this, after much persuasion, from a Mr. Ronald Weasley," Snape declared, sneering lightly at the mention of the redhead. "He has refused to be in the hearing on this day, but I believe you'll find the evidence within to be nearly sufficient to release Miss Granger. Interrogators?" He paused, holding the vial up and waiting for their response. The men in purple robes consulted for a moment before the Chief Warlock stood and gave a nod to a few guards at the edges of the room.

Immediately, plans were set in motion to view the contents of the memory; Hermione could only assume that this sort of evidence was presented often, as a Pensieve was placed on the long desk, directly in the center. Another guard carefully took the vial from Snape's hand and handed it over to the Wizengamot, where it was then poured into the basin.

Hermione didn't need to see the memory to know exactly what it contained. It was close to the tale that Draco had woven for his audience, but not quite. He'd twisted it into a horrible story of betrayal, when it was far from that. They had all been in Hogsmeade, as he'd stated, but they'd known nothing of a possible ambush. He obviously had, as he was one of the Death Eaters' little rats. Of course he'd be in on it, wanting a piece of the action -- but not for *their* side of it.

Earlier that afternoon, the group had set out to a small place just outside the all-wizarding village; it was a smaller, more close-quartered forest that bordered on the edge of the Forbidden Forest that skirted along the Hogwarts' grounds. Harry had received word from Hagrid to venture there and find the centaur Firenze. He supposedly had something to help Harry on his continued quest for destroying the Horcruxes.

It had taken a long while, but they'd finally found the centaur and had a short exchange with him; pleasantries from the humans, riddles from the creature -- nothing terribly unusual about it all. When he'd handed over the amulet and said that it was to be the last Horcrux, Hermione was entrusted to pocket it until they could properly destroy it, using a small ceremony that Dumbledore had left to Harry in a long letter delivered postmortem; it was supposedly the only way to destroy items that had been made into Horcruxes and usually required some sort of injury or sacrifice on behalf of the one destroying the item. They had then continued on back to Hogsmeade, eager for a celebratory drink, when Hermione had drifted away from the group to inspect the amulet.

Having done far too much research on the Horcruxes and their origins, she'd made a startling discovery just outside the pub. The amulet was in fact the very amulet that R.A.B. -- Regulus Andorian Black -- had supposedly destroyed. Yet it was still intact, still active? Hermione had been confused for a moment, until she'd heard the scuffle of the Death Eaters approaching the pub. Hushed voices told her more than she needed to know, told her that they were there to not take the amulet, but to take Harry and *not harm him*. And one particularly idiotic Death Eater had added a sound, 'Right, because he's the last one,' before being shushed and scolded.

The last one. The last Horcrux.

They'd all thought of the possibility that Harry was the very last Horcrux. He had been prepared to die for the cause, but none of them wanted to accept that it might happen. They'd *all* been happy when they found this amulet. Harry would live, Voldemort would die, the world would be set to rights once more.

Hermione had swallowed hard, then quickly did the math in her head, counting up all of the Horcruxes. When she had finished, there were two left: the one that was supposedly destroyed by Regulus Black, and Harry himself. She'd held one in her hand, and the other was inside, vulnerable... she had to act fast.

She had quickly duplicated the item, pocketing the original that still held the magical properties, and holding the faux in her hand. She had mentally berated the whole idea -- why had Regulus Black not destroyed it? Why had he left a note, claiming that he had? Surely there was a reason, but what was it?

Frowning, she'd ducked back into the pub and handed the fake amulet back to Harry, just in time for the Death Eaters to barge in. That part was a little fuzzy -- she knew there was a lot of violence, a lot of damage. Death, even.

Ginny was the first hit, a Stunning Spell sending her back into a table. Cries of 'Don't hit the boy!' were shouted out in orders to the Death Eaters, and Hermione had suddenly been very afraid of what would happen if they took Harry with them. They couldn't kill him. They wouldn't -- they thought him to be the last Horcrux, since the amulet was believed to be destroyed by Regulus Black. Hermione had known that he wasn't, but that didn't matter. He would likely be kept alive, just barely. Abused, harmed, miserable.. Worse than death, surely? He'd been so prepared to die..

Voldemort may have even formed Horcruxes for Harry, to ensure that they'd both live on eternally -- one ruling the wizarding world, and the other locked away, merely to keep the tyrant alive. It was all so horrible, and it forced Hermione to make a decision instantly.

She'd pointed her wand at her friend. Ron had turned to stare at her, shock on his face as he shouted at her. "What're you *doing*?" he'd screamed, angry and confused and a bit afraid. Hermione hadn't said a word, but merely frowned as she'd watched Harry.

Harry had seen it all. She could tell, by the way realization had dawned on his face. In the midst of all the destruction, he'd merely looked down at the amulet in his hand, seeing that it wasn't the real one. He'd understood, he'd known. He'd never doubted Hermione's intellect, her prowess of deduction -- he was the Horcrux. He always had been.

"Stop her!" one of the Death Eaters had shouted, and Hermione had known that she didn't have time to hesitate. She'd cast the spell before a large, lumbering body lunged at her and pinned her to the floor, knocking her unconscious.

Hermione wasn't sure how long she sat in the present, contemplating the past, while the Interrogators viewed the memory within in the Pensieve. If it was Ron's, then they'd likely not get the whole picture -- they'd probably merely see her killing Harry. How was that supposed to help her case?!

As the memory faded and their faces turned back down to look at her, she knew that she was doomed. "This proves little," the Chief Warlock stated, shaking his head and pushing his glasses back up on his pudgy nose. "It merely condemns the prisoner further. What is your case, Severus?"

Snape nodded once, rather grimly, before setting the amulets up on the long desk, taking long, thoughtful strides as he paced in front of them. "I was set free with the promise of aiding Harry Potter in the destruction of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," he began, face set in stern lines. Hermione likened his expression to the one he had always worn when giving long lectures. "I had trailed that group through the forest, and when Miss Granger was assaulted, I rallied Aurors to apprehend the Death Eaters that were on the premises before confiscating the last Horcrux and destroying it."

Hermione gasped, audibly. Her wide eyes were fixated on Snape, both angry and amazed. He'd taken the amulet from her and destroyed it. No wonder he was a 'decorated hero of war'!! She was both appalled that he'd finished their work, and glad of it. He'd brought about the final stab to Voldemort, finishing him off for good. Once a loyal servant... now his destroyer. She was slowly becoming more amazed and less angry.

Snape paused, then named off the list of all Horcruxes, leaving off the amulet that they had all thought to be nearer to the top of the list until the very end, as it was one in the same. Knowing how many Horcruxes were needed, that made Harry's death included in the final tally and therefore pulling all of the pieces together.

"She did not murder Harry Potter in cold blood. She destroyed a Horcrux."

Hermione swallowed, her mouth feeling very dry all of a sudden. This whole ordeal had begun horribly, and she was sure that Snape's assistance would only lead to her damnation. Now, though; now she felt as if she did have a chance at escaping death, escaping the Dementor's Kiss. Her heart was pounding loudly in her ears as she waited, watching the Interrogators lean over and converse with one another very quietly.

What felt like hours passed, but what must have only been minutes. Finally, the Chief Warlock straightened and looked down at the group of people assembled before him and nodded very slowly. "We will review this evidence further, and a decision will be reached regarding your sentence, Prisoner Granger. You may all be dismissed."

Hermione tensed, then looked to her guards with wide eyes. A decision would be reached? Meaning.. she had to go *back* to Azkaban? This was terrible, far worse than finding out that she was dying *now*! A horrible fear was filling her, one that was consuming her and making her not want to return to the awful prison. She'd thought that she'd never have to return -- she should have either been dead or free by now! Returning simply hadn't been an option!

Forcing herself to calm down, she looked back to her left, eager to give thanks to her former professor, for he may have saved her -- but he was gone. No longer there beside her, not even anywhere in sight. Crestfallen, she barely noticed the chains about her loosening and disappearing back into the magical chair.

Hermione was returned to her cell, much to her chagrin. She'd tried to walk as slowly as possible, but the guards weren't being fooled; they'd sped her up, knowing she could go much quicker, and thrust her back into the abysmal chamber before slamming the iron bars shut once more, locking her away. She sat there, at the bars, for the next few hours. It was the first time she'd ever really sat there, peering out and waiting, without it being visiting hours. She supposed the one thing to be grateful for was the absence of hissing women and glowering men passing her by.

She knew it was likely hopeless to even think that she'd learn of then Wizengamot's decision so soon -- she should have been expecting a couple of days at the very least.

Unsure of how long she'd been sitting there, staring into the darkening space, a voice startled her.

"I told Ginny," Neville said softly, stepping into her line of vision. She blinked up at him, surprised; how long had he been standing there, just out of her range of sight? She swallowed, not sure if she should speak now or hold her tongue -- it wasn't every day that Neville Longbottom voluntarily spoke to her, after all.

"I didn't want to, but... I don't know. I felt like it was the least I could do. I'm sorry she wasn't there to... to hear it all."

Hermione swallowed, glancing down at the dirty, stone floor. "Thank you," she replied, nodding once. It didn't matter that Ginny hadn't wanted to come. He'd asked her to, she'd known that Hermione wanted to apologize to her, and that was enough. For now, at least.

As if she wasn't surprised enough already, Neville shocked her to the point of gasping when he slowly lowered his body to sit beside her, leaning against the bars and looking at her with an uncomfortable amount of pity in his eyes. *He thinks I'm going to die*, she thought to herself, unable to form any other logical explanation for that look.

"Careful," she said, voice low and lackluster. "I'm a hardened criminal."

Her words were playful, but her intonation did nothing for the mood. Neville gave a crooked, weak smile before shaking his head. "I should've known better than to think... I feel awful."

Hermione shrugged, knowing that there was only so much anyone could have thought about that situation. She probably would have hated herself, too. "Let's not talk about it," she said, looking across the way at the prisoner in the cell adjacent to hers. He looked intrigued and interested in their conversation, which made her not want to talk about it all the more. It was none of his bloody business.

The quiet was overwhelming at first, but soon Hermione breathed it in with a welcome smile. The ringing in her ears, the distant white noise... it didn't seem so bad when she had someone sitting next to her, unafraid to be so close. It reminded her that she *wasn't* who they'd made her become. She wasn't a loathsome creature who deserved no eye contact, no exchange of words. She was still Hermione Granger.

She closed her eyes, absorbing the moment and burning it into her memory. Just in case this was the last chance she ever had to feel human, in case the Wizengamot's decision came at dawn in the form of a Dementor, poised to press his gaping mouth to her lips. *Just in case.*

They didn't speak, even as Neville's hand reached through the cold bars to take hers. They merely sat, silent and still, clinging to one another in a desperate attempt to remember life as it was once upon a time.

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Awakening

Chapter 4 of 4

The morning after Hermione's hearing, she learns her fate - from the same unlikely source who defended her.

CHAPTER FOUR: Awakening

Hermione woke the next morning to the sound of shuffling feet and murmured conversation. Her neck was stiff, and her side ached from the awkward position she'd slept in - no, not the position. She realized, as she sat up, that she was sore because she'd slept on the hard stone floor. She breathed in quickly, feeling a thrill run through her body; it hadn't been a dream.

She really had gone to her hearing, things had gone marginally well, and Neville - dear, sweet Neville - had sat with her last night.

It wasn't the same sort of giddiness one felt when getting a special smile from someone they longed for, but it was close. Simple human touch had become, somehow, the most exhilarating thing she'd experienced in nearly six months. It made her smile, just a bit, before scrambling back to her bed and crawling up on top of the hard mattress. The springs creaked and groaned in a steady rhythm, and it was then that she realized that she was rocking.

Why was she rocking? This was ridiculous!

Telling herself that it was nerves and excitement (and not the inevitable loss of her sanity), she reached across to the small shelf next to her bed and fetched ~~the~~ *Wuthering*

Heights. Why not? After all, she was so close to either never reading again or having the world of books at her disposal once more. One more go with Heathcliff and Catherine couldn't hurt.

Thus, she fell into the story. She read it as never before, her eyes hungrily devouring page after page of the dramatic, passionate tragedy.

She laughed right out at the witty passages, pouted unconsciously at moments of pity and sadness, and found herself nearing the end before she knew it, her eyes watering as tears spilled out onto her cheeks. Hermione Granger, engrossed in a tale that she'd read so many times before, was experiencing a strong and undeniable awakening. All of her feelings, her thoughts, her emotions were bubbling back to the surface. Neville had started a tidal wave within her, and it was now crashing down all around her as she openly wept for Heathcliff's tortured soul.

Hermione did not eat; her food deliveries had come and gone, each untouched plate taken away after an hour of being given to her. She was so deeply invested in the story that she'd not even noticed its arrival nor departure. The visiting hours did not faze her, nor did the sounds of mail arriving for her fellow inmates. No notion of time occurred to the maddened young woman until it had become too dark to see the words in front of her. Glancing up in slight confusion, she noticed that most of the torches had been extinguished.

Was it really so very late?

She twisted around frantically, looking up to the small, barred window that was at least fifteen feet above her head. The only light that slipped through was dull and blue, shifting in intensity as clouds slid over the moon.

Surprised at how quickly the day had passed, Hermione reluctantly set down the book and wiped at her eyes. She was a mess of tears and snot, and her lids felt heavy and hot. Yawning, she slipped down under her scratchy blanket and blinked into the darkness, wondering if she'd missed anything more significant during the day. What if a guard had come with news of her release? What if they'd opened the cell and waited for her to exit, but she was so involved with the book that she'd ignored it?

What if?

Those thoughts began to eat away at her, turning her excitement and anxiety into worry. Her mind was racing endlessly with those scenarios as she drifted off into a fitful, restless sleep. Filled with alternating nightmares and dreams - part of her night consumed with visions of running free in the sunlight, and the other full of dark scenes in which she spent the rest of her life in the dank cell of Azkaban.

"Up, Granger," the voice barked, pulling Hermione rudely from sleep. She was still so tired, so unrested; why would they force her to wake? She was a prisoner, she had nowhere to be! This was a new kind of torture; that was the only explanation. Some sort of horrible sleep deprivation. "*UP!*" it repeated, this time angry and impatient.

Blinking and groaning, Hermione rolled over and stared wearily at the bars of her cell, brow furrowing as she fought to focus. The shapes were all so blurry; the combination of sleep and tears had really done a number on her vision.

She sat up, finding her head pounding and resisting the waking process; *More sleep!* it demanded. But her eyes were slowly focusing on her visitors - *visitors!* It couldn't be, could it? Someone was *visiting* Hermione Granger?

She blinked again, reaching up to rub at her eyes before trying to look at the strange, foreign figures once more. As she did, however, her heart sank down to her stomach. She hadn't expected to see her very own public defender standing there, waiting for her to wake up.

"I- Professor Snape," she started, finding her voice crackly and grossly gargled.

"I am no longer a professor, Miss Granger," he corrected, not moving from his position. He stood, chin held high and his hands clasped regally behind his back as he stared down at her. "Are you presentable?"

Blinking, she looked down and quickly stood before brushing down the ragged robes she wore on a daily basis. It wasn't really a possibility to be indecent in prison. There was no privacy, after all.

"I am," she replied weakly, feeling as if she were about to be led to her death sentence. Why was he there to retrieve her? Why couldn't the rude, hair-pulling guards come and fetch her like last time? She was frowning in thought, hardly noticing that the cell was being unlocked and her former Potions master was stepping through it as if it were *nothing*.

He walked with more confidence than the guards, for crying out loud.

Bewildered, Hermione stared at him and felt herself back up an inch or two. Was *he* going to... hex her? Kill her? This was messy; why were they doing this here?

Her eyes were wide and frightened, but he did not back away. He reached into his robes, and Hermione clenched her eyes shut; she refused to look down his wand, refused to see his face in her last breath. But nothing happened.

No hex, no Killing Curse.

Peeking back out at him, she found nothing more than an irritated-looking man, holding a small package out to her. She glanced back down to the package, eyeing it carefully; what sort of trickery was this? "Er..."

"Are you going to take it, Granger, or am I going to forcefully dress you myself?"

Hermione's mouth fell open. She was partly surprised to learn that the contents of the package were obviously clothing and partly appalled at his statement. Since when did greasy, batty Snape make comments such as that? She supposed it was a good prod, however startling it may have been. Because she quickly reached for it and opened the plain brown paper with eager hands.

It wasn't anything special; in fact, it was her own robes. Taken from her, confiscated, when she was arrested. Still the same vivid, Gryffindor red... She leaned in, breathing the scent of the familiar fabric. It was comforting, and she stalled in the process for long enough to enjoy that familiarity.

Without a word, Snape turned and glared in the opposite direction, putting his hands to his hips; she admired the stance for a moment, thinking of how very funny it looked, before she realized that he was giving her privacy to change. The flow of his dark robes gave her a bit more coverage, and she murmured a barely audible word of thanks.

Hermione quickly dressed, discarding the dirty robes she'd worn since her arrival in a pile on the floor. She relished in the way that her old robes grazed the floor, how they hung much more daintily, how they hugged her waist a bit. She'd had them tailored before her seventh year at Hogwarts, determined to look more feminine. It felt good to be in them once more, even if she was significantly thinner and almost sickly.

Finally turning, she paused awkwardly. Snape still stood with his back to her, somewhat patiently. "Um..." she hesitated, then reached up and tapped his shoulder lightly. His head jerked to the side, eyes narrowing as he glared down at her. "I'm done," she added hastily, turning a bit red. She shouldn't have touched him; people didn't like to touch her. Neville had made her forget that momentarily.

"Very well," he replied, nodding once. "Gather your things."

Gather your things. Those words echoed in her mind for a moment, and she looked up at the man with a dumb, blank stare. "My... things?" she repeated, obviously not understanding.

"Yes, Miss Granger, your things," he repeated, his tone short and lacking any signs of the patience that he'd so graciously shown beforehand. "Gather them, unless you wish to leave them behind."

She still didn't understand. "Am I moving, or..." she trailed off, hoping he'd explain further. The expression that crossed his face was not foreign to her, however; it was that same look he had given her when she asked too many questions, or when she attempted to answer every question he threw at the class. It was annoyance, aggravation, frustration.

"Has being in Azkaban *dumbed you down*, Miss Granger?" he asked, barking at her. His tone was not unlike the rude guards. "Have you lost *so many* brain cells that you are too idiotic to understand your great fortune in being released from this *hell*?"

Hermione swallowed, and then felt her eyes grow so wide that they stung when the increased amount of stale air made contact with them. "Released?" she repeated in a soft breath. "From Azkaban?"

His expression hardened, which she honestly didn't think was possible. Without another word, she quickly tore through the cell, gathering those things that she refused to leave behind. There wasn't much, anyway; they allowed her so very little in the cell. She was most concerned with her books, having felt a stronger fondness for them after her experience the day before.

"All right," she finally said, not believing that what she heard was her own voice; it was laced with such a small trace of hope, of happiness, that it didn't sound like the person she'd become. It was light. It was eager.

"Come along," Snape said, not gracing her with another glance as he headed from the cell and stalked down the corridor. Fumbling with the things in her arms, she quickly scrambled out after him and followed along silently. His cloak was whipping up at her heels as he walked, his wake leaving her feeling insignificant and rather small. But she also felt safe. Protected.

He'd freed her, after all. At least, that's what she could gather at the moment.

They continued on, the guards following behind. It was more so like they were escorting her this time. Not like when they forcibly held her elbow, shoving her along if she walked too slowly.

Of course, she wasn't walking too slowly now, but that was only because she had no choice. Severus Snape would have surely left her in his dust if she didn't keep up on her own.

The lift rattled as they all climbed aboard and it descended down through the levels of prisoners. Down through the prison. Leading Hermione slowly to freedom, at least she hoped it was. All of the excitement building up inside of her would surely cause her to die of disappointment if she was being led to her death. But, she thought comfortingly, at least she'd die on her own terms.

More walking, more silence; past the other guards, past Neville Longbottom, past the doors without so much as a fuss. Out, into the pale light that Hermione immediately investigated. It was cloudy, overcast; but the air was warm and breezy, and she breathed it in with a smile on her face. This *had* to be freedom. She wouldn't have been allowed to stop, to admire the beauty of the sky, if she were still anyone's prisoner.

Finally feeling stronger, more sure of herself, she looked to Snape with brighter eyes. "Is there another hearing?" she asked, the hope still strong in her voice.

"It's already been held. There was no need for you to be summoned once again, only to return to your cell and gather your things." He didn't look at her, but merely stood a few feet away, narrowed eyes glaring across the choppy water that surrounded the small island. He looked disinterested, and Hermione wondered why he was even *here*.

"I'm free?" she asked, voice small and scared. What if the answer wasn't what she'd assumed? It all sounded like she was right, but... one never knew.

"Yes."

Hermione exhaled, her breath shaky, and was on the verge of frantic tears. It was a strange sensation, to feel so relieved and happy that she wanted to weep hysterically. Closing her eyes, she slipped down to the ground and sat, legs crossed, as she dug her fingers into the grass and earth. Such a simple pleasure, something she'd never thought she'd feel again. Despite her efforts, she *did* cry. She cried softly, silently, thankfully - but she cried. And Snape stayed at his distance, appearing to not see her tears as he looked off to the distant shore.

He allowed her all the time she needed, all the time she wanted; it wasn't until she'd stood and dried her face, speaking softly, that he gave her another look. "I'm sorry," she apologized, offering a very small smile. "I just-"

"It's nothing," he interrupted, looking back to the shore before glancing up at the gathering clouds. "If you're finished," he added, tone only slightly sharp as he headed toward a small row boat, "we should head to the shore."

Hermione looked up at the sky as well, noting that it looked like rain. It amazed her, momentarily, that she could still tell what exactly 'looked like rain.' She supposed that some things were never forgotten, no matter how long they were gone without. Still not questioning his presence, and assuming that this was customarily what those who freed prisoners did, she nodded and climbed carefully into the boat. He followed, pushing them off effortlessly and dipping the oars into the black water.

She watched, holding her tongue; she'd have assumed that he would charm the oars somehow, but he merely used human effort to get them out into the churning water. Waves were capping white in the distance, and she contented herself with admiring the nature around her. She'd have plenty of time to ask questions later. She was sure he didn't want to hear her go on and on and on.

It wasn't long before the spray on her face grew heavier; it was no longer the simply churning of the water that was sending moisture up to greet her, but quickly coming raindrops that started as a mere drizzle. Bit by bit, it evolved into a sprinkling, then a steady rainfall. She turned, looking behind her to see how far they were from the shore. There was no way they'd make it by the time it began to downpour, and she honestly didn't care.

The rain felt like it was cleansing. And, she supposed, it was. In a way.

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The heavier rain felt cool and refreshing on her skin, and she almost didn't hear his voice over the now spattering sound that surrounded them. The loud whisper of the rain on the water was punctuated only by the thumping noise it made when hitting the wooden boat, and the rumble of his voice.

"What?" she called, leaning forward and gripping the edge of the boat to keep her balance. She could feel a splinter digging into her palm, but she wasn't terribly concerned at the moment. He had said something, and it seemed important - after all, he didn't speak often. Not of his own free will, anyway.

He merely looked at her, as if annoyed that she hadn't heard him, and gave a shake of his head. He wasn't repeating himself, and she felt slightly disappointed. Her curiosity had been piqued, and the ruddy rain had ruined her hearing. Deciding it best to not push him, she leaned back and enjoyed the cool wetness until the rocking of the boat was more solid. They'd made contact with the shore, and she happily stood to get out. The wood was slippery when wet, and she caught her balance only barely.

However, the rocking had made it difficult for Snape to stand without wobbling, and he cast her a sharp glare that spoke volumes; he wasn't happy about looking foolish. She quickly stilled herself until he'd tied the boat off and then stepped out onto the land. She waited until he was completely steady before she climbed out, finding her hand in his without any effort.

Quickly withdrawing, she looked around and admired the rain falling down all around them. It was a perfect day to be released from prison in her opinion. *Perfect*.

