

Sovereignty

by broomclosetravenclaw

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Curse-breaker Hermione finds that she needs help from someone who has considerable Dark Arts knowledge--will she ask Snape?

Written for Timestep in the Summer 2007 SS/HG Exchange.

Chapter 1: Curse-breaking

Chapter 1 of 7

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Infractum Prosterno Ac Effligo! The object glowed a bright crimson. The space around it seemed to expand...that was the first sign that something was going wrong. Hermione quickly released her spell on the item and concentrated on strengthening her protection charm. She was knocked backwards as the glow changed to yellow and an explosive energy burst forth, charring everything within its sphere.

Hermione held onto consciousness as she held onto life. She realized a split-second before the explosion that her amulet would not be enough, but if she passed out, that would be all she had. She watched as the object returned to a seemingly innocuous item. *It* should have been charred and black...not the surrounding area. She felt lucky that she had been quick enough to protect herself, as one of her mentors had lost a hand to the same sort of curse, and he had been a much more powerful wizard. Yes, she felt lucky indeed. But that still didn't solve her problem...breaking the curse.

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Hermione had always assumed that she would go to work for Gringotts after Hogwarts, putting her Arithmancy skills to good use. But after keeping Bill company from time to time during his long recovery from Greyback's attack on him, she discovered that she might be better suited to working for them as a curse-breaker instead of just crunching numbers. The stories Bill told were fascinating, and if his recovery continued to go as slowly as it had been, there would probably be an opening. She thought along this path as she had watched while Lupin and Moody, with the help of other Order members at times, assisted Harry in destroying Voldemort's Horcruxes.

After Voldemort's defeat, Hermione began her apprenticeship as a curse-breaker under a Goblin named Tubersnuf. The work was harder than she had thought it would be. Bill's descriptions had made it seem so quixotic, akin to how she had felt in the Muggle world about archeology, she realized. In reality, it was grueling, sweaty work...hours in the dank caves under Gringotts carrying tomes from the library to the reading room to study languages and Ancient Runes, not to mention the Defense Against the Dark Arts training with Tubersnuf that made the classes at Hogwarts seem extraneous. Even though they had studied the Unforgivable Curses and various jinxes, Hogwarts had

just skimmed the surface. Hermione soon realized that when she had thought about curses and the Dark Arts, she had assumed she would be dealing with the Unforgivables. But Tubersnuf had enlightened her; those curses were only given so much attention because the Ministry of Magic had made them Unforgivable. There were many other curses used in the Dark Arts that could make the Unforgivables appear almost tame by comparison. But, like many other things, the Ministry seemed to operate under the theory that if it closed its eyes and couldn't see it, then it didn't exist.

One thing the Ministry could no longer disavow was the existence of Horcruxes. In fact, they had passed a new law declaring Horcruxes to be illegal and to be immediately confiscated and destroyed. More Horcruxes than Hermione had wanted to count had been found in the year after Voldemort's demise during raids on Death Eater homes. Of course, no one had been as obsessive as Voldemort himself, usually having just the one Horcrux. She noted that Bellatrix had two and wondered if it was after the first or second Horcrux that one started to go crazy. The Ministry had been in-charge of the raids, but they had left the destruction of the Horcruxes to the curse-breakers at Gringotts. Hermione knew that most of the Aurors could have handled the job, but thought that Scrimgeour would not even want one Horcrux in the Ministry building.

Hermione helped destroy several of them while under the watchful eye of Tubersnuf.

After a year of studying and training, Hermione's apprenticeship was over. She was kept on at the branch in Diagon Alley, which included having the opportunity for the occasional trip to Scotland or Wales when an object was deemed too dangerous, or at times too large, to be moved. When she was not curse-breaking, she was kept busy studying and practicing to keep her skills honed, or reading up on the assignments other curse-breakers had solved. Hermione found the latter the most enjoyable, reminding her of the times talking with Bill, thinking ahead on her career. She realized now how little knowledge she'd truly had before coming into this job.

Her weekends were spent in her flat, cuddling with Crookshanks and reading for pleasure, although she was not sure *Modern Alchemy* and *Runes Today* would be considered pleasurable for anyone else. Copies of *Witch Weekly* were kept around for when Ginny dropped by for tea and a bit of gossip, and she subscribed to the Muggle newspaper to keep abreast of the happenings in the Muggle world and to have a topic or two to discuss with her parents when she went over for dinner. Her job and its unpredictability was enough excitement, and she tried hard to keep the rest of her life ordinary.

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Hermione was just heading out her door for work when an owl scratching at her window brought her back in. Recognizing it as a Gringotts owl, she opened the window to retrieve the message; the owl did not wait for a reply. Hermione knew this could only mean one thing; she began mentally packing as she read the parchment.

Another Horcrux

Scotland

Open your Floo

Be ready in half an hour

Tubersnuf

She admitted to finding the goblin personable as goblins went, and enjoyed working with him, but she wished he would not be so vague in his messages. With Tubersnuf's brief letters, she was still never sure what to pack, but at least this time it looked like they would be working together. She also wondered why they were traveling to a Horcrux, instead of just bringing the item into London.

Exactly half an hour later, Tubersnuf arrived by Floo, dusted himself off, and asked, "Are you ready?"

As Hermione was answering in the affirmative, Tubersnuf placed the other end of the Portkey in her hand. Then, before she could ask any questions, they were whisked off to Scotland.

Shortly after arriving, Hermione's questions were answered. The Horcrux was a Pensieve. Three Ministry employees were standing around it, staring. The grey mist was swirling inside of it at an alarming rate. No one would even dare to actually try to enter the memory as there was too great a risk that mist was not a real memory. The Ministry workers had tried a few harmless spells to stabilize the Pensieve for transfer to Gringotts, only to have their spells repelled and cast back at them. After that failed, they tried tossing a few inanimate objects into the stone bowl, only to have them ricochet off the surface of the mist, exploding into ash. The image of Dumbledore's hand flashed through Hermione's mind...she shuddered involuntarily. Tubersnuf noticed her reaction.

"Are you going to be able to work on this objectively?" he asked.

"I'm okay, just having a bit of a flashback. I just haven't seen one cursed like this since Voldemort's were destroyed."

"Did you help with those?"

"No, but I watched closely, and Harry and I talked afterwards. The curses were difficult to break, but not impossible."

"Then, let's get to it." A gleam appeared in the goblin's eyes, one that only appeared when he was working and feeling challenged.

**

Hermione gathered her bearings. Except for the charred wooden floor beneath the Pensieve, the small attic seemed otherwise unharmed. Tubersnuf was standing over her, looking, if not concerned, then perplexed. They had exhausted their knowledge and used their last hope of destroying the Horcrux. There was nothing more they could do without further research.

The Ministry employees reinforced the Anti-Muggle charm on the two-room dwelling and left to make their report. Hermione and Tubersnuf retired downstairs to think on the next course of action. After more than an hour of nothing more forthcoming than a lot of pacing, they returned to London to bury themselves under tomes from the Gringotts library and archives. Later, they returned to the small house, Hermione to gather information and Tubersnuf to test the usability of a few spells that some might categorize as Dark Arts; but being a goblin, he had no qualms with using.

The one thing that bothered Hermione was why this Horcrux was just sitting out in the middle of Scotland with no further protection than an Anti-Muggle charm on the house. Had other charms been disabled before the Ministry had found it? And if so, by whom? Or, was the originator of the Horcrux so sure that it couldn't be destroyed that he didn't take any further precautions? With the previous Horcruxes, Hermione thought, she at least had the advantage of knowing who the Horcrux had belonged to. Here, she had no clues.

She walked around the perimeter of the house searching for answers to her questions. She found a small path at the back and walked a few feet. When she turned back, the house wasn't there, neither was the path. She reactivated the Portkey and found herself in the attic again. Some of her questions had been answered, but now new questions were demanding an answer.

A/N: A big thank you to GinnyW for her patience and beta reading.

Chapter 2: Horcruxes and the Ministry of Magic

Chapter 2 of 7

Curse-breaker Hermione finds that she needs help from someone who has considerable Dark Arts knowledge— will she ask Snape? Written for Timestep in the Summer 2007 SS/HG Exchange.

Hermione spent the next few days researching curses and consulting with Tubersnuf, but she found herself easily distracted. She found her mind drifting back to her walk around the house, not on the Horcrux—and she would not find her answer in Gringotts. Hermione left the white marble building early and Apparated to the Ministry of Magic.

The nagging thoughts in the back of her head had led her to question just how the Ministry employees had found the Horcrux. Hermione thought that working for Gringotts would give her some pull for information at the Ministry, but she was wrong. She questioned the three employees that were on the scene, but they were of no help. Determined not to be put off, she rode the lift while she thought.

Employees came and went, purple memos swirled around her. The list of Order members still at the Ministry was short, and even shorter still were ones that she thought might be in a position to help her. The lift doors opened again and she was aware of a tall presence entering the confined space; it was Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Hermione smiled.

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The next afternoon, Hermione received an owl. She unrolled the parchment to find the Ministry's report on the Horcrux and another smaller roll of parchment. The Ministry had received an anonymous letter delivered by a plain, brown postal owl. The letter contained nothing more than an address. The three employees had Portkeyed to the given address, arrived in the attic, and had basically found what she and Tubersnuf had arrived to.

She took the report to Tubersnuf.

"Did you know where we were going?"

"I knew we were going to Scotland," he answered.

"But did you know exactly where? Did you have the address?" she asked, the urgency no longer tempered in her voice.

"No."

"How did we Portkey there then?"

"The Ministry supplied what information they thought we needed and the Portkey."

"Is that the standard procedure?"

"There is no standard procedure when it comes to the Ministry," he said with a slight half-wink of his eye, and if Hermione didn't know any better a grin on his face.

"We need to go back to there as soon as possible." Hermione gathered up the report.

"Why?"

"I need to sort out a theory. It won't take very long."

Ten minutes later they were again standing in the attic of the small house. Hermione left Tubersnuf studying the Horcrux and again descended the stairs and followed the path around the house. This time when she turned back, the house was still there. She walked a bit further, the house remained. She returned to the attic.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" the goblin asked.

"I'm not sure."

"What do you mean?"

"I think this house was protected by a Fidelius Charm."

"Not uncommon with the events of the past several years."

"No," Hermione paused to think, "but why would the Secret Keeper suddenly betray their secret? And for a Horcrux?"

"The more answers one finds, the more questions there are."

Hermione shot a glare at Tubersnuf. She hated when he got all philosophical sounding on her.

She continued on, thinking out loud, "Kingsley must have suspected as much, or he wouldn't have risked including the original letter in his report."

"And your thoughts or progress on the actual Horcrux?" Tubersnuf asked as he continued to study the stone basin.

Hermione crossed her arms, a posture she took in defense when she knew someone else was right, and Hermione knew Tubersnuf was right. Even though she had answered some of her questions, she still found herself unable to focus on the Horcrux.

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The next week proved unproductive in penetrating the curses and destroying the Horcrux. Tubersnuf had been sent to Egypt to organize a shipment of artifacts back to Gringotts. Hermione was exhausted and her eyes glazed over from too many words on a page after about an hour of reading, adding to her frustration.

By Friday, Hermione decided to leave work on time, for a change, and Floo Ginny to see if she wanted to come by for a late tea. The plan was slightly disrupted when after inviting Ginny, Hermione realized that her larder was quite bare. Slightly embarrassed, but wanting the company, Hermione Flooed Ginny back to see if she might bring something for tea, and while she was at it, maybe some tea.

Ginny arrived five minutes later with some Earl Grey, chocolate biscuits, and roast beef sandwiches. Hermione relaxed for the first time in weeks, eating and talking with her friend. As the afternoon turned to evening, tea became wine and seconds on the roast beef were had.

Somehow the conversation ended up on work. Hermione couldn't give the details of what she was working on for Gringotts, but she would occasionally discuss different spells and charms with Ginny; it was sometimes good for her thought process to have an objective opinion.

"So, if someone has invented their own spell and you don't know what that spell is, how do you counteract it?" Hermione asked.

Ginny thought for a moment, chewing on her sandwich, "I think you might gain more insight if you studied the wizard first—gain insight into their personality and what kind of spell they would be most likely to create."

"The problem is, we have no clue who we are dealing with."

"Then instead of trying to come up with a counter spell, you should try to come up with the spell, see if you can curse something, inanimate of course, to have the same affect." Ginny finished off her sentence with a sip of wine.

"No, we have already tried that." Hermione sighed. *What I need, she thought, is someone who has a natural ability for inventing spells and counter spells* She stared past Ginny.

Ginny stood to pace the path Hermione had already worn and think. The movement of red hair sparked a memory—Hermione pictured Ron, hanging by his ankle. A trick Harry had learned in their sixth year that he chose to spring on Ron when he was least suspecting and not in eyesight of any adults, prefects, or a certain cat. The spell, *Levicorpus*, and counter spell, *Liberacorpus*, both written by a sixth year in Harry's copy of *Advanced Potion Making*.

"Ginny, you're brilliant!"

"What?" Ginny looked perplexed.

"I have to go back to Gringotts." Hermione looked flustered. "I need to post a letter as soon as possible."

And with that Hermione disappeared in a flash of green flames, leaving her friend sitting in her flat, and staring after her in the fireplace.

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Hermione spent an hour writing the letter, carefully wording her request for assistance. She had no idea how it would be received. She sealed the envelope, pausing as she turned it over, questioning as to how to address it. In the end, hoping that the owl would know where to find him, she wrote two words:

Severus Snape

A/N: A big thank you to GinnyW for her patience and beta reading.

Chapter 3: Owls and Portkeys

Chapter 3 of 7

Curse-breaker Hermione enlists Snape's help in the Dark Arts. Written for Timestep in the Summer 2007 SS/HG Exchange.

Snape sat staring out the dusty window, engrossed in thought. The faint rustle of feathers caught his attention. He was slightly surprised to be receiving an owl; he wondered who knew where he was. He looked at the black loopy writing and saw only his name; it seemed an owl could find someone *almost* anywhere. It had been years since he had received an owl at his residence. He laid it on the table, taking his time to make a cup of tea before he returned to the letter. He tapped it once with his wand.

Reveal!

He held the envelope up to the window, revealing no hints to its contents through the substantial paper. He studied the handwriting. Finally, he opened it to read Hermione's plea.

Dear Mr. Snape,

I am sure you find this letter surprising, as we have not seen each other for well over a year, but I am in need of assistance. I am now working for Gringotts as a curse-breaker. My current assignment is resistant to being solved. My partner and mentor has been sent out of town on another assignment. Therefore, I thought this the perfect opportunity for some outside help. The reason I am writing to you is for your spell work, particularly your ability to create your own spells and your knowledge of the Dark Arts. I can pay you a small amount for your help. Gringotts will not need to know of your involvement.

Please reply if you can be of service or not.

Regards,

Hermione Granger

Noticing several places where the parchment had thinned due to corrections, he smirked when he realized the worst of it was on the first line, his title. Picturing his former student biting her lower lip as she pondered her dilemma, Severus wondered how many incarnations she went through before she settled on *Mister*. She could no longer call him 'Professor,' yet she surely felt uncomfortable calling him by his given name. And she had actually been one of the few Gryffindors who didn't call him just Snape.

Although the letter had piqued his interest, he found this bit and the lack of pleasantries—obviously the other thinned spots on the first few lines and her closing—the most intriguing. He quickly penned his response.

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Hermione paced her office, waiting. She looked at the clock; it was past midnight. It struck her that the owl could find her at home just as well as the office and that Snape could be hours away from replying. Sleep eluded her as every small noise had her sitting up in bed, looking for an owl. It was still dark out when his response came. Hermione hurriedly tore open the envelope and read one word:

Yes.

Responding quickly, she asked him if they could meet at her flat and gave him her address. Hermione was hesitant at first about meeting at her place, but saw no other way to keep his help a secret. She knew it was slightly risky to Portkey in, but the times she and Tubersnuf had been back there, no one had been there or seen them.

With only a few hours sleep, Hermione paced between the rooms of her flat, occasionally passing through the loo to check her reflection. A firm knock made her jump. She straightened her robes and opened the door to reveal a man who hadn't changed since her school days. His robes were showing signs of wear, and something was different about his eyes, a tiredness she hadn't seen before maybe, but it was definitely Severus Snape on her doorstep.

Snape was unsure of what the day held for him. Hermione had been more than vague in her correspondence, which he appreciated from his days as a spy, but found aggravating when he was on the other end.

"Well?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

Hermione realized that she had not spoken. "Oh, come in please."

He took two steps to clear the door, still looking at her with raised brows.

What was I thinking when I decided to write him for help. I must have been... well, not drunk, but I had been drinking. Hermione turned and led the way to the sitting room. She was slightly nervous, and she was not sure if it was because she did not know what to expect, or if it was because she knew exactly what to expect. She reconciled herself to the fact that the man now sitting across from her would have some affect on her, took a deep breath, and began.

"As you know, I am a curse-breaker. I finished my apprenticeship and have had successes of my own." She felt the need to express her accomplishments. "But, this last case has left both me and Tubersnuf baffled."

"Tubersnuf?" he asked.

"My mentor and now partner," Hermione answered.

"A goblin, I take it, from the name?"

"Yes."

"You may very well know as much about the Dark Arts now as I do," Snape said, narrowing his eyes.

Was that an off-handed compliment or a cutting comment directed at the goblins? Hermione wondered, but continued.

"Despite how knowledgeable goblins may be at the Dark Arts, we have exhausted our research and talents on this latest curse. I am not sure if I can explain the details of it properly, so I think it best if I take you to it for you to have a look first, and then we can either discuss it or you can read my notes." There she had given him options, she thought; he could decide how involved he wanted to be.

Snape had to admit to himself that it was pure curiosity that had compelled him to answer her owl, that and the boredom that had set in after the war. He had gone from being important and needed on both sides of the battle to being needed by no one. At first, he had dreaded his solitude, constantly on the lookout for old enemies, almost seeming paranoid at times. When most of the Death Eaters had either been arrested or accounted for, he found himself relishing the freedom to be himself, accountable to no one. But soon he realized that the life he led did not constitute freedom, but loneliness. Hermione's letter had enthralled him, had filled an empty place in his life, but he was not about to share that fact with her.

"Before we go, I believe your letter mentioned something about money," he said.

"Yes," Hermione said, "I can pay you a little out of pocket now, and if you require more, I can exaggerate my expenses at Gringotts a bit."

Snape inwardly cringed, but kept his face fixed. He did not want to accept money from her out of her own funds. He was set and did not need the money. He had two houses, if you included the dump at Spinner's End, and enough money to live on modestly. He did not mind, however, taking money from Gringotts. *In for a Knut, in for a Galleon*, he thought.

"Shall we get started then?" he asked.

Hermione reset the Portkey, and five seconds later they were standing in front of the Horcrux.

A/N: Lots of thanks and chocolate to GinnyW for beta reading.

Chapter 4: More Owls and Runes

Chapter 4 of 7

Hermione continues her research with Snape's help, but things do not always go smoothly.

Snape stared at the Pensieve. Hermione noticed it took him a few minutes to get his bearings. Without speaking, he went downstairs. Hermione followed him after a minute to find him sitting in the kitchen.

"I'll take your notes and have a look at them," he said callously.

"Don't you need to look at the Horcrux more closely?" Hermione asked.

"I have seen all I need to see." He stood. "Do you have the Portkey?"

Hermione held it out to him.

**

Back at her flat, Hermione gathered up the copy of her notes for Snape. She was not sure what had happened back at that house, but she took as much time as she dared, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

Snape stood by the door, anxious to leave. The old Muggle saying about curiosity and a cat struck him as ironic. He would study her notes and see how far she had got on breaking the curse and then nudge her in the right direction, but after seeing it today, he knew that he would not be able to help her actually destroy it.

**

Back at Spinner's End, Snape poured himself a firewhisky, beat the dust out of a once cornflower blue, wing-back chair, and settled in for a long read. He found Hermione's research quite thorough and was impressed with the steps both she and the goblin had taken in their attempt to destroy the Horcrux. He double-checked the runes she had used and noted her placement using complex Arithmancy. Scrutinizing her notes, he found that she was still depending heavily on knowledge she had learned at Hogwarts; he thought she needed to read some different materials, branch out, and start using her instincts.

Methodically, Snape gathered some books from his own shelves and had them delivered to her flat. He had stayed up most of the night going over her findings. In his dank, dark surroundings, he lost all track of time. He poured himself another firewhisky, downed it, and tried to get a few hours of sleep.

**

Hermione was awakened at dawn to a persistent tapping...or as she became more awake...a banging on her window. A rather large owl was balancing on her ledge with a package dangling from one of its talons, pecking at her window. Hermione rubbed her eyes, trying to focus, as she made her way to the window. The owl hopped in as it surveyed its surroundings.

Hermione tried to get the elaborate knot untied, but after a few moments gave up and went into the kitchen to find a pair of scissors; the owl followed. There was no note, just a stack of books wrapped in plain brown paper, but she gathered they were from Snape. She began to absently thumb through the books until a hoot brought her attention back to the owl. *What?* she thought. The owl was eyeing the toaster.

"OK, now that I'm up, I might as well make something to eat. Would you like some tea as well, I suppose?" Hermione knew she was not fully awake to be talking to an owl. She set the kettle on to boil and put some bread in the toaster and went back to the books.

Most of them seemed to be old Celtic writings. One book was very thin, with a worn crimson cover. She opened it; the strange symbols inside didn't make sense to her, an alphabet, but like no other she had ever seen. Another book was on Norse runes; those were slightly more familiar to her since they had briefly been covered at Hogwarts in her Ancient Runes class. She picked up the small, tattered book again, studying the symbols.

Just when she thought she recognized something, the toaster dinged, and the owl hooted. The water was not quite boiling, but she made the tea anyway. After she had fed the owl and set a plate out for herself, she went back to her reading, eventually setting the slender book aside to examine the books she could read.

Hermione spent the afternoon at Gringotts, combing through the library, looking for anything similar to the unusual writing system. After four hours, she finally found something, a tiny book crammed in a corner of the top shelf. Hermione almost fell from the ladder with the exertion of pulling it free of the other books. But retrieving it revealed to be worth the effort.

The book concerned Ogham, an ancient alphabetic system of the Celts. Slowly, she descended the ladder as she read; the feeling of something familiar struck her again. She needed to go back to the house and take a closer look at the Horcrux. She owed Snape, asking him to meet her at her flat again.

**

Snape had been hoping that he would only have to continue his assistance via owl post, that Hermione would figure out the solution, and then she and Tubersnuf could destroy the Horcrux when the goblin returned from Egypt. But, it seemed Hermione was ready to go ahead full-force with Snape's assistance. He was hesitant, but felt a niggling somewhere in the back of his head that told him it was his responsibility to travel with her to the Horcrux site while Tubersnuf was gone. It was unwise for her to venture there on her own.

**

When they arrived at the house, Snape excused himself to the kitchen. Hermione cautiously approached the Horcrux. She had noticed the inscriptions on the basin, but as most Pensieves had runes inscribed on them, she had not paid them much attention, as she was not planning on entering what it held. She stayed outside the charred circle, but got close enough to examine the writing.

Her suspicions were correct; the writing matched the Celtic Ogham symbols. She berated herself for not noticing the strange runes on her previous visits here while Snape had noticed them after only spending a minute or so in the room. Quickly, she copied the markings on a piece of parchment; she would try to make sense of them later.

Anxious to get back to her flat and work out this newest development, Hermione went downstairs to find Snape, practically sliding down the banister in her haste. She was surprised after they returned to her flat when he picked up one of the books he had sent over and began to read. They sat there in an amiable silence, Snape reading and Hermione writing.

The next few weeks developed a pattern. Snape would read while pointing out pertinent information to Hermione and marking specific pages for her to read. Hermione spent the days reading and adding notations to her research, always aware of his silent presence.

Hermione let out a small squeal. She had finished translating the inscription on the Pensieve. Snape looked up.

"Oh, sorry," she said, "I just finished translating the Ogham."

Snape walked over to her, standing behind her chair to peer over her shoulder. He leaned over her to take a closer look, his chest slightly touching her back. Hermione didn't move, afraid to breathe, not wanting to bring attention to their bodies touching; she closed her eyes.

Snape straightened as he said, "Yes, you did."

"It seems it is just the regular Pensieve inscription, but in a different alphabet. I don't think it has anything to do with the curse on the Horcrux. There is also the symbol for serpent in Norse, but by the placement of it, I don't think it is part of the original inscription but maybe a mark by the owner, a Slytherin perhaps... Wait, how do you know if it is translated correctly?"

He turned and went back to where he had been sitting, the movement stirring the air around her, making her more aware of where their bodies had been touching. As he sat down, he picked up a small book with a crimson cover. Hermione felt foolish. Of course, he had originally sent her the book. She had been so busy trying to find out what those symbols meant, first looking through the library at Gringotts and then doing the translation herself when she could have just asked Snape.

Then the realization hit her; he had been sitting in her flat watching her struggle over learning this new alphabet and translating the inscription. Her face flushed, half out of anger and half out of embarrassment. She lashed out at Snape.

"Why, you could have just told me what it said, instead of letting me waste my time. You knew what it said all along."

"But then you would not have learned anything."

"You are no longer my professor," Hermione said, then added in anger, "nor anyone else's for that matter."

"I've looked over your research and added a few notations," he said coldly. "You should be able to break the curse and destroy the Horcrux now without my help." Snape left.

Hermione locked the door behind him. She took out the rest of her anger on the books and her notes...stacking, organizing, laying them out, re-stacking them. She tried to go over her research, but she was painfully aware of the emptiness without Snape there.

A/N: Thanks and chocolate to GinnyW for beta reading.

Chapter 5: Ogham and Occamy Eggs

Chapter 5 of 7

After alienating Snape, Hermione continues her research on her own. Will she wait for Tubersnuf's return or ask Snape for his help?

Hermione owed Tubersnuf to find out when he would be back. She had reread her notes and Snape's notes and found where they had gone wrong.

Of course, she thought to herself, *if the rune inscriptions on the Pensieve are in Ogham, maybe we should cast our runes in Ogham.*

Hermione began the process of translating the runes she had used to try to break the curse. It was not as lengthy of a process as the previous translation had been as she became more familiar with the symbols.

Hermione received an owl back from Tubersnuf saying that he would be back the next week. Excitement rose in her chest, the adrenaline making sleep difficult, and the days before Tubersnuf returned seemed to drag. Hermione passed the time practicing casting the Ogham symbols until the movements became as natural as the runes she had been casting since her days at Hogwarts.

When she felt confident, she began casting the runes in the circle pattern she would use to break the curse on the Horcrux, but the runes would not cast in a circle, instead seeming to drift on wisps of air of their own accord and then disappearing. She double-checked her figures with Arithmancy, but she could not get them to work. Hermione knew she was missing something important. She rechecked the books that Snape had sent her, reproaching herself for both asking him for his help in the first place and for picking a fight with him.

Hermione penned a letter to Snape, discussing her translation and how she was puzzled as to why the runes wouldn't form the pattern she needed them to. Sometimes writing things out when she didn't have anyone to discuss them with helped her to come up with a solution. She reread over the parchment...still no insight. She folded it and turned it over to address. Her mind and hand hesitated...she wrote *Tubersnuf*.

She paced her flat; it could take a day or more to get a reply back from Tubersnuf.

This is ridiculous, she thought, *I am being juvenile, and as I clearly pointed out to him, he is no longer my professor.*

She re-penned the same letter she had sent to Tubersnuf, and this time, addressed it to the person she felt confident could help her.

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Snape was not surprised to receive an owl from Hermione, but he was surprised at her matter-of-fact statements on her findings and a roundabout pretext for help again...no apologies, no pleas, just stubborn pride. He smirked...she was more like him than she would ever admit.

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Hermione received no replies that evening. She had not really expected one from Tubersnuf, but she had expected one from Snape.

Of all the stubborn, ill-tempered men, I have to ask for help from him.

After ranting to the empty hearth for a few minutes, she thought maybe she was being too harsh on him.

Maybe he has left town for a bit.

She followed that train of thought for a few minutes before she pictured him reading her letter and casting *arIncendio* at it, pouring himself a firewhisky before laughing at her incompetence. (*Well, maybe not the Incendio, but I have smelled firewhisky on him*) Then, hopefully, she thought, *Maybe he is doing a little research before he owls me back.*

Hermione spent a tumultuous evening with the different scenarios as to why she had not received an owl back from Snape.

The next morning, Snape decided she had waited long enough and wrote back a short response:

You have everything you need.

Use your instincts.

Use my instincts? Hermione thought. *I'll bloody well use my instincts to hex him to next Tuesday. What kind of answer is that?* There was a post-script:

If you have any 'questions,' you may owl me.

What? Hermione crumpled up the paper and threw it across the room. *Questions? Why would I ask him anything just to get no answer?*

She decided to go to Gringotts and work on her research there, hoping a change of scenery might encourage a solution or, at the very least, get Snape off her mind.

While at Gringotts, Tubersnuf's owl found her. He had hastily drawn several different patterns with brief descriptions that she might try. His post-script informed her that he would be returning in two days. Hermione smiled; she would be glad to have him back, especially as this case had been so frustrating. She took his letter, her notes, and a small box and, sticking two pencils in her hair, she walked down to the rooms (if dusty caves could be called rooms) that they used when working with unknown spells.

The goblins that worked bankers hours up top wanted to be as far away from the curse-breaking as possible. Tubersnuf had said that working with money had made them soft. Hermione picked a larger room that looked sturdy and not too dusty. The rooms were empty, but she had come prepared this time. She Transfigured the box into a table and one of the pencils into a chair and set to work. Spreading out her notes and the letter from Tubersnuf, she began casting runes in the different patterns he suggested, starting with the simpler forms first, and from her readings on Celtic traditions, paid special attention to the directions, beginning facing East.

It took her well over an hour to get through the easier patterns. She took a small break to read over Snape's small scrawl interspersed within her notes. Hermione had read over them numerous times by now and did not expect to see anything new, but felt the need to feel as if she had consulted him. Finding nothing different, she returned to Tubersnuf's letter and casting runes. As fate would have it, the last pattern she tried held, the runes softly glowing and amber floating around her...she stared at the sight with slight disbelief. Hermione was so excited, she did not know if she could wait the two days for Tubersnuf to return. She sent him an owl on her progress, hoping that he might return a day early. Next, she sent an owl to Snape not really knowing what she expected, but in her own way letting him know that she did not need him to answer any 'questions.'

Hermione began to worry when she had not received an owl back from Tubersnuf by the next afternoon. Her excitement too much for her to try to pretend to be patient, she traversed the upper levels of Gringotts to find her superior and inquire about Tubersnuf and his pending return from Egypt.

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Snape read through Hermione's letter several times. He knew her to be impetuous and was not sure she would wait for her partner to return. Against his better judgment, he decided to make the trip to Gringotts...just to ease his own mind, he told himself. He entered Gringotts on the pretense of drawing money from his account...an amount sizable enough to merit a trip to his vault.

Snape knew enough about the goblins to know that he would not be able to freely roam about, but thought that the more area he covered while there, the more chance he would have of finding Hermione. As a last resort, he thought he may even inquire about her in a vague manner as a passing interest in a former student.

Oh, who am I kidding, they will never believe that I would have an interest in anyone.

With that thought, he boarded the cramped cart and began his journey into the depths below Gringotts.

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Hermione found her supervisor and received distressing news regarding Tubersnuf. A large crate of Occamy eggs had fallen on him. There would be no lasting injuries, but they were keeping him at the wizarding hospital in Egypt for at least a few more days for observation. Hermione was beside herself, not with worry, but with aggravation. She sat down in the lobby to think.

Do I dare venture to that old house on my own? No, too risky She looked around. *What about asking another curse-breaker to assist? Would they feel disloyal to Tubersnuf? Who is available to even ask?*

Hermione thought about Bill, who himself was still out from his injuries. She watched the foot-traffic of goblins, wizards, and a few Muggles go through Gringotts as she tried to find a solution to her dilemma.

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The harrowing cart ride proved too fast for Snape to adequately see in the few doors that he had seen open. Now, with his pockets abundantly full, to his chagrin, he proceeded to the exit. Snape took one last look through the lobby, squinting up the three levels that had hallways overlooking the ground floor. He turned to leave and there was Hermione, sitting within ten steps of where he stood, looking distressed, staring blankly at the daily commotion going on around her. He had closed half the distance between them when her eyes met his. She saw the solution to her problem. She had not sought him out; he was standing right in front of her. Snape gave her a slight nod as he walked past her.

Hermione started to follow him, but knew that was not wise. No one at Gringotts was supposed to know he had been helping her. She turned and purposefully walked back to her office that she normally shared with Tubersnuf, gathered her notes, and Flooded home. As she came out of her own hearth, she heard a knock on her door. She opened it to Snape.

"I seem to have timed my arrival about right; I only had to wait a few minutes. You must have stood there deciding whether or not to follow me longer than I thought you would."

Hermione shut the door behind him a little harder than necessary, wondering how he could be so condescending in so few words. She thought she would have been immune to his remarks by now. Deciding she couldn't exactly ignore him while he was in her flat, and she could use his help unless she wanted to wait for Tubersnuf to return, Hermione briskly walked past him to the couch, hoping he would resign himself to follow her the short distance to the sitting room.

As Snape sat down opposite her, she briefly recapped her letter and explained about Tubersnuf. Snape did not want to return to that house, but knew that he could not let Hermione go alone.

A/N: A house-elf to my beta GinnyW so that she does not have to carry her own Occamy eggs.

Chapter 6: Circles

Hermione and Snape return to the house to destroy the mysterious Horcrux. Will they find out to whom it belongs?

Snape convinced Hermione to wait until the next day to embark upon their attempt to destroy the Horcrux. Hermione awoke early. As she clasped her amulet around her neck, Hermione ran through the steps in her mind. Too anxious to eat, she decided to make some tea while she waited for Snape. Her wait was not long yet seemed an eternity. Upon entering, Snape's brisk manner reminded her a bit of Tubersnuf's.

"Ready?" he asked.

She nodded, and they were off.

When they arrived at the remote house, it looked the same as it had on their previous trips. Hermione approached the Horcrux with more than a little apprehension.

Snape saw her hesitation. "Are you sure you don't want to wait for Tubersnuf?"

Hermione slightly shook her head to the negative and stepped towards the swirling bowl.

"I can help to lead you, but you must break the curse and destroy the Horcrux yourself."

Hermione looked back at her former teacher, took a deep breath and began.

Leaving nothing to chance, Hermione started with the Four-Point Spell. *'Point Me.'*

Her wand spun on her palm, stopping at due north. She turned ninety degrees to face east and began casting the ancient Ogham runes. Hermione rotated in a clock-wise direction, drawing runic patterns in the air, then stepping to the right and forming a new circle oriented south.

She repeated this two more times until the Four Directions each had their own circle, each touching, forming a center over the cursed Horcrux. To complete the Celtic form of the Five Zones, Hermione needed to cast a fifth circle in the middle of the first four, the midpoint being directly on the Horcrux. She stood as close as she dared to the Horcrux and began the final circle; once complete, she would not be able to step outside of the circles until the task was complete.

Snape watched her precise movements slow as she became more cautious. Closing the last circle, Hermione stopped, facing north once again and locking eyes with Snape. Time seemed to stand still, enclosed within the symbols, everything outside looking pale in comparison. Hermione waited for something to happen, a sign that the curse had been broken and that it was safe to destroy the Horcrux—nothing, just utter stillness, except for the swirling mist of the Pensieve.

Snape spoke, "You need to unlock the circles to lift the curse."

Unlock? Hermione stood there looking at the runes floating around her—looking for the key to unlocking them; they overlapped in several places.

"Raise the center circle," said Snape. He sounded far off to Hermione, even though he only stood a few feet away in the small room. For some reason, his logic puzzle with the potions that he used to protect the Sorcerer's Stone flashed through her mind.

She began elevating the circle; it was difficult to move. It seemed to lift a little and then slide back down. Hermione thought she maybe should have waited for Tubersnuf; two wands may have made the lifting less demanding. As it was though, she had to complete the task she had started. She concentrated all her efforts at hoisting the center circle and began making progress.

Suddenly, it dropped back down several feet with a large gust, the symbols shattering across the room in an outward wave, throwing everything in the attic, including every speck of dust, against one of the four walls. Hermione was not sure if standing in the center of the circle or the dragon amulet that Bill had given her from Egypt when she started her job had saved her from the blast. Snape had not been so lucky. He was lying slumped against the eastern wall. Hermione stood in the middle of the remaining four circles, unable to help him until she finished her task.

She had little time to worry about him as the remaining circles began to drift apart, opening the center. The Horcrux seemed to be highlighted amongst the aperture. Hermione noticed a movement that was not the swirling of the foggy mist. The marking of the serpent that had been on the outside of the Pensieve was growing larger and coiling around the basin. Its head made it around to the side Hermione stood on; it reared up to half her height, hissing and looking her in the eye threateningly.

Hermione froze. She was trying to recall everything she knew about serpents, but there was no time—the serpent rose up further. Hermione instinctively shot blue flames out of the end of her wand; the serpent disappeared in a blinding flash, leaving nothing but a smoky outline.

Hermione's attention turned back to the Pensieve; the mist had slowed down, and a form was rising out of the miasma. The figure seemed oddly familiar. When it had fully taken shape, Hermione found herself staring at a small ghostly image of Snape. She was taken aback; she felt her knees weaken, but she managed to remain standing—staring.

The figure turned and began speaking. Hermione didn't want to hear what he had to say, but at the same time felt she must. The image spoke of killings, whom he had killed to make the Horcrux. He referred to where he was the night the Potters had been attacked. He spoke of furtive meetings and secrets concealed, using names she knew and those she had never heard before. Hermione only heard half of what was said, her mind reeling. The image sunk back down into the mist. Hermione felt betrayed and angry at the man lying unconscious across the room from her. She raised her wand. *Prosterno Ac Efflectum!* The Pensieve turned to dust.

Snape regained consciousness just in time to see Hermione destroy his Horcrux. He felt a sense of sadness and relief. He tentatively stood, leaning heavily on the wall for support. Hermione stood there staring at him, her face and hair slightly damp from her efforts with a look he couldn't quite place. When his eyes met hers, he recognized it as disappointment, then anger.

Hermione walked over to him, looked him up and down and said, "Harry was right; you are a coward. Your whole life—never standing up for yourself, killing for Voldemort, leaving me to destroy your Horcrux."

Hermione was so upset, she only wanted to leave, but she also wanted to know why, so she asked the simple one-word question, "Why?"

Snape did not answer. He was still a bit unsteady, but not too woozy to realize that she had said Potter was right ~~and~~ called him a coward in the same sentence. He wanted to scream at her his reasons for everything he had done since joining the Death Eaters to standing in this room with her.

Instead, he said, "Get out of *my* house!"

Hermione snatched up the Portkey and left.

A/N: Thank you to GinnyW for beta reading.

Chapter 7: Truths

Chapter 7 of 7

After the Horcrux is destroyed, Snape and Hermione have another meeting.

Snape had spent enough time alone to contemplate his decisions in life, banishing some memories temporarily with firewhisky and others more permanently in a Pensieve, to know that Hermione had been partially right. He had never felt the need to explain himself to anyone other than Dumbledore before, until now.

★★

Hermione was awake when a knock on her door made her look at the clock. Most people would have still been asleep, but as sleep had eluded her for the past few days, she had become closely acquainted with the first light of dawn. She sat staring at the door, thinking that the person on the other side might be inclined to leave if no one answered. The knock came again, harder this time.

She shuffled her way to the door. "Who is it?"

Snape paused on the other side of the door. He finally answered, "Severus Snape."

He was not sure if the door would open at that point, so he added, "I've come to collect the money for helping you."

After a minute, the door opened and Hermione threw a drawstring pouch at him. He stepped in before she could slam the door shut.

"I thought I should answer your question also."

Hermione looked at him, confused.

"The why," he answered her look.

"I made the Horcrux to protect myself. If Voldemort ever found out that I was spying for Dumbledore and working for the Order, he would have killed me on the spot. His suspicions would have been enough; there would have been no warning. I had valuable information that Dumbledore and the Order would need.

"I was not always able to share everything with Dumbledore, but upon my death, I needed a way to tell him everything, so I put the memories that he would need in a Pensieve. Then when the times got darker, I became afraid that some memories may never make it to Dumbledore. So, I decided to create a Horcrux, and the Pensieve seemed the perfect tool."

Hermione was still standing with her hand on the doorknob, prepared to open the door again, this time for him to leave.

"And these memories?" she asked.

"You destroyed them."

She knew she could not enter his mind to see if what he was saying was the truth. Deceit had poisoned her trust of him more than once.

"You could have stopped me."

"After I had gone to the effort of revealing the location of the Horcrux? No, I needed it destroyed. Once I sent that owl to the Ministry, there was no turning back." Snape leaned into her and whispered. "I just never expected it would be you destroying it." He turned and found the nearest chair, fatigue catching up to him.

"Why would you give away the location? If you were the Secret Keeper, no one would need to ever be the wiser." Hermione had a tinge of doubt in her voice.

"The house was protected by a Fidelus Charm. Of course, Dumbledore had the address, along with a few Order members. With Voldemort gone, there is no longer a need for those memories."

"And?" Hermione pried. "I am supposed to believe that you would just give up a chance at a second life?"

"After all the things I have seen and had to do in this life, yes," he said. "A Horcrux is one piece of Dark magic that I do not want held over my head for the rest of my life. If someone had wanted to use it against me, they could have. It is better that it has been destroyed."

Hermione sat down on the ottoman, looking at him closely for the first time since he had entered. His face was scratched on the right side, a result of him being thrown into the wall during the curse breaking. She automatically reached up to touch the marks; his hand grabbed her wrist, stopping her. His eyes locked with hers; he turned her wrist over, placed the pouch of money in her hand and closed her fist around it.

"I can't take your money." He stood to leave.

Hermione stood with him; she leaned into him and whispered, "I never expected it would be you helping me."

Snape realized that his hand was still over hers; he gave her hand a light squeeze. Hermione dropped the pouch and squeezed his hand back. Snape leaned down towards her, the space between them just a thin wisp of air. The clock on the mantle chimed the hour; Snape pulled back.

"I should be going," he said, not really wanting to leave.

Hermione nodded, lowering her eyes, and walked towards the door in front of him. Half-way the short distance to the door, Snape reached out for her, catching hold of her hair at the base of her neck, stopping her forward motion and turning her head into him. His first kiss landed on the side of her mouth as he turned her completely to him. His lips pressed hard into hers, forcing her mouth to relinquish, and her body to surrender to his. Hermione felt as if every breath she took was taken from him, drawn out from his body into hers. She was not sure if it was his pulse or hers vibrating through her body.

His tongue breached her lips, his hands tangled in her hair, grazing the back of her neck, making her shudder. Her whole body tightened in response to him. Snape ran his hands across her shoulders and down her arms; he took both her hands in his as he broke the kiss.

"Come with me," he said.

Hermione stood there, her body aching for him and could suddenly think of no reason not to.

★ ★

With the Horcrux destroyed and the Fidelus Charm lifted, Snape set up residence in the small house, making a few modifications and setting up a potions lab. He much preferred the country to Spinner's End.

Hermione had returned the Portkey to the Ministry of Magic after she had finished the case, but Snape had made her a new one that she wore on a chain around her neck just below the dragon amulet. Snape unofficially helped her when she and Tubersnuf had a complicated case, and Hermione unofficially lived in a small country house in Scotland with a man she never expected.

★ ★