Tempestuous Trials

by dacian goddess

With an exciting new career and ambitious research projects keeping her on her toes, Hermione Granger has settled nicely into her post-war life. But unexpected news, delivered in the form of a letter from Minerva McGonagall, compel her to seek out the help of a man she hasn't seen since Voldemort was vanquished.

I. In which there is a secret meeting

Chapter 1 of 5

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Hermione Granger set down her quill at last with a deep sigh and a spine-cracking, muscle-loosening stretch. Before her lay teetering piles of books and the work of over six months' worth of sleepless nights and of impossibly exhaustive research. A quick glance at her watch told her this barely even qualified as night anymore; she counted on the fact, however, that the fruits of her labour would be well worth it.

Another thorough perusal later and Hermione had double checked that everything written on the sheet of parchment before her was accurate beyond any question or doubt. Hermione had never been one to give in to uncertainty regarding her skills and efforts, particularly when it came to doing research; but in this case she checked and double-checked painstakingly. It was imperative that everything was absolutely impeccable if her plans were to succeed.

Hermione rubbed her eyes before stretching once more. She carefully folded the long sheet of parchment, tapping it with her wand to seal and secure it. A few precautionary spells later, she set it on the table in front of her. She would get it to an owlery in a few hours' time; its arrival would come as something of a surprise, to be sure, but Hermione knew how much the recipient would be in need of that research within a few days. Stifling a yawn, Hermione opened a thick binder which was already past overflowing with notes. She flipped through the partitions until she got to a black one, where she filed the duplicate of her research notes; she had made sure to constantly replicate her work as her accumulation and assembly of the information had progressed.

She stifled another, bigger yawn as she flipped through her binder again before deciding she could afford herself some sleep. She had finished the most pressing of the matters she had wanted to achieve. The rest of it could wait until tomorr oh, right, she thought around yet another yawn later today. A flick of her wand as she got up from her seat Banished the piles of books back to their places in her bookcases, sending them zooming past her as she slowly walked to her bedroom.

Hermione made quick work of her clothes as she padded into her bathroom for her ablutions and dropped them into her hamper with a mental reminder to take care of the more menial tasks that she'd been neglecting, before she ran out of clothes or her plates became their own sentient life forms. With a last self-satisfied smile at all the work she had accomplished that day, as well as over the course of these past months, Hermione returned to her bedroom, slid between her cool bed sheets and succumbed to a long, restful sleep.

"You're late, Granger. I may have agreed to meet you after working hours, but that didn't give you leave to make me wait, howeve*fashionable* you might have thought you

were being."

Hermione valiantly resisted the urge to roll her eyes, though she muttered something uncharitable to herself as she negotiated the tables in the small café where she had set up the meeting. Actually, Hermione had really rather known she wasn't and wouldn't be late. Ever since she'd finished her exhaustive research five days ago, she had taken to relaxing with good books and very high-grade dark chocolates, restoring some balance to her depleted intellectual energies by concentrating on nothing but quality literary pursuits.

The fact that she'd spent her days in leisure had given her plenty of time to arrange this meeting with Rita Skeeter and prepare for it. Since the meeting was taking place in Muggle London, Hermione had even left earlier than necessary to account for the distance she would have need to walk to the café from the dingy, secluded alley where she had Apparated.

"Tardiness isn't based on your schedule, Rita. I'm actually quite early. You merely happen to be earlier; but that certainly doesn't make me in any way late," Hermione said tartly.

"Naturally," Rita replied curtly, giving Hermione a dismissive once-over. One of Rita's hands was still tapping an impatient beat on the marbled surface of the table; her blood-red, talon-like nails produced a hollow sound of plastic clicking against plastic. Rita's other hand was curled around the stem of a tall, curved glass; the cocktail inside was an acid green nearly identical to Rita's robes, provoking a mental shudder from Hermione as her eyes got used to the colour.

Hermione took a seat opposite Rita and ordered a coffee from the waitress who had been hovering near their table. The silence between Rita and Hermione was somewhat tense as they waited. Finally, the waitress returned with Hermione's coffee, setting it down deftly on the plastic table between the two women. As soon as they were alone, Rita's mien changed from studiously bored to intently focused; the glint in her eyes was nothing if not avid, Hermione thought. Drawing in a breath, Rita leaned forward slightly, fixing Hermione's eyes with her own.

"All right, Granger, talk. I won't deny that your ideas of mutual benefits have run somewhat similar to mine in the past. Nor can I deny that my little exclusive with Potter made me something of a commodity in the reporting business. However, I don't quite think you've contacted me because of some ardent desire to organise interviews for your famous best friend." Rita's expression twisted into something close to contempt. Now that Lord Voldemort had been defeated for a long enough time, the public's interest in Harry had dwindled exponentially.

Hermione was sure something similar had happened to Dumbledore; she ignored the slight pang that reminded her of the appreciation she'd felt for the wise, powerful, manipulative old wizard. She had read up on Dumbledore quite extensively in the first weeks following his death, of course. Anything on the intersecting history between Dumbledore and Tom Riddle could have helped, she had thought, though her research had largely been covert, so as not to upset Harry. With the thought of Dumbledore's power and achievements in mind, she had researched as far back as Dumbledore's defeat of Grindelwald; that had thrust him briefly into the public eye before the general populace's fickle attention had moved elsewhere.

Rita hadn't exactly suffered for lack of attention, though. While the first hearings of captured Death Eaters before the Wizengamot had been open to the public, she had put her Quick Quotes Quill to excellent use. Neither of the sides facing off had escaped her wrath, and Rita's scathing articles had painted bleak pictures of the Death Eaters being prosecuted as well as of the Ministry of Magic. Hermione was sure she had never seen more objective reporting, much as she was sure that had been the last thing on Rita's mind.

In a surprise move that had proved someone employed at the Ministry was in fact in possession of at least half a brain, the Wizengamot hearings soon became closed, and started being held in secret courtrooms. The idea to decide the venue a half hour to an hour before the processions had to have originated with someone in the Order, Hermione was sure ... Specifically, she suspected, with Harry, Mr Weasley or Ron. That had been the tactic Fudge and Umbridge had employed in their attempt to get Harry expelled from Hogwarts four years previously. Minister Scrimgeour had never thought to do the same when it came to the Death Eater hearings, choosing instead to splutter indignantly in the *Daily Prophet*, making public demands of silence from Rita Skeeter.

The Death Eater Trial Secrecy Statute, which the *Prophet* had 'affectionately' nicknamed the DETSS, had effectively prevented Rita from reporting the goings-on inside the courtrooms. Just as Hermione had expected, that had incurred a vitriolic backlash that the Ministry had had no hopes of containing. Rita's Quick Quotes Quill had gone to work on the prominent Ministry employees dealing with the Death Eater hearings, drawing parallels between them and the dignitaries who had handled each of those same Death Eaters' trials after Voldemort's first fall. The Ministry had been unprepared for such a response from Rita; they had forgot, it seemed, that she had been there at those hearings, and that she also had access to those old Ministry trial archives.

"Besides," Rita continued, "I'm sure you remember the terms on which we parted as well as I do. And yet you contacted me, and took obvious pains to make sure your letter was sufficiently secure and sufficiently intriguing. So," she enunciated slowly, leaning forward just that bit more, "talk; what is it you want?"

Hermione allowed herself a small, satisfied smile. She had been sure the spells she had heaped on her letter would get Rita's attention as much as, if not more than the content would. Hermione had written something quite nondescript, really, merely requesting, or rather suggesting, a meeting for mutual benefits. Given the explosive success their earlier joint venture had enjoyed, Hermione had been sure Rita would read between the lines enough to be interested in what Hermione had to say and to offer.

"What do I want? Why, actually," Hermione confided in a slow, conspiratorial tone, "I want Severus Snape, of course."

Seeing Rita Skeeter splutter and stare in unblinking shock really was a sight to behold, Hermione decided.

II. In which nothing spells worse mischief than two women plotting

Chapter 2 of 5

With an exciting new career and ambitious research projects keeping her on her toes, Hermione Granger has settled nicely into her post-war life. But unexpected news, delivered in the form of a letter from Minerva McGonagall, compel her to seek out the help of a man she hasn't seen since Voldemort was vanquished.

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"You ... want Snape," Rita rasped out slowly, a disbelieving frown etched into her features.

"Snape," confirmed Hermione. Had her expression graced the features of any other person, she would have accused them of being smug. As it stood, Hermione knew she was being smug, but thought highly enough of her reasons that she wouldn't make self-recriminating accusations. And just in case she may have run the risk of Rita also thinking she was being smug, Hermione lifted the small cup in front of her and sipped daintily at her coffee.

"Are you going to explain yourself, Granger, or are you going to hide behind that ridiculously small cup of coffee all afternoon?" Rita growled impatiently, her eyes narrowed.

"I want Snape," Hermione repeated, a wickedly mischievous glint in her eyes. "I want to know everything, and I do mean *everything*, that will be going on at his trial."

"Are you daft, you silly girl? There's a reason Scrimgeour has waited this long and has left Snape's trial for last. Security for these blasted hearings is rumoured to be higher than when You-Know-Who came back and everyone was under suspicion of Polyjuice or *Imperio*." Rita seemed to rattle off her explanation in a single breath, ignoring the fervent nods that showed Hermione was well aware of all of these details.

But of course Hermione knew. Scrimgeour's plans for Snape's trial had been all anyone had talked about at the Burrow for the past several weeks. Scrimgeour had rather high ambitions for this final Death Eater hearing; it appeared he thought it would be all he needed to fully secure his position as Minister for Magic. The irony of it all was that without Rita's activities for the past two months, Scrimgeour would have likely tried to get as many spectators in as possible. Either way, Snape was poised to be the Minister's example.

The intent was to have the courtrooms changed daily; the proceedings were also to take place early in the morning and last until mid-morning, ending an hour before noon at the latest. Speculations abounded over whether Snape was to be interrogated at length, of course; but several rather high-profile witnesses, colleagues at Hogwarts and in the Order, had already been called forward to make depositions during his hearing. Scrimgeour also planned to use as many of the testimonies given by the Death Eaters tried before Snape as he could get away with passing off as relevant ... Which, if Snape's popularity among the Death Eaters was comparable to his popularity among the Hogwarts student populace, could turn out to be quite a few.

Not many Death Eaters had *truly* survived the final battle, though. A number of them had fought too ardently to escape unscathed from a fight everyone had known would decide everything. Others, like Bellatrix Lestrange, had thrown themselves into the fray with all the more ardour once they had seen Harry emerge victorious from his duel with the Dark Lord; Hermione expected they had known they would die and had preferred death to a life in Azkaban without their Master, without a cause and, this time around, without a single hope to escape.

Among those who had been captured, some had still attempted to persuade the Wizengamot that they had been trapped under Lord Voldemort's will by use of the Imperius curse. The tactic had worked well enough at the time of Voldemort's first demise; given that the Dark Marks had once again disappeared from the flesh of the suspected Death Eaters, they had seen no reason why it wouldn't work once more. Some of those who had already been imprisoned at Azkaban for being Death Eaters had tried using the same excuse as well, of course. As Lord Voldemort had been the one to free them from the prison, they had been given the perfect opportunity to claim that the Dark Lord himself had placed them under *Imperio*: a curse of that magnitude, cast by someone of his obvious power, was nigh unbreakable.

In the end, a third at most of Lord Voldemort's followers had faced hearings before the Wizengamot. Some of them, for whom the Ministry couldn't prove any wrongdoing other than being in Lord Voldemort's service, had been given token sentences in Azkaban. They had been the first victims of Rita Skeeter's vitriol, as they had been the few at whose hearings she had been present. Her editorials had lambasted them for giving the Minister convenient, nondescript answers to any and all of his questions in exchange for a drastically lessened sentence in an Azkaban long deserted of its Dementor guards.

Others, like Walden Macnair and Fenrir Greyback, had shocked the wizarding world with their atrocities. Their trials had been lengthier, more elaborate; but they still weren't convenient enough scapegoats for a Minister who seemed to be trying desperately to break all publicly discernible ties with Fudge's old administration. Their Wizengamot hearings had been held behind closed doors, but Hermione doubted they had had much of interest to say, if indeed anything at all. She knew for a fact she would have expected naught but bravado from Macnair, and nothing but threats and insults from Greyback. She hardly considered the lack of reporting from their hearings a loss.

"I know all this, Rita." Hermione huffed somewhat impatiently. "Nonetheless, I can get you inside. I shall simply let you know which courtroom has been chosen as a venue each morning ... And you can certainly get *in there* the same way you got in at Hogwarts during the Triwizard Tournament. Surely you don't expect they'll have any real wards protecting the courtrooms; especially none of the calibre that Dumbledore had been using to guard Hogwarts!"

"That remains a rather large risk that you would have me take, Granger. Which brings us to a very important point ... What exactly is my benefit out of all this?"

"What, do you mean besides being a witness to the most anticipated trial in all of wizarding history?" Hermione enquired none too acidly. The raised eyebrow her retort was met with, as well as the cool, unimpressed look in Rita's eyes, let her know the Animagus was suitably uninterested. Hermione would have expected no less.

Out of all the hearings that had been taking place after the war, the two last were expected to be the most important. Arthur Weasley, Harry and Ron had confirmed this independently, meaning multiple sources within the Ministry had started coming to the same conclusions.

There were merely two former Death Eaters who meant everything for the policies of the current Minister for Magic. The first, and most tactically obvious from a purely political standpoint, was of course Lucius Malfoy. His ties with the former Minister, his status and his respectability were very well known. In 'breaking' Lucius Malfoy, Hermione was sure Scrimgeour intended to show that he would be in no one's pockets, and that he wouldn't play political games. The problem with that, of course, was that many who had fought against Lord Voldemort, those closest to Harry foremost, knew just how fond Scrimgeour really was of playing games, political or otherwise, with the wizarding population.

On the other hand, it was rather fortuitous for the Minister that most of those nearest to Harry also loathed the elder Malfoy with a passion; well, in truth, they tended to hate both Malfoys with a passion, but Draco was among the first to have been acquitted and thus wasn't the most convenient target of their ire any longer. Of course, the Minister couldn't let such a detail pass him by without attempting to use it to his advantage.

In a move that had in turn surprised and shocked a public now accustomed to the DETSS and to Ministerial secrecy, Scrimgeour had declared Lucius Malfoy's trial open. He had likely hoped to use the loathing festering in so many of the newly-prominent and highly respected post-war heroes to compel the majority of them to provide testimonies against Lucius during the hearing. Of course, rendering the trial public had also increased its popularity as a conversation topic and had shifted the bulk of the public's attention from the trial of the other Death Eater that the Minister had a vested interest in, Severus Snape.

Rumours of Snape's true loyalties had surfaced not long after the final battle. Several witnesses from both sides of the fray had seen Severus Snape fight alongside Order of the Phoenix members, his black eyes alight with fervour as he had silently cast curse after curse at his Marked brethren on the field of battle. Hermione had, of course, been one of those witnesses. She had even fought alongside him briefly, before she and Ron had moved with Harry to the front and Snape had cast a curse to deviate a purple jet of light (one disturbingly familiar to Hermione, at that) which had been approaching Minerva McGonagall from behind, and which had looked like it would have killed her.

"All right, Rita," Hermione continued after a breath, "cards on the table for a moment. I shall get you inside the courtrooms each morning; or, rather, give you the numbers of the courtrooms that will serve as venues every morning. In exchange, you can print anything you witness in that courtroom in your editorial. I'm sure the Minister will be just as puzzled by your ability to spy in on his proceedings as we were when you spied on our lessons at Hogwarts.

"Just ... I'd like to know what will be going on in there. And this is one trial where I feel the public deserves, and more importantly needs to know the truth."

"You seem to have quite the vested interest in this, Granger ... Why are you so concerned with what happens to Severus Snape?"

"Because he fought on our side," Hermione answered heatedly. She didn't care how naïve or idealistic her response would sound. "He fought with me; he saved Minerva McGonagall's life, and I'm sure the lives of other Order of the Phoenix members. In fact, I'm not entirely sure he was ever truly on Voldemort's side to begin with ...

Certainly not from the moment he turned to Dumbledore for help and earned the Headmaster's unwavering trust!"

"What do you need me for, in that case? You'll see the whole trial when you testify for him ... So why would you need my *reports*?"

"Funny how that worked out," Hermione retorted bitterly. "Both Harry and Ron stated to the Aurors that I had never left their side for the duration of the battle. 'Why, it would have been inconceivable; the three of us have been taking on challenges together since our first year ... Mione wouldn't have abandoned us willy-nilly during the fight,'" she mimicked acerbically.

"When the Boy-Who-Lived and his bloody 'respectable, upstanding Weasley' best friend both said I never left their side, and then went on to state loudly that they had never even caught the slightest glimpse of Snape on the bloody battlefield, my own testimony was taken as seriously as a statement that I'd been fighting against Crumple-Horned Snorkacks or or bloody Nargles, rather than against vicious Death Eaters.

"Despite Harry and Ron's best efforts, I still intended to testify at the hearing, of course. But with their testimonies discrediting mine to such an extent, it seems I 'would have nothing relevant to bring to proceedings of such gravity'. In other words, though snarled for my ears alone and thus clearly something that never happened, the Minister 'doesn't appreciate a pushy, uppity Mudblood who doesn't know her place'." Hermione's eyes sparkled defiantly at that, though her face felt rather hot and she suspected her cheeks to be quite a blotchy red from her fury ... Which wasn't far from the truth, really they were actually a *very* blotchy red; and though her hair was fairly crackling with magical energy, it was at least still neatly tucked in its chignon instead of loose and puffed up in volume.

"Indeed," Rita said softly after a beat. The menacing glint in her eyes reminded Hermione that Rita's articles targeting her, however malicious, had never cast aspersions on her parentage as a Muggle-born witch. "If you're right about Snape, Gra Hermione," she added, surprising Hermione by correcting herself at the last minute, "Scrimgeour won't have released Snape fast enough once this trial is over before I'm through with him."

III. In which we join the man in black

Chapter 3 of 5

Hermione has breakfast at the Burrow and we catch our first glimpse of Snape.

Disclaimers of non-ownership here. Neither am nor want to be JKR.

Story written for the summer round of the *SS/HG Exchange* to the prompt '*A liaison between Snape and Hermione which won't evolve in love or babies. Happy sex buddies. It does exist and can be satisfying, respectful and funny*.'

No less than five Aurors, none of them fellow Order of the Phoenix members, escorted Severus Snape into the dungeon courtroom, holding their wands trained on him at all times. In a misguided attempt at a combination between abuse and security (the very definition of what the Dementors had been before they had proved themselves completely outside Ministerial control), Snape's hands and feet had been manacled together almost tightly enough to stem his blood circulation. Apparently, gruff Aurors poking their wands at one's person weren't quite enough in the way of a pointed demonstration of security ... But, of course, the Ministry needed to actually exhibit something that the public and the prisoners could equate to the horrors that had been the Dementors.

When he had been in this position the first time around, some eighteen years ago, Snape had enjoyed the dubious honour of being escorted to the defendants' chair by three of the soul-sucking abominations. Severus had been sure the use of Dementors as ushers had had little if anything to do with subduing rebellious prisoners or with facilitating transport to and from Azkaban. The prison itself was more than capable of performing the former of the tasks; and one would imagine, or at least hope, that wizarding Britain's Aurors were at least well-trained enough to provide secure, competent escorts for weakened, unarmed prisoners. Still, to most witches and wizards, given their weaker constitutions and their propensities to wallow in fear, Dementors were unsettling entities, disrupting their presence of mind and their abilities at coherent thought. Little else could have gone such a long way in making prisoners more amenable to 'cooperating' with the Ministry when the time came for such to be required.

Severus had relied on his not unremarkable Occlumency skills to guard himself from the Dementors' influence during his erstwhile incarceration in Azkaban. He still thanked Albus Dumbledore quite fervently in his innermost thoughts for having discerned his natural abilities for Occlumency and for having taught him that powerful and particularly subtle art. Severus knew he would have barely lasted in the Dark Lord's service, let alone as a spy for or against Dumbledore, armed only with the skills he'd possessed when he had first received those fateful orders from the Dark Lord.

Snape remembered disgustedly how honoured he'd felt when the Dark Lord had 'entrusted him with the most important mission any of his servants could dream of.' The Dark Lord had preyed upon Severus' desire for recognition; he had sent Severus before Dumbledore to secure a teaching position at Hogwarts and to become a spy in the place where the world's most powerful wizard would ostensibly spend most of his time, and where they would hold each other under mutual, intense scrutiny. Essentially, the Dark Lord had, with no small measure of cruel amusement, sent Snape to the wolves.

Severus had been inordinately smug during his first meeting with Dumbledore drunk on the esteem the Dark Lord had deluded him into thinking he had secured. The old wizard had been his usual affable self, listening to Severus' shoddily concocted story intently and without interruptions before fixing Severus' black eyes with a piercing gaze. It had taken all of Severus' concentration for him not to squirm under the weight of those clear-blue eyes. Ever perceptive, Severus had realised Dumbledore could read him like a ridiculously accessible book and had understood just whom the Dark Lord had sent him to face and to fool. As Snape had realised the depth of the Dark Lord's flippancy towards those whose lives he had Marked and commanded, his loyalties towards his erstwhile Master had begun to crumble.

That, in the end, brought him in this highly unenviable position once more ... Unlike the previous time he had appeared before the Wizengamot, Severus didn't have the Headmaster's former Headmaster's, he reminded himself with an unpleasant lurch in the pit of his stomach kindly blue eyes gazing at him in encouragement. Nor did he have his mentor's declarations to confirm on whose side he was and for whose benefit he had been risking his life during these long, torturous years.

Snape tried to take comfort in the thought that Albus wouldn't have left him to take the fall when he had concocted his ridiculous, self-sacrificial plan. Of course, Severus didn't know whether Albus had had an inkling of the kind of machinations Minister Scrimgeour would be setting in place to impede any proper judicial proceedings. Severus expected Scrimgeour would be capable of dismissing virtually any evidence that Albus could have left, on the basis that nothing could be verified if the wizard in question wasn't there to present it himself. Snape firmly instructed himself not to continue with that train of thought and start brimming with even more of this uncharacteristically exuberant optimism. As things stood, he no longer had the power to change anything.

Aggressive hands, hostile growls and pushing, prodding wands led Snape to the iron-wrought chair in the middle of the courtroom where the manacles on his wrists and ankles were replaced with the chains built into the chair. He took a small measure of comfort in the fact that these proceedings would take place in privacy. He shuddered internally at the thought of being made into even more of a spectacle than the Minister already seemed intent on doing.

Hermione sneezed as she cleared the last of the soot from her robes with a measured flick of her wand. With Harry and Ron's budding Auror careers gaining momentum and her own projects becoming increasingly ambitious ideas that she couldn't wait to explore, Hermione had found that she and her two best friends had less and less time to see each other as regularly as they would have liked. Intent on not distancing themselves from one another, the Trio had agreed to convene in the Weasley kitchen at the Burrow every morning to enjoy a hearty breakfast and some light conversation together before going their separate ways for work.

"Oh, hello, Hermione," Molly Weasley greeted her surprisingly warmly. Hermione was quite relieved that Molly had managed to overcome the impulse to treat her glacially; said impulse, a reminder of how vindictive Molly could be beneath her usual veneer of courtesy, had seemed to have been instigated by her split with Ron after the end of the war. Never mind that precious Ronniekins had been the one who had opted to go in search of greener pastures. Molly Weasley had apparently been quite hell-bent on seeing Hermione as the source of any and all of Ron's possible discontents.

"Good morning, Mrs Weasley," Hermione answered civilly. There really was no reason for Hermione to follow Molly's example and treat the older woman in kind, especially now that the Weasley matriarch seemed to be returning to her more affable, motherly attitude towards Hermione. Well, well, Hermione mused. Ronald must have started seeing a witch with whom he was becoming serious enough for Molly and her matrimonial (and presumably grandmotherly) yearnings: desires which strangely enough only seemed to manifest themselves where her youngest son was concerned.

Just as Hermione was stepping further into the kitchen to take her customary seat at the table, a jovial-looking Ginny came bounding down the stairs, holding hands with Harry and dragging him in after her by their intertwined fingers. Ginny's look didn't so much resemble a cat that had got the cream, but rather a cat that had spent the night rolling blissfully in catnip.

"Good morning, Hermione," she trilled, giving her friend a brief one-armed hug before taking her seat. Ginny then encouraged Harry to sit next to her by the judicious use of a jerking, pulling motion which looked like it could successfully be applied as a dislocating manoeuvre.

"Morning, Hermione," Harry greeted once he had managed to seat himself next to his girlfriend and retrieve his hand. Ginny's hand, apparently unable to stand still and function as a normal appendage if it was bereft of contact with Harry's person for more than two seconds, soon set itself on Harry's upper back, massaging the nape of his neck before tangling in his hair.

Ginny, Hermione surmised as she witnessed her friend's clinginess, must have missed Harry far more desperately than she'd let on while the Trio had left her behind in their search for Lord Voldemort's Horcruxes. Ginny had put on quite a brave face when Harry had made the decision that splitting up with her would ultimately protect her from becoming Voldemort's target. Perhaps now she was feeling just that exuberantly joyous over Harry resuming their relationship.

On the other hand, perhaps this behaviour was Ginny's way of desensitising Molly to the relationship, in case her mother would accuse her of being a 'scarlet woman' (incidentally still one of Molly's favourite appellations, and how Hermione managed to think that without breaking into giggles, she had no idea) or of being 'too young', as she had claimed about Bill when his relationship with Fleur had evolved. Of course, where she had been snide and openly dismissive of Fleur, Molly adored Harry to the point of already considering him a part of the family. How that would face up to Molly's reluctance to let her only daughter grow up and let go of the apron strings remained to be seen.

Ron made his way sleepily into the kitchen just as Hermione had taken her seat at the large table. He gave her a crooked smile and a mumbled, "Morning, Hermione," before plopping down into the seat next to her and hiding a wide yawn behind the large palm of his right hand. Arthur Weasley padded his way down the stairs moments later, just as Molly seemed to have finished bustling about with her wand and the pots and pans lined up on the stove. As was their habit, Fred and George Apparated right behind their respective seats at the Weasley kitchen table; their arrival was heralded by a resounding crack, one that Hermione suspected was magically enhanced by the twins to ensure their entrances didn't pass unnoticed.

Ron's exclamation of "Bloody hell!", understandable given that Fred and George had Apparated to his immediate left with a great deal of noise and without any warning, almost drowned out the twins' chanted, "Good morning, Mum, Dad, everyone."

"Ron!" Molly snapped. "Watch your language at the table. And you two," she continued, rounding on Fred and George, "how many times have I told you two not to Apparate in unannounced?"

"Sorry, Mum," Fred cut her off as she was drawing in a breath to continue berating them.

"Yes, Mum, very sorry," George rejoined, the smile adorning his face every bit as devious as the grin his twin was sporting. Fred and George took their seats almost at the same time, having clearly decided that they had baited and aggravated their mother enough that morning.

Seemingly content to leave the twins be for the moment, Molly rolled her eyes and heaved an exasperated sigh; she then placed the results of her sumptuous cooking before them all. Random conversations broke out among the eight people gathered around the table as they all filled their plates and started eating.

Before long, the conversation turned to Severus Snape's trial. Given that Harry and Ron would both be giving testimonies several times over the course of the next few days, the topic was inevitable. Ron started the discussion with his typical brashness after he'd had a look at his watch.

"Oi, Harry, we'd better hurry and eat our fill, mate. We're set to be in courtroom eight in an hour. Don't want to be late...

"I can't wait to see the git," he added viciously after a small pause, enough to give Harry the time to check his own watch and nod. "I reckon being in Azkaban all this time made him even greasier and uglier than normal."

Hermione was impressed that Ron had managed to swallow the last of the morsels he had been chewing before opening his mouth to speak. She imagined the disgust in his voice would have been contagious otherwise, though she certainly wouldn't have caught it for the reasons he had expressed or would have expected.

An ugly look flashed in Harry's eyes as he listened to Ron. Hermione was alarmed to see that the loathing burning in those green eyes was far more intense than it had ever seemed even when Harry had talked of Lord Voldemort. Only the intense fury and concentration in his eyes when he had struck down the Dark Lord had resembled or perhaps surpassed the hatred that Harry's eyes had just exhibited. What was more alarming, though, was how no one else at the table seemed to have noticed or cared. Irrespective of this seeming inattention, Hermione was sure it was more than just her impression that all eyes had, however surreptitiously, been trained on Harry since Ronald had opened his mouth.

This wasn't the first time Harry had blown personal prejudices out of proportion and deluded himself into believing that his fabricated half- or even quarter-truths were accurate interpretations of previously transpired events. Despite the fact that Hermione couldn't be there at the hearings, she was determined that Harry would see the truth that had been staring him in the face since first year. Regardless of the outcome of the trial, Hermione would see to it that Harry understood once and for all where Severus Snape's loyalties truly lay.

IV. In which the trial gets underway

Chapter 4 of 5

Harry and Ron finally make it to the courthouse, Rita Skeeter remains her charming self, and Severus Snape is left to witness the proceedings.

Author's Note: *My apologies for the hiatus enforced upon this story. Health issues and more pressing commitments forced me to temporarily abandon posting, or indeed much of any kind of fanfic-related activity.*

"Come on, Ron," Harry cajoled; Hermione found the asperity in his voice rather pronounced. "It's time to go. Like you said earlier, we don't want to be late."

Hermione looked at her own watch for a moment; they still had forty minutes before the trial was set to start. She wondered if the proceedings would commence even earlier than they had initially been scheduled. Given Scrimgeour's penchant for dirty politics of late, that wouldn't have surprised her one whit. She didn't know whether the Minister expected anyone to come and testify on Snape's behalf though, so she suspected the manoeuvre would be as pointless as it would be aggravating for all parties involved.

"Why are you two leaving so early?" she asked, infusing a tone of genuine curiosity to her voice. "I thought the hearing wouldn't begin for forty or so more minutes."

"It doesn't, but we're taking the Visitor's Entrance this time," Ron explained.

"Less press that way," Harry elaborated. If there was one thing Harry would be most eager to avoid, the attentions of the press would most assuredly be it. "We'll take the Floo from here to Grimmauld Place, then walk from there to the Visitor's Entrance of the Ministry. It'll give us a chance to set our thoughts in order" *get their stories straight, more like*, Hermione thought bitterly "and to practice a spare bit of Occlumency before seeing the greasy git face to face." Hermione was left thoroughly unimpressed by Harry and Ron's exaggerated and obviously fake shudders.

Hermione was glad Molly Weasley came in to do a last-minute bit of mothering on the boys before they left for London; otherwise, she was sure, they would have both taken note of her discontented scowl. While her friends were being so thoroughly distracted by Molly, she surreptitiously slid her right hand in her pocket and palmed the Galleon she had taken to keeping in there. Hermione then slid the tip of her wand out of the holder her sleeve was hiding and touched it to the Galleon discreetly. She concentrated on changing the markings on the coin into the time when the morning's hearing would start and the number of the courtroom. Gathering her focus, she activated the Protean charm, feeling the coin flare slightly in her palm before returning to an ambient temperature. Hermione willed her wand back into its holder, then slid her hand, sans Galleon, out of her pocket just in time to hug Harry and Ron goodbye. She wished them luck at work that afternoon and especially at that morning's portion of Snape's trial.

"Thank you for coming in such a timely fashion, Auror Weasley, Auror Potter," Rufus Scrimgeour said unctuously before leading Harry and Ron into the courtroom. None of the three men noticed the small, rather fat beetle that was hiding under the collar of Harry's black robes.

Harry didn't answer; instead, he appeared to content himself with shooting a look Rita read as part loathing, part dismissal at Scrimgeour's back. He and Weasley seemed rather happy to ignore Ministry official Percy Weasley, who was sitting pompously in the scribe's chair, arranging his parchment, ink and quills; quite as happy, it appeared, as Percy Weasley seemed to be to ignore them, for he never once even glanced in their direction, despite the way Scrimgeour's mention of their names had reverberated through the courtroom.

"or better seat accommodations and capacity ... And here is the prisoner, of course," Scrimgeour continued rattling off an explanation no one had been listening to. The smugness and self-satisfaction in his voice were enough to turn anyone's stomach. By the look on Harry Potter's naïve little face, Rita was sure even the boy had to be wondering at Scrimgeour's motives. If only Potter had been familiar with the old adage of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' ... That should have made him far more receptive to the idea that Rufus Scrimgeour's flagrant behaviour where Severus Snape was concerned had to mean that Harry and Snape were more on the same side than the immature whelp was willing to accept.

Snorting to herself in disgust, Rita turned her attention to the prisoner Scrimgeour was still bragging about. Severus Snape was bound to the prisoner's chair so tightly that his normally pale hands looked very nearly purple. The manacles seemed to release slightly every few minutes, just enough for his blood circulation to resume, before tightening again and making them turn that same all too lovely purplish shade.

Snape's black hair was tangled and matted beyond belief, as though he had spent years in Azkaban instead of months. Rita saw the fading, yellowish marks of several nearly healed bruises on Snape's pale skin. She wondered whether the Ministry had implemented newer, more barbaric interrogation techniques borrowed from the Muggles they so seemed to disparage and despise; though perhaps Snape had been 'given' to the new Azkaban guards as reparation to make up for all the Death Eaters the Ministry hadn't been able to capture or had let off without a charge. Both his robes and his hair were filthy and dark enough for her Animagus form to remain unnoticed if perched atop his form. The perfect vantage point, Rita thought smugly. She was becoming impatient for Scrimgeour to get his pompous arse moving in a more constructive, less futile direction than trying and failing spectacularly to ream praise and approval out of Harry Potter's arse.

"Auror Potter," the Minister's voice echoed in the silent courtroom, "very trustworthy sources close to the Ministry have confirmed that you played a significant role in the protection of the legendary Philosopher's Stone while it was placed in Albus Dumbledore's care at Hogwarts some years ago." Rufus Scrimgeour had cast what he must have thought was a discreet look at Percy Weasley upon his revelation of close sources. Impressively, given the esteem in which the former Auror had held Albus since he'd been appointed Minister, Scrimgeour had even managed to infuse his voice with something that could have passed for respect when he had spoken the great wizard's name.

"Those same sources have revealed that you had been given reason to believe that someone close to Dumbledore was involved in a plot to steal the fabled Stone, and this ever since your investigations allowed you to discover what Albus Dumbledore had been protecting. Now then, Auror Potter, tell us what led you to suspect Severus Snape as being involved?"

Severus bit back an impatient groan at Scrimgeour's unparalleled idiocy. Really, though. He hadn't been one to suffer fools when he had been a professor, and back then he'd at least been afforded minute daily distractions from the sheer incompetence which had surrounded him on an hourly basis. How in the nine circles of hell had his luck managed to land him before one of the wizarding world's greatest arses after months with only himself for company?

"...And he watched me and my friends constantly, always trying to tell us where we should and shouldn't be, especially when we knew he would be up to something..."

How ironic, really; altogether unsurprising, however, for Potter to confuse the roles of the actors embroiled in the plot. Up to something, indeed.

What was truly impressive, though, if one appreciated that sort of thing, was how arduously Scrimgeour attempted to fluctuate between being serious and sycophantic in his questioning of Potter ... *Auror* Potter, Severus corrected himself with a purely mental smirk. Well, well. Not even a full year had passed since the Dark Lord's defeat, let alone the three required for a completion of the Auror programme ... So it seemed Potter was still getting ahead on the hard-earned merit of his famous name.

"...watching me even more in my second year; tried to get me expelled, too, for the stupidest things..."

Severus nearly took to biting his tongue in frustration. How typical that that threat hadn't managed to intimidate Potter into better behaviour. There was one thing he certainly wouldn't deny; of course he'd bloody well watched the boy even more, given Potter's penchant for getting himself into near-death experiences. He shouldn't have expected Potter to understand that, really. Especially when he and that little red-headed miscreant of a best friend of his had been overjoyed at the thought of him being

sacked or killed after he'd spent well over an hour sweeping the Forbidden Forest for them and their blasted enchanted car. Severus had known better than to expect gratitude or appreciation from a Potter, but he had at least hoped the boy would have inherited some of Lily's intelligence or common sense: enough to discern the subtleties of things and see them for what they really were.

Severus rolled his eyes impatiently; still mentally, of course it wouldn't do to give that imbecilic excuse for a Minister even more fodder for this *heroic* crusade of his. He and Minerva had been the only professors who had truly tried to show Potter that fame wasn't everything, and that he would need to apply himself and make the same effort that was and would be required of anyone else should he want to get deserved results. Unfortunately, the boy appeared to suffer from the same affliction of cranial inflammation as his misbegotten father and godfather ... And the majority of the wizarding world, it seemed, was more than happy to further flout the rules in favour of the fame of the 'Boy Who Lived' if it brought *them* enough of a profit.

"...of clearly nefarious intent," Rufus Scrimgeour's appallingly sycophantic voice concluded. Severus was sure the Wizengamot needed to have had a decree in place against speakers sounding so smarmy before them.

"Auror Potter, you have famously declared that you were 'Dumbledore's man through and through'. Clearly, no one who was against you could claim any form of loyalty towards the late Albus Dumbledore. Tell us, Auror Potter, how the accused demonstrated his malicious intent towards you throu"

Severus was beginning to wish quite fervently that the Minister and Potter would get on with it; really. What kind of a shoddy excuse for a testimony was this? Potter was doing little beyond recounting how he'd been 'unfairly' (the cranial inflammation must have made good friends with a Bludger and a few sturdy Beaters' bats at some point, surely; what else had all that Quidditch been good for?) assigned punishments and detentions. Merlin help them if Weasley's testimony for the day would consist of the same regurgitated doxy droppings: recalling cruel lessons which had clearly had nothing to do with disciplining rowdy Gryffindors; mentioning poor marks which had clearly had nothing to do with students' own ovine-like intelligence; and offering up a sob story of the occasional detention which had clearly had nothing to do with rampant misbehaviour and rule-breaking.

Snape felt as though his face had been stuck in a perpetual scowl for the past few days. In truth, the irony wasn't lost on him that he should feel disgruntled at the possibility, particularly given the habitually sullen state of his countenance during his teaching career.

Today was set to be the last day of his trial, and things were looking bleaker than even his characteristically exuberant temperament had prompted him to expect. The testimonies that Scrimgeour had made him and the Wizengamot listen to for the past several days had alternated between irrelevant and insulting. As the proceedings had advanced, Scrimgeour had clearly begun grasping at straws when it had come to painting as black a picture of 'the greasy bat of Hogwarts' as possible.

Potter had been the most prominent speaker, of course. He had rattled off things of little relevance to anyone but himself at first. In the final few days, he had moved on to the events surrounding Albus' death, though the boy had proved once more that he couldn't be counted upon to discern subtleties even when Albus Dumbledore himself had pointed them out painstakingly. And when Albus went out of his way to make a subtlety obvious, it remained as subtle as a phoenix singing as it burst into flames in a pitch dark and inordinately silent room.

For the most part, Ronald Weasley had been there to pay lip service to Potter's own declarations. He had, of course, added his own impressions of how 'terrified' and 'shaken' poor Potter had been after he had come back from the Occlumency lessons. Neither of them had mentioned how Potter hadn't practised worth a damn, nor how he had begun to nearly welcome the dreams that had shown him insights into the Dark Lord's actions. Regardless of how appalling an Occlumens he was and of what Severus had hinted at when he'd performed Legilimency on the boy, Potter clearly thought that Severus had not picked up on his carelessness, lack of interest and effort or sense of self-importance.

The Minister had then provided his own evidence material, consisting of declarations made by Severus' former Death Eater brethren. Snape suppressed a most violently derisive snort at the thought. The lower echelons of the Death Eaters had essentially been an amalgamation of braggart yokels who hadn't carried the ability to hold a wand properly between the lot of them. They had also generally proven themselves brutish enough that any modicum of intelligence in their possession would have been superseded by their baser instincts regardless.

It was unquestionable, then, that they would tell the Minister exactly what he wanted to know if there was an even remote possibility for their sentences to be lessened. Severus took comfort in the fact that the Wizengamot had been present at those hearings and had had ample chances to witness Scrimgeour's interrogation tactics. Ah, well ... it had provided Severus with a small and much-needed measure of amusement to hear the collection of fabrications that those infamous declarations and testimonies had consisted of.

Not many members of the Order of the Phoenix had testified: certainly none of them in his favour. Lupin had been there, still impertinently addressing him as 'Severus' as though they had ever got along, or as though Lupin had ever earned or been given permission to address him so informally. Given Lupin's penchant for being passive and mild, it had surprised Severus that the werewolf had been there at all. He had at least tried to make a show of being neutral, though it was clear that the prejudices perpetuated by his former companions would go undisputed because Lupin lacked the courage or conviction to refute them.

Unsurprisingly, Lupin had blathered on about how he and his Marauder friends had been aware of the hatred Severus had felt towards them. Severus had muttered several highly uncharitable things under his breath about the werewolf and his friends when he'd heard that. He wondered if Lupin truly believed that he'd reached such levels of hatred for Potter and Black on his own and not as a response to unprovoked cruelty and bullying.

Severus had certainly not been a stranger to Black and Potter's antics during his years as a student. He had suffered at their wands more times than he'd cared to count before he had adjusted to the world of Hogwarts and to his own magic enough to begin retaliating. Once Snape had become a professor, he had had access to the old detention records and had seen for himself just how many 'bystanders' there had been to Black and Potter's purportedly harmless fun.

As Lupin had paused, Scrimgeour had turned to Severus triumphantly, staring at him superciliously. Clearly, he had believed that Lupin's answer determined that Snape was the absolute culprit, as the one who hated and held on to grudges for no reason. After a deep breath, Scrimgeour had seemed prepared to move on and commence a new line of questioning.

Griselda Marchbanks had taken advantage of Scrimgeour's pause, though, and had asked a pertinent question of her own one that Snape thought was the logical follow-through to Lupin's previous barrage of statements, but which no one else had seemed ready to ask.

"And tell the Wizengamot, Mr Lupin, did Severus Snape have any reasons for his animosity and hostility towards you and your friends?"

"Well," Lupin had answered neutrally and Snape was at least thankful that the werewolf hadn't seen fit to pity him, "I suppose he has never forgiven the fact that Sirius may have tried to kill him."

Yes, because that was what harmless attempts at fun were made of. Nothing bespoke of innocent pranks more than sending someone to face a transformed werewolf in a narrow tunnel with the exit guarded by a sprightly Whomping Willow. Still no mention of the public humiliations ... At least the werewolf had had the decency to be consistent. In truth, Severus rather preferred not having Lupin add to those old slights the humiliation of making the Wizengamot, the present witnesses and Potter privy to those incidents of old.

Murmurs had broken out among the members of the Wizengamot at Lupin's statement. Despite Sirius Black's exoneration and the enquiry into his death that the Ministry had proceeded with, Black's renown as a notorious serial killer hadn't died out in the least. That Black had been capable and intent on sending someone to his death before he had even become of age would raise quite a few questions, or so Severus was hoping. Whether this aspect of the werewolf's statement would work at all in Snape's favour, of course, remained to be seen.

Though it shattered his heart to consider it, perhaps it was time to accept that Dumbledore had really not left anything to aid him and see him out of this situation. Or that, if he had, Scrimgeour had anticipated and intercepted any such move on Albus' part and had simply wiped it out of existence. And to top it all off, Severus had not been

allowed to speak on his own behalf. After all, 'because the prisoner is known for Occlumency skills the likes of which could allow him to circumvent even the most potent Veritaserum, the Wizengamot has no means of detecting the truth in any of his statements.'

So then, one final witness today and then it would be time to, as his father had had the habit of saying, 'face the music'. Severus sighed wearily as he saw Minerva McGonagall approach and conjure her own chair next to him. He allowed himself a small smirk at her rejection of the chair that the Minister had conjured for her. She was no Albus, but she had clearly learned quite a few things from her old friend and colleague.

Minerva had been one of Severus' favourite professors during his time at Hogwarts as a student. He had tried to emulate her teaching style as much as possible, and as much as had been applicable to the far more dangerous classroom setting in effect with Potions. After he had returned to Hogwarts as a professor and had earned Albus Dumbledore's trust, Severus had forged a tentative friendship with Minerva; their friendship had grown along the years and had become quite precious to him, especially with so few people he either liked enough or had afforded to call his friends.

Snape's hands flexed open and closed within the manacles binding him to his chair. It was the only outward indication he could afford to give of the tension that had suddenly overcome him. Meagre as they were, all his hopes for he'd foolishly allowed himself the luxury of hoping until today now rested on the stern, grey-haired Animagus holding Rufus Scrimgeour's gaze rather defiantly with her own.

V. In which the focus is, at last, on Rita

Chapter 5 of 5

We finally hear Rita's and the boys' sides of the story, and the trial slowly comes to a close.

To say that the wizarding world was in an uproar would be something of an understatement. Everywhere Hermione looked, no matter whom she talked to, it seemed like everyone was in a furore. Hermione was certain sales for the *Daily Prophet* had never been higher, and Rita Skeeter's editorials seemed to be what everyone was talking about ... And for good reason.

Severus Snape's trial had started some eight days ago with all the restrictions in place that the Minister had seen fit to impose. Through her contacts and friends in the Order, those working at the Ministry and those slated to be witnesses in the hearings, Hermione had managed to get the courtroom numbers to Rita every morning: she'd made simple use of the same Protean charm ruse that she had employed when she'd been plotting the making of Dumbledore's Army.

Aided by her proficiency with non-verbal spells, Hermione had been even more discreet in her collaboration with Rita than she, Harry and Ron had been when they had been planning each subsequent meeting of the DA. Back then, the Trio had gone to great lengths to ensure Umbridge wouldn't get a whiff of their plans. Now, though, Hermione had needed to demonstrate a different, more inconspicuous kind of behaviour. This hadn't been the time for the more obvious secrecy of boisterous youths, who, in hindsight, tended to try and hide what they were up to so obviously that one would immediately know that they were diverting attention from a misdeed or two. Instead, she had needed to make sure she didn't appear to be up to something in such a way that no one would suspect she was covering for the fact that she was, in fact, very much up to something.

Rita Skeeter, intrepid reporter and clandestine Animagus at large, had really upheld her end of the bargain quite brilliantly. Unlike the tack she had taken with the previous Death Eater trials and hearings, Rita had rather changed tactics for this occasion. Severus Snape's trial had been intended to be the most important, and the Minister had taken the greatest pains to make it go as smoothly for his plans as possible. Consequently, Rita had rewarded the Minister's judiciousness with devious tactics of her own meant to thrust the trial into all possible spotlights.

Rita had taken to printing timeline-like, snapshot accounts of the daily goings-on in the courtroom in the evening edition of the *Prophet*. That, Rita had reasoned to Hermione, would give readers a general outlook and a raw perspective over what was happening during Snape's trial. It would also allow the public to have a general mental picture of each day's proceedings before Rita's exposés every bit as acerbic as Hermione had expected the editorials to be after her and Rita's meeting twelve days before had ended were printed in the next morning's edition of the newspaper.

True to her word, Rita had also given Hermione full daily reports on everything that had gone on at Snape's hearings. Though uncut, in that she hadn't edited out anything that had gone on at the proceedings, Rita's notes had been full of acerbic asides that had proved as entertaining as they had been useful; in all, they had painted a very broad and comprehensive picture of the byplay and interactions in the courtrooms.

The illustrious Minister greets Potter and Weasley aren't they too young to already be Aurors? I'm not mistaken that you three should be Seventh years, am I? in a sickeningly false affable tone. I've arrived at the Ministry just in time to hide in Potter's robes; interesting use of those Galleon serial markings, by the way.

I can't decide whether Scrimgeour hates Potter's defiance more than he wants his support, though I expect he thinks he's being rather subtle about both.

My, my ... Icy silence between the redheads. Is there a Weasley rift I should know about? Could prove itself significant for those of us who are concerned with Ministerial stability, especially if young Miss Weasley's romance with dear Potter blossoms further still and Potter furthers his career within the Ministry.

Wizengamot assembled already; watching prisoner curiously, almost avidly. Most of them have seen him before what twenty? years ago now. I expect they're curious to see how this wartime's stint in Azkaban has affected him. Snape's condition really is particularly appalling. Filthy robes, tangled and matted hair good thing we witches and wizards have our magic maintaining our usually favoured length of hair; I don't want to consider how scruffy, tangled and unshaven Snape would look otherwise.

Scrimgeour giving Potter, and by consequence the younger Weasley tagalong, grand tour of courtroom and assembly. Potter is sporting a particularly glazed look in his eyes ... I may have seen that look before when I peeked in on a Potions lesson during that lovely time when I was shall we say ***visiting*** *at Hogwarts. The Minister would feel so very special if he knew Potter listens to him as much as he used to listen to the prisoner he's so proud of flaunting.* ***(Note for article: whereabouts of Minister during final battle worth exploring ... in depth)***

"You should have seen the greasy git today, Mione!" Ronald exclaimed with inordinate excitement. He and Harry were seated on the sofa in Hermione's living room, having decided to stop by for a bit of afternoon tea before they made their way to the Burrow for dinner and presumably to spend the night. "I was right ... he *is* loads uglier than he was at Hogwarts. Luckily, there aren't any mirrors at the Ministry; all these secrecy measures would be pointless with mirrors screaming bloody murder every time the great greasy bat passed them by."

"Scrimgeour still sounded like he did when he wanted to use me against Dumbledore, though. I..." Harry let out a rough sigh. He looked rather tired this afternoon, Hermione noted; the defiance that had sparkled in his eyes that morning at the thought of confronting Snape once more seemed to have been replaced with weariness. "I can't believe he actually threw my words back into my face. 'Dumbledore's man through and through' ... he made it sound as though I'd shouted it for everyone to hear ... as though it was just another thing that Harry Potter said to make him famous."

Hermione frowned. She had known Scrimgeour had a disturbing penchant for being tactless. A part of her had hoped that he wouldn't stoop to using Dumbledore, and Harry's affection for the man, even more than he was obviously already intent on doing; not on such a personal level, in any case.

"How did your testimonies go? Did you get questioned a lot by the Wizengamot?"

"Harry was the only one who talked today actually. No time to get past second year, either."

"Scrimgeour asked for details on our investigation on Flamel and the Philosopher's Stone. He knew we oh, all right,," he relented at Hermione's sceptical look, "had initially suspected Snape.

"I still don't think the bloody bastard was completely innocent ... The traitor was probably Voldemort's man all along. Who's to say he wasn't really plotting to steal the Stone for his Master? It's not like he knew Voldemort was on the back of Quirrel's head..."

"So you revealed all those suspicions before the Wizengamot?" Hermione asked. She knew the answer veered from the, "Of course," that Harry replied with and into, "Of course, and I added my own subsequent 'Snape is a bastard traitor' interpretation," which she expected was a far more accurate description of what Harry had likely said in court.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief when Harry and Ron left. She loved the boys dearly, but their stubbornness and refusal to concede that the world wasn't made up of blobs of black and white really exasperated her at times. Quite often, really. Well, all right, lately, a lot.

Potter's testimony is particularly tedious today. He's capping his tragic rendition of, 'Woe, the evils of the Potions Master!' by recounting, in detail, all the detentions he got while at Hogwarts assigned by Snape or not and speculating on how much Snape must have gloated for the duration.

Has no one listened to Potter before, Granger? Has he been sitting on his tale of misery and woe all these years, dying to rant and rage about the smallest perceived slight? Does Potter expect his famous name is enough to shield him from the big, bad world? Questions which may never be answered ... Shocking of me to say, I expect, but I'm suddenly glad it's not my job to ask them.

"Bloody git was staring at me defiantly today," Harry ranted as he paced before Hermione's sofa. He hadn't been able to remain seated for more than five seconds at a time since he'd arrived for a light lunch at Hermione's apartment. Harry and Ron would have to go back to their offices to actually do some work in the afternoon, as Kingsley had assigned them some extra assignments. The boys had received their honorary Auror titles in celebration of their victory over Lord Voldemort and the army he had commanded during the final battle. In order to become Aurors officially, though, they would soon need to prepare in order to actually commence their three year Auror training programme.

"I'm glad the Wizengamot decided not to let him speak," Harry continued savagely. "The bastard would have probably tried to make excuses for all those times he was watching us, and assigning all those unfair detentions, and taking points, and favouring his precious Slytherins..."

Hermione sighed. Ron was nodding fervently, though he apparently preferred to eat rather than get worked up about their former Potions professor. Still, he was seemingly unwilling to sit idly and watch Harry rage when he could just as easily sit and be a corroborating participant.

Given Harry's mood at the moment, Hermione opted not to say anything that reflected her own opinion on the matter of Harry's detentions. She was sure she would get her head bitten off, and it really was the last thing she needed. Harry may have needed to blow off steam, and she was willing to let him do so, but if he turned her into the target of his ire, he would have to find out just how much she'd grown from the girl who would grow meek and placating at his shouting.

Weasley's moment to shine at last ... Weasley the best friend, I mean, not Weasley the pompous scribe. He seems to be regurgitating Potter's story. You'll really have to let me know if these two worked as hard at coordinating their stories as I expect they did.

More tales of woe. Occlumency ... that was the reason Rufus Scrimgeour declined Snape the right to give his own statements; said Snape's Occlumency could be counted on to counter Veritaserum. So Snape had to teach Potter how to do that ... interesting. That's clearly something useful to master if you know it's inevitable that you face off against You-Know-Who.

I'm perched on Snape's shoulder and can feel his breathing rhythm shift and change as we advance. He is exhaling in short, rapid breaths; I think I can even see the slightest hint of a flush creeping into his cheeks ... Obvious anger or frustration, though I expect no small measure of exasperation. Weasley's so-called statement is an exercise in tedious pointlessness. I take Snape's reaction to mean that he put in genuine time and effort to teach Potter this Occlumency. Yes, if anything, this clearly denotes that he was an evil, duplicitous agent of You-Know-Who's all along.

Reading between the lines, I take it Potter never took the time to put in any effort of his own? I doubt this fact will escape the Wizengamot; most of them do have a capability for rational thought. My, what a reliable testimony Rufus Scrimgeour has seen fit to produce for this hearing.

"We finally got to talk about the Occlumency lessons today. We explained to the Wizengamot how the bloody bastard probably sabotaged the lessons, how he always opened Harry's mind." Ron was flushed with excitement, talking animatedly and gesticulating wildly. Hermione thought he should talk about the Occlumency lessons in front of his goal posts when he played Quidditch. The sweeping motions he performed with his arms and hands would certainly improve his Keeper abilities quite dramatically; even Hermione could see that, dispassionate as she was about the 'noble' wizarding sport.

"We told them how he never let up on me and never explained things properly, just using that *Legilimens* spell on me over and over instead of telling me how to shield my mind."

Hermione chose to overlook that Harry's retelling of the Occlumency lessons back in fifth year had indicated that Snape had, in fact, told him how to clear his mind. Hadn't Harry told them that Snape had said something about it being similar to resisting the Imperius curse? Hermione scoffed to herself. Even if Snape hadn't explained anything to Harry, the Hogwarts library had been brimming with books on Legilimency and Occlumency. *She* had certainly explained the basics to Harry, after all ... and Harry could have certainly done even the slightest bit of research on his own.

"I almost forgot to tell them how he refused to resume the Occlumency lessons, even after Remus and Sirius promised to talk to him about them. When I did remember to bring it up, the great bloody git looked unrepentant, as if I could have expected anything else from *him*," Harry concluded in an indignant tone.

Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"What do you mean, 'refused to resume Occlumency', Harry? I thought you had said that Snape had concluded you didn't need those lessons anymore ... that you had learned enough?" Her voice trailed upwards enquiringly at the end of the sentence.

Harry's eyes went wide, and a blush seemed to colour his cheeks as he looked at her and processed her question and what had prompted it. He stuttered for a moment before making a hasty exit.

"Whoa, would look at the time, Hermione. We really, really have to go ... Come on, Ron; your mum's waiting for us. We don't want to be late for dinner, especially if Fred and George get there early. They'll nick all the food again just to spite us."

Hermione watched Harry and Ron Disapparate, her eyes still narrowed pensively. Harry's slip of the tongue had concealed something potentially important, she was sure. She stored the matter away for future contemplation, just in case this was one matter where it wasn't best to let sleeping dogs lie.

It was Remus Lupin's turn to step forward and address the Wizengamot today. He seemed more intent on singing a song of lament for his dearly departed school friends than on providing us with anything particularly pertinent on 'the prisoner'.

"Severus hated James."

"Severus hated Sirius."

"Severus hated the four of us."

If he bloody well hated that lot so much, why is Lupin calling him by his first name? Clearly, they can't have become friends at any point. Unless this is Lupin's way of showing it wasn't from ***his*** *lack of trying ... Gryffindors, honestly.*

...Not you, of course, Granger.

"Well, I suppose Sirius may have tried to kill him."

He supposes? Black either did or didn't ... And by the look on Snape's and Lupin's faces, I don't think it was so much 'tried' as 'intended' and not so much 'may have' as 'at least once'.

Oh, colour me amazed. Lupin managed to convey some gratitude for the fact that Snape brewed him flawless batches of Wolfsbane potion free of charge. Perhaps the Prophet *should do a report on the time and expertise it takes to brew that. If Lupin managed to sound both grateful and impressed, it must be harder to come by than I thought.*

That's an odd way to express outright hate for someone, though. It's an even more bizarre way to express a lack of loyalty for the man who "ordered you to brew it under duress" ***(To explore in editorial: was Lupin there? Does he know if there even****were* ***any orders?)****... Lending all that time and effort to brew the lycanthropy potion perfectly and free of charge is most certainly proof positive that Snape is completely dark and evil.*

"Remus was there today," Harry picked up the conversation quietly. "Talked about mymy dad and Sirius ... how they were at school. Told everyone Snape hated them.

"He did, you know," he continued after a beat. "Everyone says they were good people and loyal to the Order and to Dumbledore. And Snape hated them. The bastard betrayed my parents to Voldemort for a lousy Prophecy he didn't even hear all the way through. He was a traitor even back then. I don't know how Dumbledore could still trust him. He should have known, should have expected that Snape would betray him too."

Resigned to Harry's prejudice until the final hearing the next day, when the Wizengamot would hopefully reach their verdict, Hermione bit her tongue with the effort to remain silent.

I'm starting to think Rufus is beginning to believe that, if he ignores something, that means it doesn't exist. Every morning, before coming into the courtroom, I see him frothing at the mouth while staring at a copy of the Prophet*.*

Oh, well ... I daresay I haven't been making him look too good.

Unexpectedly though, he's attempted nothing to prevent these articles from appearing; nor has he raged, either in court or to the Prophet *about how these reports are a scandalous abomination. Either he realised he had made a spectacle of himself the last time around and decided to desist (and pretend there aren't any articles), or he secretly intended to gain this publicity all along. He must be quite confident indeed that the outcome will favour him.*

Severus hardly dared to breathe as he took in his friend's countenance. Minerva McGonagall was the last hope he dared hold on to for a chance to hear something positive said about him at this trial. Severus knew how very much Minerva had loved Albus, though; he imagined Minerva must have suffered must still be suffering as much as he was over Albus' death. He wondered whether she could speak around the hurt and bring herself to say anything at least not negative, if not positive, about him.

Heart heavy with his own pain and with the resignation that it would have been best if he hadn't nurtured any hopes, Severus turned his attention to his friend and onetime professor.

"Headmistress McGonagall, welcome. It is a privilege to have you before the Wizengamot," Rufus Scrimgeour proclaimed smugly. The reason for his apparent self-satisfaction became clear with his next phrase. "You were one of Albus Dumbledore's closest friends and confidantes, Headmistress. Undoubtedly, the late Headmaster must have confided in you quite a bit over the course of your friendship ... I am sure you are in the best position to tell us what the late Albus Dumbledore truly thought of Severus Snape. Just as I am sure you were in a position to judge whether the accused ever displayed any loyalty towards the great wizard he murdered."

Whatever else the Minister had intended to say was quelled by a particularly stern look in Minerva's eyes. Being able to witness Scrimgeour on the receiving end of such a look made even listening to him blather on worth it. The inanities Rufus Scrimgeour saw fit to pepper his speeches with were about as welcome as it had been to have Neville Longbottom, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle all in the same Potions lessons for years on end.

"Thank you, Minister," Minerva said in a crisp, frosty tone. "I shall endeavour to present the Wizengamot with my personal opinion of Severus Snape if they should deem it necessary. As far as Albus Dumbledore's thoughts on Severus, I should think the Headmaster himself is in a far better position than I am to reveal them."

With that, Minerva wordlessly reversed a Vanishing charm and with it the concealment on a rather large parcel; Severus concluded that she must have perched it on her lap as she had taken her seat next to him. Another tap of her wand unravelled the parcel to show Severus' heart constricted Albus Dumbledore's Pensieve, as well as several vials full of the swirling silvery substance of extracted memories. A rather thick roll of parchment that appeared filled with cramped, minute handwriting separated the vials from the Pensieve.

Intrigued, Severus focused his full attention upon the contents of Minerva's parcel. The muddled senses of his disused magic hummed and prickled with awareness once more. As Severus gathered his concentration, he felt the familiar, precious sense of light and power that he instantly identified as Albus' magical signature. Feeling it in such proximity made him miss Albus terribly, but it also provided a comforting balm to his soul. To his shock, however, another familiar and powerful magical signature, one that surprisingly enough was nearly as present as Albus', imbued the thick roll of parchment and several of the silvery vials.

Severus had known of Hermione Granger's rather staunch defence of him when he had been her professor at Hogwarts. He had thought her absence from his trial had been a clear enough means of expressing that any regard she may have held him in had dissipated under the shock of his last act at the school. So Severus would never have expected her magical signature alongside Albus Dumbledore's in what was clearly a collection of overwhelming evidence on his behalf.

Hermione was on tenterhooks waiting for Rita's missive detailing the final day of the hearings and the verdict of Severus Snape's trial. Hermione and Minerva had been exchanging letters since before the trial had started, and Hermione knew from Minerva that all elements pertaining to Snape's defence would be revealed today during her former Head of House's deposition. She hoped it would all prove to be enough.

A nondescript barn owl tapped lightly at her window. With her heart alarmingly far up her throat, Hermione opened the window, let the owl in and snatched the scrap of parchment off its leg. Instead of the account Hermione had expected, Rita had merely penned a terse note:

Granger,

Certain developments have arisen and I want a clarification. We need to meet; soon.

Rita

Developments? Oh, gods ... Hermione needed to focus. She drew in one breath, then another, until finally she could get her rising sense of panic under control and get a sense of order in her thoughts. The last thing she wanted right now was to waste time and lose her focus.

The terseness of Rita's letter led Hermione to believe that the matters that had 'developed' were quite serious indeed. Hermione didn't think it prudent, therefore, to meet in public, even in Muggle London as they had met the last time around. This wasn't a late afternoon meeting. It was now just barely approaching midday, and this ought to have marked the final verdict being given in Severus Snape's hearing. No matter the outcome of the trial or the development that Rita had in mind, Hermione didn't think it prudent for the two of them to risk being seen or overheard together.

Hermione took a plain, bare piece of parchment off her desk and penned a brief note of her own to Rita.

Rita,

Your urgency is duly noted. The ribbon is a Portkey that will take you to my apartment. Just tap it with your wand and cast a discreet Portus when you're alone and ready to meet.

Hermione

Hermione then took a narrow piece of hair ribbon and touched her wand against it while focusing on turning it into a Portkey with her living room as the destination. The tone of Rita's missive had just made illegal Portkeys that much less illegal. Hermione hastily rolled up her note and tied it with the enchanted piece of ribbon before securing it to the barn owl's leg and sending the bird on its way.

"Find her fast," Hermione whispered to the owl as she held it outside her apartment window to let it take flight.

All that was left to do for the moment was wait. And not think of the worst. And focus on breathing.