

# Anima Mea

*by Proulxes*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 32*

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She dreams.

First.

The smell of sweat, urine and blood; sweet and nauseating.

A horrible gurgling and gasping noise.

Then.

A view of his boots; his heels are scratching on the filthy floorboards.

Moving upwards and into the room, following Harry, now she can see more of the body. Harry's shoulder is in the way. She moves to the right. Finds the empty bottle in her beaded bag, passes it to her friend, looks down at the mess of blood, mucus and silver memories leaking from the face, eyes, ears, nose.

Harry takes the memories. Green eyes look into black eyes. Soon neither man breathes.

Gone.

Two hands shoving Harry forwards – "Go; use the memories, Harry! Ron - go with him – I'm right behind you!"

Moving forward. Hands on his chest, fingers pushing into sodden cloth. Head bows, tears splash onto the bloodless face. Of all the deaths today, later this one will hurt the most.

Suddenly his eyes open again, the chest heaves, his hands flail and grab hers.

Adrenaline explodes in her chest.

Shit!

“*RON!*” She screams.

No one comes...

His right hand has closed over the old Time-Turner that has fallen forward out of her shirt. She is at a loss for what to do. She scrabbles in her bag again – finds the Essence of Dittany –*is there enough?* She is sure there is not, but empties the phial anyway on the pulsing wound. He writhes in renewed pain and she pulls backwards, frightened. As she does so, the fine chain that holds the Time-Turner snaps. Frantic fingers search his coat for anything else she can use; she finds Blood-Replenishing Potion and pours it into his open gasping mouth. He coughs and chokes. It is still not enough. Desperate, she leans forward again towards his face and feels his breath, thin and shallow on her cheek. His eyes are thick pools of pain and frustration and anger. His mouth moves, but he clearly cannot form words; nonetheless she can feel that he is chanting something. Blood suddenly wells through his mouth and nose, diluting the silver streams that had spread on his skin.

“*Ohhhh Christ!* Professor!”

She presses her hands on his chest again. He gasps. His fingers twist the Time-Turner, slick with blood. His eyes burn into hers – was that an apology? Her heart begins to race in her chest as her panic rises even further. His lips are still moving and again she is aware that he is trying to do something, to tell her something. She grabs his hands in an effort to try to focus his attention further.

“Professor – what can I do? I have tried everything I can. We need to get you to the Infirmary, I’m sure that Madam Pomfrey will be able to help you...”

He seems to gentle under her touch, and his lips still but his eyes continue to search hers, as if looking for something within them. His face relaxes, and he almost smiles before finally closing his eyes.

She feels a tug behind her navel and suddenly cannot breathe. His body seems to blur in front of her, through her tears. Reflexively she grips the front of his coat and cries out as a ripping pain pulls through her chest.

His chest rises.

Breaks.

Stills.

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The Black Lake is tranquil and silent as the group of mourners gather.

Memories fragment and move faster.

Images and the memory of emotions flicker past her mind’s eye.

A grey stone coffin, not white like Dumbledore’s. Somehow white marble does not seem appropriate for someone who has spent so much of his life in the shadows.

Ron’s arm around her shoulders provides reassurance but not understanding.

She feels a physical ache that is so profound she can almost feel it like a pulse in her chest and belly.

Harry speaks briefly about lost opportunities and regrets and the nature of bravery.

He seems guilt ridden, but all the survivors share that.

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## 11 years later

She writes:

“*Dear Hermione,*

*I hope that you are okay and work is going well. Life back here at Hogwarts has been pretty uneventful. Harry is enjoying teaching (who would have thought?) and I have settled in as well. The children are both happy living here and Lily loves the animated soldiers that you sent for her birthday -“*

*- too much! If you knew how many times I’ve tripped over the wretched things or found them stuck down the sofas or in her bedding!*

*“...I know that you are really busy right now on your dig, but there is something that I really need to show you at the castle. It’s a bit of a puzzle really, and I wanted to ask your advice...”*

Ginevra Potter paused, squinting at the manuscript in front of her. It had been more than ten years since Hermione had left Hogwarts with Ron and Harry. Unlike Harry, however, Hermione and Ron had not only left Hogwarts, but Britain itself. Anxious to avoid the media attention that had accompanied the fall of Voldemort, Hermione had gone to see her parents in Australia to restore their memories, but she decided to stay once Ron had secured a contract playing professional Quidditch for the Sydney Sirens and Hermione had been accepted onto a graduate archaeology programme at Macquarie University. Since gaining her PhD, Hermione had worked on various archaeological digs across Indonesia and in Europe, publishing her research regularly in Muggle and Wizarding journals.

She and Ron had initially seemed happy enough to Ginny, who did not see them regularly, but as the months passed it became clear that they were growing apart. She rarely accompanied Ron back to visit the family at the Burrow or Grimmauld Place, often citing work commitments or giving other excuses not to be in the UK. They had not married, nor had children, something that had surprised everyone as Ron had made it clear that he had expected children and Hermione doted on their godchildren Lily, James and Albus. After five years, Ron’s contract expired, and he signed for the Chudley Canons.

When Ron came home, Ginny had cornered him at the top of the stairs in Grimmauld Place about the end of his relationship with Hermione. Never one for overanalysing his actions, Ron had shrugged and been evasive. Under his sister’s relentless pressure, he eventually let out that Hermione had changed, become shut off from him and sunk in her work. She was obsessed with finding something important, Ron had said bitterly, something to make her reputation in her academic field. He had angrily denied that there was someone else, that he had done anything to push her away. “It’s almost like she never got over the end of the war, Gin.” He had said and pushed past her to go to the bathroom.

Hermione did not return to Britain after Ron and she split up and apart from Christmas and birthday presents for the kids, she had had very little contact with Ginny and Harry, despite the Potter’s best efforts to keep in touch.

Ginny’s eyes refocused on the parchment in front of her. How to phrase this so that she would come back, then? Too much information in the letter and Hermione would

simply reply to the question. Not enough and she would surely make another excuse to stay in Italy. Ginny tapped her quill lightly on her nose...

"... *It's about Snape's headmaster's portrait; and... erm... you...*"

# Chapter 1

*Chapter 2 of 32*

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## Chapter 1

A/N: Not mine; all characters belong to JKR.... Huge thanks to my alpha reader, beaweasley2, for her comments and support. Thanks also to my beta reader, lyn\_f, without whom you would not be reading this! Reviews are very welcome; I still have lots to learn! Please note that the rating for this story is K+PG for the next few chapters, rising to MA (NC-17) later in the tale...



Thank you to beaweasley2 and Jay for the wonderful banner!

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## Chapter 1

Dr Hermione Granger rocked back on her heels, brushing the dust from her hands absentmindedly on her thighs as she did so. She looked carefully at the image that she was painstakingly revealing with her brush. It was shaping up to be in almost perfect condition, a beautifully intricate example of a mid-first century AD mosaic. She had been working on the dig in Pompeii for the past month, supervising the excavation of a row of modest houses to the northwest of the city with a team of Australian and Italian students who made up with enthusiasm what they sometimes lacked in intuition and understanding. Some instinct had drawn her to this particular area of the house that her team was excavating, and she had been rewarded by the emerging mosaic image before her.

It was nearly noon, and she realised that the sun was becoming painful on her exposed neck and shoulders. She muttered another cooling charm, tilted her hat further back on her head in hopes of covering up the skin that was burning and took a long drink of water. She was used to the weather by now in southern Italy and knew that the other archaeologists on her section of the dig would have retreated sensibly to shelter, eat lunch and chat about the morning's discoveries. She had been so interested, however, in the intricate mosaic that she was busy uncovering from its layer of ancient pumice and tufa dust, so engrossed in her work that she had completely forgotten the time. She could, of course, use spell work to remove the dirt that was covering the original image, but she felt that there were good reasons why the traditional method worked best. It wasn't a matter of skill (her wand casting was excellent, as was her control) but she harboured a romantic notion that she would rather see the layers of dust and damage peeled away by hand, tantalising her with the possibilities beneath.

She returned to her task. Brush. Brush. Blow. The mosaic was about three foot square, each tile about a small fingernail in size. She was working methodically, from the edges inwards. As she worked, carefully brushing away at the images in front of her, her excitement rose. The edge of the mosaic was decorated with geometric designs, interwoven lines of different colours. Every six inches or so, along the twisting design, the artist had added Roman numerals that were arranged in a simple pattern. Hermione paused and frowned, unconsciously chewing her lower lip. The numerals were familiar somehow. Perhaps the colour, the relationship between them... she wasn't sure. Pulling out her phone from her pocket, she took some quick photographs of the designs before returning to the work of uncovering it.

The next stroke of her brush lightly exposed the centrepiece of the mosaic, and it became clear that the central feature held a portrait. Her excitement increased again by a degree as this was very, very unusual. Roman portraits were mostly painted at this time, mosaic portraits were incredibly rare and only one other had ever been discovered in Pompeii before now. She smiled a tight grin of satisfaction. This would be worth an academic paper at least. Another gentle swish of the brush and more colours emerged. Dark hair. *Mmmmm*. That would have been typical of the region and the people who had lived there before the volcanic eruption that destroyed the city. She had another swig of water and absently blew a lock of frizzy hair out of her eyes as she bent again to the mosaic. *Steady... take your time*. Suddenly a voice, a memory from long ago, rang in her mind.

'Be *precise*, Miss Granger. Precision is everything, or the potion will be ruined.'

Another pass of the brush.

More uncovered.

Dust swirled.

Pale skin tone.

Large nose...

Hermione frowned.

Wait! Was...? That face emerging seems familiar? She bent again, heart thudding in her chest, holding her breath, the brush poised in her hand. There seemed to be a strange smell in the air. A metallic tang, like blood...

Suddenly with a snap of wind and wings, an eagle owl swept in front of her, chittering for attention. Hermione shot backwards in shock, landing on her arse in the trench and knocking over her water bottle, which spewed onto the notebook beside her. She swore roundly, slightly ashamed of her reaction to the bird, and glared balefully at the messenger. It was just as well she was alone, trying to explain to her colleagues or students the sudden appearance of a giant bird of prey with a tightly rolled scroll tied to its leg would have challenged even her abilities. She rescued her notes, thankful that she used pencil to record her finds so the dousing had not damaged her records. The bird merely regarded her loftily and proffered its leg.

Hermione patted her jeans pocket, located and withdrew a half eaten packet of peanuts and offered them to the owl. It looked at her with disdain for a moment, picked up the packet in one clawed foot and then flapped off into a nearby tree to eat its unsatisfactory meal. Hermione struggled to her feet, wincing and rubbing her bruised backside. She opened the scroll, her eyes widening in initial pleasure and surprise as she noted that the message was from Ginny, then narrowing as she began to read its contents.

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On his return to Hogwarts that year, Harry Potter had been surprised and upset to learn that Severus Snape had not been granted the honour of a portrait in the Headmaster's Study. A few judicious owls to the Ministry (not to mention *The Quibbler* and the *Daily Prophet*) from The Boy Who Lived and Defeated the Dark Lord, and various shamefaced officials had signed the relevant paperwork, and a magical portrait was promptly commissioned.

"... *Which was only what he deserved, don't you think, Hermione? After all he did for the Order, and dying like that, still loving Harry's mum?*" Ginny added as a chatty aside before continuing on to describe how the portrait painter, Adequus Doge, had arrived at the castle with the finished painting some three weeks later. The portrait ("*...rather too flattering I thought, although I suppose you'd like it,*" Ginny wrote. "*You always fancied him a bit, didn't you Hermione?*") had been attached to the wall in Flitwick's office and the little painter began the spells required to animate it.

And this was when the trouble had begun.

The portrait would not move. It was terribly embarrassing. At first the assembled dignitaries from the Ministry and Hogwarts assumed that the spells had not been done properly, but once several senior professors, including Flitwick himself had checked Doge's spell work and pronounced it sound, they explored alternative solutions. Perhaps the manner of Snape's death had in some way prevented him from occupying a portrait? Perhaps his desertion of the post meant that he could not have an animate portrait with the other headmasters? Hermione's face twisted into a smirk, thinking that perhaps he was simply being a snarky bastard and pretending not to move to piss off the Ministry and, particularly, Harry? Somehow the thought of her sarcastic and acerbic former professor getting a little bit of retribution in this way was strangely satisfying. She found her heart briefly aching at the thought... She returned to Ginny's letter.

Minerva had the bright idea of asking the other portraits in the room for their opinions. None could sense him as they could sense each other. None could offer any suggestion or solution to the mystery. Dumbledore even offered to try to tickle Snape to see if he was faking of course but (to his disappointment and the rolling eyes of other portraits around the room) he could not make his way into the painting to make good on his proposal. Harry had been very upset, and the Ministry officials and press had left that evening with the promise to return if the mystery could be solved.

Okay... thought Hermione. *You said at the beginning that this had something to do with me...?*

Ginny's letter continued: "*So, Hermione, I guess that you're thinking, 'What's this got to do with me?' right about now..*"

Hermione smiled guiltily.

"... *Well, the following morning Harry went back to the portrait to try to figure this out, and he saw that the portrait had changed. In fact the painting doesn't even look like a painting any more...*"

Hermione stopped reading and looked again at the mosaic floor in front of her, its image finally exposed by the wings of the eagle owl as it had landed in front of her.

She stared at it.

She looked back at the page in her hand.

"...*it's turned into something that looks like a piece of mosaic tile instead, and at the bottom of the image there are words written in Latin...*"

Hermione looked again at the first century AD mosaic floor at her feet.

...At the mosaic floor that had been made before 79 AD.

...At the mosaic floor that had been covered by the ash and stone and wrath of the volcanic eruption that had killed every living thing in Pompeii.

...At the familiar image of Severus Snape looking at her, unmoving, from the centre of the image.

...At the shimmering numbers around the edge of the mosaic that seemed to draw her forwards and the slick feeling of magic being awakened.

...At the words on the parchment in her numbing fingers.

...At the same words written in tiles under the figure at her feet.

"*INVENIENT ME*" "Find me," she translated automatically.

"*ANIMA MEA, HERMIONE*" "Hermione, my soul".

She bent down, her brow furrowed with shock. Almost without thinking she placed her fingers on the portrait, tracing the line of his brow, his nose, down to his lips. She remembered the last time she had touched his face like this, and she felt her heart ache again, a wretched, twisting sensation behind her navel and in her chest. So much sorrow and regret. His had been a missed life, no life at all, really. Was hers a missed life also? Her face twisted, feeling a familiar tightening of her throat. She felt like she could cry again easily. As she stroked the rough texture of the tiles, she felt the ache again in her chest, lower even, behind her navel. Regret and loss, an absurd desire and quickening that was not even formed properly, that had grown unbidden over the past years as she had pulled away from other loves and pulled towards this... memory... no, this *hope*...

Her fingers traced the lips again and then moved over the words beneath the portrait, brow furrowed, her lips moving as she traced the words. *Anima mea... Who talks of souls? Who could have made this impossible thing?* She looked again at the numbers around the edge of the mosaic. They seemed to shimmer in the sun, their iridescent tiles flickering fire in the fierce light.

As she touched the glass tiles, they seemed to move under her fingers. She felt a familiar and disturbing tug in the pit of her navel again, and with a quick intake of breath, she found herself pitching forwards, twisting as she dipped and fell.

# Chapter 2

Chapter 3 of 32

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## Chapter 2

Slipping.

Falling, twisting towards the ground.

Darkness. Then a bright light.

Then darkness again.

Heat.

A feeling of compression that stopped her breath.

The metallic taste of blood in her mouth.

Nothing....

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Urgent voices.

Wet on her forehead, in her eyes and nose.

Coughing and spluttering against the water that was being poured over her face, Hermione struggled to sit upright, her arms flailing. Firm hands pressed her backwards and a cloth wiped her face.

"No, no," she said, struggling again to sit up, "Ginny, I'm fine. Let me..."

"*Mendacium tamen, ancilla,*" said a deep voice, shaken and roughened, "*permissum mihi magna...*"

Another voice, lighter than the first said: "*Magister, quid faciemus?*"

"*Da mihi linteam.*" This was an order to the other speaker. The voice was smoother now, more controlled.

She felt movement beside her. "Wha...?" Hermione screwed her eyes into slits, trying to focus on the man who was holding her and now wiping her face. She had the *worst* headache. She could still taste blood.

"*Exspecto,*" the voice spoke again. It seemed to be a command.

*What is that word?* Hermione tried to force her sluggish brain to function. *Wait...?* Hermione put her hand to her face, and was shocked to see that her fingers came away from her forehead bloodied. There was a shift in the way she was being cradled, and she felt rather than saw the swish of a wand followed by a sense of magic in the air. She stared blankly at the blood on her fingers. *I must have smashed my forehead on the pavement* she thought stupidly.

"*Vertere!*" The first man spoke again, and Hermione knew he was a wizard.

Immediately, Hermione began to relax, thinking *Okay... that's okay...*

The man holding her grunted in satisfaction and seemed to turn his attention directly back to her. He wiped her face again, more gently this time, and muttered something under his breath. She could not make out his features in the glare of the sun above them, but there was something familiar about his voice. She tried to push back the foggiest clouding her mind to find the answer. It was still hovering just out of her reach. If she could only just sit up, she'd be able to see his face and recognize him. As she moved forwards again, his face swam once more in her vision, and she felt a violent kick in her stomach. "Ohhh, Gods," she began, but then vomit surged up her throat into her mouth, and she couldn't stop it. The stream hit him square in the chest. It spattered the black tunic he was wearing. He did not pull away from her, although his distaste was evident. With an exaggerated sigh, he wiped her face again with the bloodied cloth.

"Well done, Miss Granger," Severus Snape said sourly in perfectly enunciated English, "you appear to have found me."

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"HAAAAAAAAARRRRRRYYYYYYY!" Ginny's bellow brought Potter running to the fireplace in their apartments. His wife's head was sticking out of the flames in the fire.

"What's the matter, Ginny? Is it the kids?" Harry had not realized that he was so unfit. He sucked air into his lungs in great whooping bursts.

"Harry! Headmaster's office. Get here. Now!" His wife ordered in *that* tone of voice he recognized as meaning 'Don't argue, just do it!'

He grabbed a handful of Floo powder and dived into the fire.

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When he arrived in Flitwick's office, Harry brushed off the soot from his hair and immediately saw a small group of people gathered in front of Snape's portrait on the far side of the room. Flitwick was there, as was McGonagall, Sinistra and Trelawney. There was an excited hubbub of conversation. Ginny grabbed his hand and pulled him forward impatiently. As Harry approached the portrait, the group parted and revealed what they were looking at. Harry stared.

Snape was still staring out belligerently from the frame with the same ancient landscape and belching volcano in the background as before. Standing beside him, however, her arms folded and wearing a frustrated look on her face, was Hermione Granger.

Harry's mouth dropped open. Ginny squeezed his hand.

"Filius called us when he noticed the change a few minutes ago."

The diminutive Headmaster nodded vigorously. "I saw it when I came in. They are still not animate. We were wondering if you had heard from Hermione recently?"

Harry shook his head, still staring at the picture on the wall.

Sibyll Trelawney moaned quietly. Everyone ignored her.

"We need to find Hermione," McGonagall said decisively, pursing her lips in concentration as she cast her Patronus.

"Find Hermione Granger, and ask her to contact me here at Hogwarts," she called out to the silvered cat, which nodded and fled the room.

"She hasn't responded to my owl," said Ginny frowning, "I hope that she's okay."

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When Hermione woke up again, she thought she was on her cot at the dig site. The events of the previous afternoon returned to her slowly as she moved awkwardly on the bed, and her eyes snapped open in shock. Her head still pounded as she moved, and she put her hands up to her forehead to feel the wound that she remembered being there. Her fingers encountered material, tightly bound around her head. She sat up carefully and swayed. A small guttering oil lamp stood on a low stool by the door on the other side of the small room; its light gently illuminated the door and the plain walls but kept the area she lay in near darkness. She could see that the floor was covered with a layer of rushes that emitted a sweet and slightly musty smell. There was a second low wooden stool by the side of her bed. A goblet of water had been carefully placed upon it. She noticed that her bed was a stuffed mattress covered with soft woollen fabrics and some sort of animal skin. Her eyes followed her fingers as they ran through the soft pelt and then settled on her bare knees and lower legs dangling over the edge of the bed. She was wearing a thin shift of fine cloth, rather than the jeans, T-shirt and boots of the dig. She stiffened as she realized that she was also not wearing any underwear. Her heart began thumping irregularly when she realised that her wand was also missing.

Her mind was sluggish. Her memory was returning, but in fragmented slow motion, like an old black and white film from the early days of cinema. She remembered falling towards the mosaic in the excavated house. She must have hit her head when she fell. Putting her fingers against her forehead again, she moaned a little at the swooping sensation in her stomach as she tried to stand up.

There was a slight scraping noise from outside the door to the room, and the door opened to admit a small, anxious-looking figure in a knee-length tunic. He was carrying a wide wooden bowl in both hands in front of him. The oil lamp danced on his rather fine but worried-looking features.

"Mistress," he asked, nervously, "are you needing the bowl again?"

Hermione smiled. Did he think that she was going to be sick on him this time?

*Oh shit!* She remembered whom she had been sick on earlier, and a hand flew to her mouth, causing him to flinch and offer the bucket towards her.

She held up her hand. "No it's okay," she reassured him. "I'm feeling much better. No bowl needed, I hope."

He seemed to relax a little and flashed a quick relieved grin in her direction. Nevertheless, he placed the bowl on the stool by her bed and withdrew out of her reach. He remained hovering in front of her, almost wringing his hands in indecision. His behaviour and mannerisms made her think of house-elves.

He cleared his throat.

"The Master is not here, but he will be home presently," he began. "I am ordered to serve you. Would you like something to eat or drink, Mistress? I can offer you some wine, or perhaps some milk? We have honey, olives and bread..." The little man danced once more on the balls of his feet nervously in front of her. He was looking at her as if she might explode or disappear.

She smiled again, seeking to reassure him further. "Yes, I am hungry. I would like something to eat, but first, please will you tell me where I am, and who you are, and who your Master is?"

The little man drew himself up proudly. "I am called Pertus, Mistress. You are in the house of Severus the Healer," he replied in a singsong fashion like a child, as if remembering long practiced information, "in the street of the courtesans, in the district of the Faun, in the city of Pompeii. It is summer, in the first year of the consulship of Titus Flavius Caesar Vespasianus Augustus."

There was a pause as her befuddled mind sorted out everything he said. The implications were utterly impossible... *There is no...did he say Pompeii in the first year... of...?* No! Hermione's mind suddenly began to work in overdrive as she struggled to assimilate his pronouncement to what she knew about the history of Pompeii and the first year of the consulship of Titus Flavius Caesar Vespasianus Augustus.

"Oh," she said and fainted.

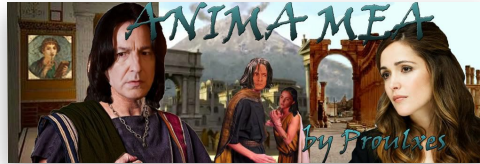
# Chapter 3

Chapter 4 of 32

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## Chapter 3

"Did you not offer her anything to eat or drink, Pertus? Fetch some food."

Hermione could hear Snape's (*Snape's!*) voice. He sounded in equal parts exasperated and concerned. Cool hands pressed themselves to her face and the base of her throat. Her eyes fluttered open. There was more light in the room this time when she looked up at him. It was morning, and the sun slanted in through the open door. His skin was sallow and his nose jutted towards her. Black eyes glittered, his thick brows were angled downwards, and his lips were stretched tightly. It was not quite a sneer, but not far off. *Severus Snape is staring at me*, she thought, in a kind of surreal daze.

"Am I dead too?" she asked softly.

His eyebrows raised, and his lips quirked for a moment in amusement. "I think not, Miss Granger. There is altogether too much vomit on my best tunic for this to be the afterlife." He turned to the table beside her bed and picked up a small clear glass phial.

"But... we buried you," she said stupidly. "I found you after the battle, in the Shack. You were dead. Nagini's bite killed you. I saw you die... with Harry. We took your memories..."

"Yes, yes. So you say, Miss Granger." Snape's voice was clipped and emotionless. "And yet, here we are. Drink this; it will help to revive you and settle your stomach." He cupped one hand behind her neck, lifting her head slightly from the mattress, and tipped the contents of the phial into her mouth. She swallowed, still in shock. The effect of the potion was immediate. She felt her head clear and her stomach unclench.

"Can you sit?" he asked her and shifted his hand to her back to help her upright.

Again, she felt an absurd wrench in her stomach at the physical contact between them, and she reflexively clutched her arms around him as she sat up. He stiffened immediately; his body was very warm against hers, and she became painfully aware once again of the fine cloth that covered her. Immediately she felt her face flush hot with embarrassment and pushed herself away from him.

"Right," she began, determined to reassert herself in this bizarre situation. After all, she was a grown woman and a *scientist* for Merlin's sake! "I have questions," she said.

His face broke into a trademark sneer. "*Really*, Miss Granger," he mocked, "you *do* surprise me. It is, after all, common practice for young women of my past... acquaintance... to fall out of portraits in my house and into my arms."

"Okay," she began again, although the bravado in her voice sounded brittle in her ears. "First things first. What did you *do*? How did you bring me here? I found a mosaic in a house I was excavating in Pompeii, and it was a portrait of you, and Ginny told me that your Headmaster's portrait at Hogwarts had the same message on it as well, and neither image moved, so that must mean that your soul has not moved on, but we buried you. *Buried you*. I saw your body I *felt* it there was nothing left and I saw you die and what are we doing in Pompeii in 79AD, and why did your portrait have that writing on it? How did you think I could possibly find you? *Why* were you asking me to find you? *And where are my clothes...?*"

"*Miss Granger*," Snape cut across her babbling, "if you would be quiet for *amoment*, I will attempt to answer as many of your questions as I can." He spoke quietly, but the effect of his voice was just as it had been years ago when she had been his student. She stilled immediately. *How does he do that?* she wondered, almost blushing.

"In answer to your first question I have no idea how you got here." His face was set in a strange expression, and she thought fleetingly that he was trying to evade her.

"I was reading in the *peristyle*," he said as he indicated the covered courtyard outside her bedroom with a wave of his hand, "beneath a new painting that I have had commissioned. There was a gods-awful noise, and suddenly you appeared out of nowhere and fell on top of me. I am sorry to say that I was rather startled. I dropped you."

Hermione indicated her forehead. "Hence the face?"

"Hence the face, the concussion, *and* the vomit," Snape confirmed drily.

Before she could say anything further, he held up his hand. "In answer to your *next* question, I have no idea at all why we are both here in Pompeii. I have no memory of how I came to be here and no explanation for how I survived Nagini's bite. My memory has become... distorted." His eyes were hooded. "I woke to find myself in this city. To my astonishment I realized that I was alive. My neck was... painful... but I could function." His face twisted into a rueful grimace. "I have recovered from the *attentions* of the Dark Lord on previous occasions. I had not gone to the Shrieking Shack unprepared." There was a pause during which he seemed to be considering something.

"These healed remarkably quickly in fact," he added softly, pulling his tunic away from his neck to reveal the scars of the snake's bite on his pale skin. He wore a thin, bright chain of gold around his neck. It looked incongruously delicate against the ravaged skin. Her breath caught, and without thinking, she lifted a hand to stroke the raised flesh at the base of his throat. She was surprised at how cool his skin felt under her fingers, yet she could feel his warmth emanating from him on the palm of her

hand. Snape stared at her, frozen stiffly for a brief moment, his dark eyes riveted upon her face, his breath caught in his chest. Then he pulled away from her touch as if stung. He glowered at her and pulled his tunic back over the base of his throat.

"I soon realized that I had no means of return," he continued after a moment. "It was obvious that I had travelled in both time and space something that, as I am sure you are aware from your exhaustive reading, breaks several of Waffling's Fundamental Laws." His lips twisted into a wry smile. "So, Miss Granger, I had to begin again and so I have. I do, after all, have... certain skills. As time passed, I garnered a reputation for healing. There are many potion ingredients to be found here or may be gained through trade. I have built a successful reputation through my patron and other... business interests, and now I can live quite comfortably." He gestured to the house around them.

"In fact, I had put much of my past life behind me. It has receded into memory, becoming more and more of an intangible thing almost like a dream. My new reality, this life here in Roman Italy, is in so many ways much more... *satisfying* than my life in your time. Here I am safe and protected. I am no longer the plaything of others. There is *nothing* further that I could want other than to be left alone to live out the rest of my life." His voice had turned bitter, and Hermione, who had seen the memories that Snape had gifted to Harry as he lay dying on the filthy floor, suddenly understood what a new start would mean to him, after what he had gone through for Lily's sake.

"So," Snape's voice suddenly took on a rough and aggressive timbre, "given my evident contentment with my new life here, you can imagine how delighted I am to see you on my property. I suppose that you have come to rescue me and return me to my past life of *fulfillment and happiness* under the Dark Lord."

The injustice of this last statement, and the sharpness of its tone, caused Hermione to remember that she was no longer a schoolgirl in one of his classes. She rallied, sitting up and tilting her chin in what she hoped was a suitably defiant manner.

"Tom Riddle is dead," she said baldly, "and I am not Miss Granger any more. I have a combined doctorate in Arithmancy and Archaeology. It is a very long time since I was your student, and I am most certainly *not* here to rescue you, Professor far from it. I can assure you that I have no desire to stay in this place for a moment longer. Please return my clothes to me and my wand, and I shall leave."

Her bravado did not seem to have the intended effect; after regarding her for a few seconds, Snape snorted, and then he threw his head back and roared with laughter.

"Oh, Miss Granger," he purred, "I'd like to see you try."

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He had refused to return her clothes, sarcastically pointing out the idiocy of walking in the streets of a first century Roman city wearing a Muggle T-shirt and jeans. Instead, he had returned her wand and furnished her with a midnight blue *stola*, the long, loose tunic worn by women of Ancient Rome, with a lovely, voluminous white *palla* to drape around her body as a mantle, and soft leather sandals. He had waved her out of his house with a sardonic grin and raised eyebrow. Unwilling to allow him to see her nervous uncertainty, and still incensed by his supercilious attitude, Hermione squared her shoulders and stepped out onto the streets of Roman Pompeii.

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Of course, he could not leave her to blunder around the city on her own. Since her extraordinary arrival the day before, Snape had been reeling from the implications of her presence in his refuge. His last memory of her had been of her terrified face, slack jawed with dismay and revulsion, which had shifted into a grimace of pain as he had lost consciousness. She had looked so vulnerable through the grime, blood and sweat that had marred her features. *Barely out of childhood*, he reminded himself with a stab of guilt. She had been too young to see so much horror. He knew that she would be safe while she was here because he followed her, keeping carefully out of sight with the aid of a Disillusionment Charm. It had only taken moments to move swiftly out of the rear entrance of his house and circle around behind her. A lifetime of fading into the background, of avoidance and evasion, had taught him many tricks. *Who needs Potter's bloody cloak?* He marked the determination of her stride and the set of her jaw and smiled despite his emotional turmoil, remembering how she had stood up to Malfoy all those years ago.

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Hermione wandered the streets in a state of shock. The city bustled around her, shops and stores open on the street, raucous voices raised in dispute over prices. She found that she could understand the street tradesmen easily enough; Snape's translation spell clearly had long-lasting effects. The archaeologist in her wondered at the dual story buildings (all the remains of the city in her time were chopped off at the ground floor) and also at the colours around her; the bright graffiti on the walls of the houses and buildings along the streets, the fluttering banners and materials in the stalls and hanging from the windows above her. The smells were almost as overpowering as the visual and auditory bombardment. This was a living city which pissed and sweated and stank. It was almost intoxicating.

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He noticed with some appreciation that she had changed over the years since he had last seen her but not by much. Of course, his memories of her were dominated by the image of the insufferable student, desperate for attention and approval. Time had leant her confidence and maturity. He admired the energy of her movements and the assurance with which she strode along the raised pavement. *She had said that she was an archaeologist, hadn't she? This experience must be unlike anything that she had ever expected as she read her books in the library.* He smiled nastily as she swung past a fuller's shop and practically gagged on the stench from the stale urine-filled bowls close to the street edge.

Carefully, he skipped from the high pavement to the crossing posts and on to the opposite side of the street. He noted that she was about to walk past the main brothel in that area of the city. It was certainly not an area where respectable women should walk unaccompanied. Despite the fact that she was dressed as a Roman matron, there was something provocative about the manner in which she walked. Her gait was unselfconscious and open, her attitude was athletic and confident. As Hermione marched on, he silently prevented a would-be customer from approaching her with a flick of his hand and another from getting near to her by a quickly muttered Glisseo Charm, which pitched the man into a pile of ox manure in the centre of the street. She did not notice the commotion around her, as she gazed up and about her in wonderment at the street ahead, drinking in the sights of the ancient city. Snape rolled his eyes. *Stop being a bloody tourist! You're asking for trouble, stupid woman!*

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She took a side road abruptly, heading for the eastern gate of the city. Her sense of direction was quite impressive, given the lack of lines of sight and the confused nature of the street pattern here. She turned left, past one of the city's public bathhouses. Raucous singing could be heard from within. A right turn at the next intersection, and she emerged into the forum, the commercial heart of the city.

Hermione stopped for a moment, taking in the extraordinary sight before her. The forum was a large open space, roughly 40 metres by 120 metres in size, and rectangular in form with buildings on each side. People flooded the space. They were there to conduct business, visit the temples, attend the law courts, buy and sell goods, or just to be out meeting one another. Children ran about chasing dogs or each other. Shouting and laughter filled the air. The impression was of a vibrant city square filled with the bustle of everyday commerce and life. Hermione had entered the forum by an eastern entrance, alongside what she knew as the Building of Eumachia. Her colleagues at Macquarie University disputed the purpose to which this building was used. Some insisted that the huge building was some sort of guildhall for the cloth industry while others maintained that it functioned as a slave market. The building was so named because archaeologists had discovered the name of the woman who had paid for it to be built in the early years of the first century AD, and Hermione realised with another jolt that she could probably lay to rest this academic debate there and then by simply *asking* someone. The thought was at once absurd and exhilarating. In front of her, its white marble colonnade almost completely obscured by temporary market stalls and street vendors' carts, was the Basilica, a cross between law court and stock exchange.

Hermione walked forwards, into the centre of the forum's open space, and slowly revolved around. Her eyes took in the Temple of Apollo next to the Basilica, a huge building faced with white marble. She noted the people gathered on the steps of the temple at the altar. Her eyes moved onwards to the Temple of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. This temple was a much smaller building than the first temple, but it was located in a more propitious position set directly to the north at the head of the forum. To the right of this temple sat the *macellum*, the meat market, conveniently located for the purchase of sacrificial victims. Before these buildings, running along the edges of the



open space in the centre of the forum, was a vast series of columns. These columns were interspersed with statues of famous and wealthy men. Hermione walked towards one, a giant equestrian statue of the Emperor Vespasian. His thick neck and bullish features were clearly recognisable to her. She remembered with a start as she stood there that Vespasian had only recently died and had been replaced by his son, Titus. As she studied the dead Emperor's face, her eyes were drawn even further upwards and beyond his statue, towards the huge bulk of the black mountain that was now visible to her beyond the city, towering above the city's skyline. This was, she knew, Vesuvius itself.

The volcano looked quiet and innocuous, framed against a Mediterranean sky of deep azure blue. As she looked more closely, she saw that its shape was different to what she remembered from her time. Vesuvius in 79AD was a perfect conical shape, its slopes rising with perfect symmetry to its tip. The side of the mountain were crosshatched with vineyards, she knew. The grapes took advantage of the rich volcanic soil and thrived there. Farming was a profitable business, and vast estates called *Latifundia* had grown up outside the city walls, growing food for sale and consumption in the city. As she stared at the mountain, a wisp of cirrus cloud drifted across the peak of the volcano. The effect was not unlike a lazy drift of smoke, and suddenly, as the memory of the eruption of 79AD returned to the forefront of her mind once again, Hermione was jolted back into reality. She had to get out of this place and quickly! Looking around and remembering her knowledge of Pompeian geography, she knew the quickest way out of the city was to head east out of the forum and towards the docks beyond the Marine Gate. Pushing her way through the crowds around the Basilica, she left the forum and made for the sea. Silently, and with interest, Snape followed.

She knew something was wrong as soon as she approached the gate. As she drew closer to the city walls, she could smell the sea air and heard the yammer of the sea birds circling the harbour. Here was escape. She could catch a boat, and... well... after that she was sure that some solution to her situation would present itself. The key was to keep moving. Just so long as she was away from the volcano, she could stay safe. The closer she got to the exit from the city, however, the worse she began to feel. As she approached the huge gates that were swung open to admit the traders and shippers with their goods, she became increasingly aware of the presence of magic. She could feel it thrumming through her chest and abdomen, creating a sickening sensation in her gut. Determined, she pressed on, but as she approached the customs legionary, standing at his station at the opening in the walls, she felt a hard kick in the stomach, a twist in her perception, a blurring of awareness like she was close to fainting, and she found herself suddenly facing another brightly coloured building in a different street entirely.

She stumbled on the rough cobbles, her shoulder slamming into the wall of a cheerfully decorated shop front. Her head swam. *I should be getting used to that here by now* she thought to herself wryly and looked around again. She did not recognise where she was for a moment until her eyes alighted on a familiar mosaic on the pavement across the street from where she was standing. It was of a large black dog, snarling and straining at the leash. The friendly greeting "Beware of the Dog!" arranged in irregular mosaic tiles around the dog's front paws. She recognised it as the entrance to the House of the Tragic Poet, and she knew that she had been thrown back into the western region of the city, just north of the forum. The gate had been warded with powerful protection. Would it be the same of the other gates? Snape had not mentioned anything about this when they had spoken. Although, in fairness, she reminded herself ruefully, they had not had much of a conversation at all. She had snapped at him for his attitude and panicked at the situation and insisted on leaving. Now, as she found herself in an altogether more sinister set of circumstances, she was beginning to regret her high-handed insistence on walking out.

Desperately, she fought down her rising panic. Since the end of the war, she could not bear the thought of being trapped. The year she spent with Harry and Ron evading capture, starving, cold and fearful, had undoubtedly left its mark. She knew that it was a psychological problem. Muggles called it Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Giving it a name had not reduced its effects, however. A wave of nausea struck her, and she pressed her hand against her chest in an action that usually went some way towards calming and soothing the symptoms of her panic. "Deep breaths, Hermione," she muttered to herself, "calm down!" Replacing fear with anger and a sense of injustice had sometimes worked before when the anxiety attacks came on, so she told herself that she was damned if she would return to his house without trying every means of escape. She needed to work out if all the gates were warded in the same way, and if so, where the source of the magic was coming from.

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Still *Disillusioned*, Snape watched her stop in the street and press her hand to her chest. Concerned, he had nearly approached her, only to see that she straightened again, squared her shoulders and continued onwards. He shook his head in disbelief. *She really is remarkable*, he thought grudgingly. As he knew they would, the city wards had thrown him back into the city and to the same location as Hermione. The wards were at least predictable. He wondered how long it would take before she exhausted herself trying to test them. Then he wondered if she would return to his house. The thought was unsettling. He was just about recovering from the shock of having her fall out of time and on top of him yesterday afternoon. He had meant what he had told her about the peace he had found in this city in this time. His memories of his past life were fading fast. Some were mere ghosts. His last memories of the Dark Lord and his near fatal encounter with the snake were still clear and vibrant, but before that it was almost as if there were echoes and impressions. He knew that he had given Potter the knowledge that he must sacrifice himself to defeat the Dark Lord, but he was often tormented by the loss of the other memories that he had also lost to him as he lay bleeding out on that bloody floor. Seeing her face again so close to his own as he wiped away the blood from her grazed forehead, watching her eyes flicker open and widen as she recognised whom she had found, caused him to think again about the action he had taken in the Shrieking Shack in order to secure his survival eleven years ago. He felt a stab of remorse at the memory and then angrily pushed it away.

*He had a right to live, dammit!* After years spent atoning for Lily's death, he felt that he had paid his dues. He had done his duty, done everything to protect her arrogant brat and his friends. He would use any means to enable his survival.

She was approaching the Herculaneum Gate....*Ahh, there it is...* A twist in the gut and a shift of perception, a rush of sensation in his mind... and they were both walking along a different street, heading in another direction. Snape's introspection ceased as he concentrated on keeping her in sight and safe from harm.

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It took her a while to re-orientate herself before she could resume her exploration. The Herculaneum Gate's wards had deposited her in a small side street close to the *Via Stabina*, an area that had yet to be excavated in her time. These wards had thrown her further and in a different direction than the ones protecting the Marine Gate. She remembered an old Muggle TV show called *The Prisoner*, which her parents had been fond of, and found the comparison to be uncomfortably appropriate. So, she thought, *I can't get out through the western gates. I wonder if they are all warded to this extent?* She turned about, setting off with determination for the east of the city. As she walked, using the setting sun and her own knowledge of the street alignment as her guides, she thought furiously about the source of the warding magic. She also found herself thinking again of Snape... alive and... clearly... *himself*, after years of thinking him dead and buried.

He had looked *pretty good*, *actually*, she admitted. His hair was still lank and unkempt, framing his familiar features, but the Mediterranean climate had given him a light tan and his slim figure had filled out slightly. She remembered the peculiar sensation of holding on to his chest as he had helped her upright from the bed. Her fingers remembered the feel of his back, smooth and muscled under the thin fabric of his *tunica*. She was sure that she had felt his heart rate increase in the few seconds she had held on to him, and it occurred to her that he was as surprised as she had been at her sudden appearance. The contrast between his appearance and manner now and her last memories of him, frantic and desperate on the floor in that dingy room, was jarring. She had replayed his final moments in her mind's eye thousands of times, both knowingly and in her dreams. Aside from her lessons with him and the few moments in which they had met at Grimmauld Place, her interactions with him had been few. The antipathy between him and Harry had marked much of her experience. She had thought him spiteful and needlessly severe in lessons, and his bullying of Neville had been unnecessary and cruel. She had joined in the laughter in Lupin's class that day when she had seen him humiliated as a Boggart in her third year. He had crowed with delight after he captured Sirius without listening to their protestations of his innocence, and he had seemed pitifully disappointed when he lost his chance for an Order of Merlin following Sirius' escape.

She sighed. As a child, then, she had thought of him a not much more than a bitter and vindictive teacher, using his position to bully and intimidate the children in his care. Later, Dumbledore's insistence that he was worthy of their trust seemed to have been nothing more than the misguided faith of a duped old man, a misjudgement that the Headmaster paid for with his life that night on the Astronomy Tower. A year later however, as she had worked frantically to heal him in the Shrieking Shack, scrabbling for anything that would prevent his death, she had felt a connection to him that she had never felt before, or since. Apart from a few fumbling snogs with Viktor and one unexpected kiss with Ron, she had never been so close to a man before. Admittedly, the situation had been anything *but* romantic but the raw nature of the link between the two of them had been tangible, disturbing, thrilling... and utterly unforgettable.

She took a moment to dwell on the odd sensation in her stomach that she had experienced when she touched him this morning.

Her foot slipped suddenly on one of the uneven paving slabs, and her ankle twisted sharply. The jagged pain brought her back abruptly to the present. These streets were precarious if you lost concentration! Pushing her thoughts about Snape to one side, she focused once more on where she was going.

She threaded her way through the narrow thoroughfares, dodging people, carts, donkeys, oxen, stray dogs and all manner of goods and other detritus that the city had collected. If her reckoning was right, she should be headed for the far eastern corner of the city, towards the amphitheatre.

As she got closer to her destination, she began to notice increasing number of scrawled graffiti adverts for the games. She smiled as she recognised one that had survived the eruption to the present day. It was beautifully scribed directly on the wall in front of her, advertising a five-day spectacle of beast hunts and gladiatorial combat. At the end of the advert, there was a final sentence: "*Aemilius Celer wrote this all alone by the light of the moon!*". The sign writer was obviously touting for future business. Idly, Hermione wondered if he had been successful. She walked past the *palaestra*, an open space for exercise close to the amphitheatre, which she found to be deserted at this time of the afternoon. A hundred feet later, and she was standing in front of the most imposing building in Pompeii. The need for escape forgotten, Hermione stopped dead and simply marvelled.

The amphitheatre's marble-faced walls shone golden red in the glow of the fading sunlight. Built comparatively recently, it was of a size similar to the smaller football stadiums in England. Hermione knew that it was still very large by small town standards, only half the size of the mighty Colosseum in Rome, which was supposed to serve a city of one million. No one was sure how many people lived in Roman Pompeii, but estimates placed it between 6,400 to 30,000 people. The amphitheatre towered over the nearby buildings, more than one hundred feet tall. It was silent, as there was no show on today, but Hermione could imagine the screams, shouts and roars of the animals, fighters and spectators all too easily as she stared up at the beautiful and forbidding edifice. A sudden hot breeze blew across the amphitheatre's square, kicking up a small dust devil in the dirt in front of her and bringing with it the sharp scent of pine trees and lavender. Hermione turned instinctively leftwards towards the direction of the breeze and saw the Sarno Gate in the near distance. Picking her way by the side of a vineyard, she approached the gate, steeling herself for the physical onslaught of the wards once again. This time, rather than getting close enough to activate them, she turned aside as the thrum of magic and attendant feeling of nausea began to fill her chest and moved northwards to check the Nola Gate.

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Dusk began to give way to darkness. Snape, still following, wondered how soon it would be before she got into more trouble. Roman cities could be hostile environments at night, and she was still walking with the air of a sightseer. She was wandering back towards the centre of the city from the theatre district. There were some people in the streets, but the shopkeepers had closed an hour ago, and the bars and brothels were just warming up for the night. Most citizens were probably at home, eating. True enough, as she continued her progress, two shadows detached from a wall as she walked past them. The men, both burly and yet light footed (*clearly professionals*, Snape noted), stealthily moved to either side of the walking woman and shared a look full of meaning. Snape's smile deepened and became wolfish in anticipation. He withdrew his wand from its leather holster on the inside of his left forearm. The would-be muggers inclined their bodies towards her in a pincer movement and fell to the ground silently as Snape's non-verbal Jelly Legs and Langlock curses struck. The men writhed in pain in the street. Hermione walked on, oblivious of his protection, which made him smirk with satisfaction. He continued to watch over her, amused by her increasingly furious attempts to figure out the wards on the city until she turned into his own street again. Seeing that she was nearly home, he hurriedly dived down the alleyway to the rear of his house, slipping through the rear entrance and sliding into his seat on the couch in front of the ornamental pond in the centre of the courtyard.

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It was late in the evening when Hermione conceded defeat, and she returned to Snape's house. The wards on the gateways and walls of the city had been so strong that after her determined attempts to escape she felt completely drained of energy and magical resources. The unpleasant sensation in the pit of her stomach that occurred whenever she approached the boundaries of the city walls had left her feeling nauseated and unwell. Apparition was impossible; she doubted her ability to picture her destination effectively enough and feared that she would fatally splinch herself. It would have been highly unlikely to succeed anyway.

It was obvious that those wards had been set by a powerful magical source, but she had been unable to determine from where the source had originated.

The darkened streets were making her feel uneasy, even though she had her wand handy. As she walked along the uneven street, taking care on the slippery slabs of pavement alongside the houses, she realised with some relief that she was close again to the district of the Faun. Turning into a side street, she saw the fuller's shop that had caused her to gag earlier in the day and then the beginning of the external walls of Snape's house.

She did not have to knock; Pertus opened the door to admit her immediately. *How did he know she was there?* she wondered, but she was grateful to be admitted into the sanctuary of the high walled *insula*. She was shown through the interior to its central courtyard, lit by a series of finely wrought metal lanterns. She found Snape relaxing on a low upholstered bench, a goblet of spiced wine in his hand. He appeared to have been sitting there for some time, although she noticed that his chest was rising and falling a little more rapidly than was usual, and there was perspiration on his forehead.

"Why *Doctor* Granger, did you enjoy your walk?" he asked, amused. His voice was even and controlled, although he was clearly recovering from some exertion.

Face set in a scowl, Hermione flopped down beside him on the cushioned seating. Despite her annoyance at his supercilious attitude, she had to admit that she was glad to be safe again in his company. She would also admit to feeling a curious sense of peace now that she was with him; the anxiety that she had felt earlier, and the feeling of queasiness that the wards had inflicted, had dissipated.

Silently, he passed her some wine.

She took it, drained the cup and handed it back to him.

He replaced it on the low table beside him.

"Don't say anything," she warned, shooting him a filthy look from under her brows.

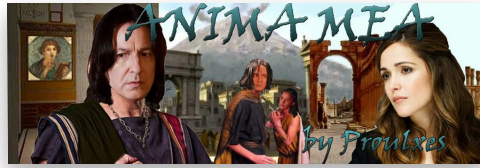
His eyebrows lifted, a slight smirk visible on his otherwise austere expression. "Well,*Doctor* Granger," he said, managing to infuse the word with an infinite degree of disdain and sarcasm, "I see you have discovered the slight flaw in my idyllic existence here."

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 5 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

A/N: All the characters you recognise are JKR's and not mine! Again thanks and hugs to the wonderful beaweasley2 for her alpha reading and to lyn\_f for her beta work and her patience! Thank you also to my lovely reviewers; I really appreciate your time and effort.



Thank you to beaweasley2 and Jay for the wonderful banner!

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#### Chapter 4

Harry Potter thrust his fists deeply into his pockets and tucked his chin into his chest as he walked through the streets of Hogsmeade towards the Three Broomsticks. It was getting late in the evening, the sun had set, and August had turned cooler this week in Scotland. He shivered and drew the light jacket he had worn more tightly around him, wishing that he had listened to Ginny and put a jumper on.

Immediately after the thought had presented itself, he rejected it. *For Merlin's sake, how hen-pecked am I?* Ginny was a wonderful wife and mother, and he loved her passionately, but there were times when her protective instincts were so alarmingly like his mother-in-law's that he feared for his future. Once he had looked at Arthur after he had been on the receiving end of one of Ginny's 'helpful' suggestions and was shocked at the look that the older man was directing at him. In that moment, Harry had recognised the hunched shoulders and the embarrassed shrug of his father-in-law as his own. As the memory continued, he grinned as he recalled Ginny's angry denial later on that evening and the subsequent bout of fierce lovemaking that followed. He felt himself flush while he smiled. Those thoughts were more warming than any piece of clothing he could have put on.

He paused at a junction in the street opposite Honeydukes before turning left towards the pub. It was Tuesday evening and the village was quiet. A few people passed him, nodding as they recognised him. He smiled in return, walking easily down the street towards Zonko's and the Three Broomsticks. He had not enjoyed working for the Ministry. Although he liked and respected Kingsley Shacklebolt, it was a fact that he spent more time at diplomatic functions and tedious meetings with international representatives on the Wizengamot than chasing down criminals. Going back to Hogwarts to teach had been a risk, but Harry had grown so frustrated by his experience with the wizarding world in London that he had eagerly taken the opportunity to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts back at school when Flitwick had approached him. Following a curriculum plan and thinking of interesting ways to get ideas and information across to the students at school was a challenge that he relished. He found that he was enjoying the opportunity to teach.

Harry pushed open the door of the pub and walked inside. A brief nod to Rosmerta, and Harry surveyed the noisy bar, his eyes sweeping the interior quickly and efficiently, before he alighted on the figure that he was expecting to meet. The Three Broomsticks was packed, as usual, and the atmosphere was convivial and cheerful. Despite the time of year, Rosmerta had lit a fire, and the shadows of the flames danced on the walls and shone on the faces of those inside. Harry stared around him, his Auror's instincts searching for a familiar face. *There!* Harry's face broke into an easy smile of recognition as he picked his way past the other drinkers in the bar towards the fireplace where his friend was sitting, surrounded by others.

As he got nearer, Harry could see that Ron was his usual animated self. He was currently engaged in explaining some complicated Quidditch move to two attractive blonde witches who were looking at him with a mixture of hero-worship and incomprehension. Ron was demonstrating the manoeuvre with the aid of his Deluminator that he had charmed to hover and twist in the air in front of him in response to his hand movements, an impressive trick. He was flushed and excited, and a half-drunk pint of Butterbeer sat on the table in front of him. Harry came up behind his friend quietly and then clapped him sharply on his shoulders. Ron yelped in surprise, and the Deluminator dropped sharply onto the table, narrowly missing his pint.

"Harry!" Ron grumbled, embarrassed at his lack of control. He swept the Deluminator into his hand and clicked it reflexively. This habit had particularly annoyed Hermione and had been the cause of many of their rows as their relationship faded and died. The little object no longer worked; it had ceased functioning since leaving Australia, and Ron had not been able to fix it. Perhaps the only person who could have done so was the last person he was going to ask to help him. Nevertheless, clicking the Deluminator was a habit that he had never shaken.

"Drink, Ron?" asked Harry and inclined his head towards the young witches at the table, eyebrows raised.

"Oh, yeah, thanks, mate," Ron said, grinning. "I'll have another pint. May I introduce ... err ... Sharina and Amira?"

The blondes smiled at Harry insipidly.

Harry smiled back. He was used to the groupies that usually surrounded his friend. Since his break up with Hermione, Ron had embraced wit henthusiastic abandon the sexual opportunities that being an internationally famous Quidditch star had provided. It appeared that Ron had lost little time in making new *friends* in Hogsmeade on this fleeting visit.

"Nice to meet you," Harry said insincerely, his innate good manners warring with the need for him to have a serious conversation with Ron over Hermione's situation. "We do need to talk, Ron." He looked pointedly at the blondes before turning for the bar.

By the time Harry had returned to the table, carrying their drinks, the girls had withdrawn to another table from where they continued to flash lascivious looks in Ron's direction. Ron waggled his eyebrows at Harry suggestively.

"I think I'm in there, mate!" he said cheerfully.

"Which one?" asked Harry and was quite shocked as his friend made a gesture indicating both of them. Rather primly, Harry pushed Ron's Butterbeer over to him and picked up his own.

Ron took a pull of his drink and suppressed a gasp. "Right, Harry," he began. "What is so important that I have to meet you here to talk face to face?"

Harry leaned forward, searching his friend's face. Ron had always had a horrible temper, and he hadn't wanted to risk a sulking fit while he tried to gather information. He took a deep breath in anticipation. "Do you know where Hermione is?"

Ron scowled immediately, his jaw set, and he clicked the Deluminator reflexively. "No idea," he said eventually. "We haven't exactly kept in touch."

Harry sighed. He was used to his friend's moods, and he knew that Ron had been deeply hurt by Hermione's rejection. He knew how hard Ron had worked to try to keep the relationship going and how frustrated he had been by his failure to do so. The fact remained, however, that Hermione was still missing, and he had to try anything to locate her, including asking her ex-boyfriend if he'd seen her. Ron clicked the Deluminator again. Briefly, Harry explained what had happened over Snape's Headmaster portrait.

"So what's the problem? Snape's portrait doesn't work. Big deal! You wouldn't want that sneering bastard whining at you all day if you were the Headmaster, would you?" Unlike most people, Ron had been unmoved by Snape's memories of Harry's mother in the Pensieve. Hermione's frequent attempts to take him to task about this had caused friction between them as well. He took another drink and clicked the Deluminator again. "Send your Patronus to contact her, if you want to."

"Minerva tried that." Harry frowned. "As far as we knew, she was working in Italy... on that dig in Pompeii. Minerva tried to send her Patronus out there, but it couldn't find her."

Ron shrugged. "She'll be fine, mate. You know how she disappears sometimes. Remember when she went to Jakarta, and we all thought she'd vanished, but then she showed up two weeks later having got distracted by the bat caves...."

Harry nodded. Even so, the portrait was a concern. As was the fact that she could not be contacted by magical means.

Ron scowled again at the object in his hands.

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Hermione took another long draught from her wine glass. The wine was sweet and strong. She strongly suspected that it was the famous fortified wine from the local region, a version of the *falerian* wine that was highly prized in these times. It tasted like wizards' mead or Muggle sherry. Whatever it tasted like, it was welcome. She had grabbed mouthfuls of water from the many public fountains around the city as she had walked, but she was dehydrated and thirsty.

Hermione and her former professor sat underneath a narrow portico that extended around the edge of the *peristyle* garden in Snape's home. It was still very warm. A thick and scented evening air surrounded them as they sat beside each other eating a late supper. She looked around at the courtyard garden in front of her. Although she could not see it very well, she could smell the scents of the plants growing in the enclosed space, especially the rosemary and lavender, and hear the brush of the plants against each other in the light evening breeze that swept through the garden. The cicadas had finished singing for the night, and there was peace and silence around them. She closed her eyes and inhaled, drawing in the scents of the garden. When she opened her eyes again, the light from the candles in the lanterns that hung around the couches they were sitting on did not reveal much of the space in front of her. She could make out the details of the mosaic flooring surrounding the dining area, a beautiful geometric pattern of interweaving black and white mosaic tiles bordering larger flagstones that looked yellow in the flickering lamplight.

Unaccountably, she had a sudden and absurd vision of the Muggle film Luna had insisted on taking her to see called "The Wizard of Oz".

"... *not in Kansas anymore....*"

*Ruby slippers.*

*Scarecrows and lions.*

*Houses falling on witches*

She shuddered and raised her hand to rub at her forehead. The graze had healed up, but she could still feel the slight ridges of the new skin under her fingertips. She was exhausted and the wine was strong. "I'm so confused," she admitted to him in a small and tired voice, her bravado of a few hours ago long gone. "This is so... so... *overwhelming*. I walked for hours. The wards on the gates ... can you get through them, or do they keep you captive too?"

Snape turned to face her, and she felt his eyes regarding her, although his face was in shadow. He said nothing. Hermione felt her throat constrict, and tears began to come. The crushing feeling in her chest returned, and she pressed her right hand to her stomach as she drew a deep and shuddering breath. The pain intensified, and she found herself leaning forwards, her left hand moving to rest on his leg. Suddenly his arms were around her, his body moving against her, and she was sobbing without restraint. The fear and tension of the day, the heat and the exhaustion, had reduced her to a wreck, clinging to him for stability and comfort.

The fine wool of his tunic was smooth and soft, more like cashmere against her skin. His collarbone jutted out from above his chest muscle, and as his torso rose and fell, she thought he smelled rather sour, of vinegar and pine resin. She could hear his heart beating loudly against her ear. She clutched at him and burrowed closer. It was impossible to think because thinking overwhelmed her. She was badly frightened, and the fear reminded her powerfully of all that she had gone through eleven years ago when she was on the run with Harry and Ron. Snape was holding her quite tightly, and she thought that the strength of his hold encircled her in a sort of protective armour.

She sobbed for ages, but slowly, as she began to calm, she realised that he was humming something softly that sounded rather like a healing spell. He was also rocking her slightly. As she came back to herself, she realised that the material under her cheek was wet and scratchy on her face. She had covered him with her tears and snot. She closed her eyes in embarrassment.

"Oh God... I'm sorry..." she said, hiccupping wretchedly and sniffing hard, her arms still wrapped around his body for comfort.

"Miss Granger," he began gently, his deep baritone a rumble in his chest that she felt as well as heard, "you are clearly very tired and overwrought. I think it is time for you to go to bed."

Hermione nodded into his chest and snuggled closer to him, beginning to drift. His chest was so comfortable and so solid, so secure. Her belly felt so much better, her mind was more settled. *Pine resin and vinegar*, she thought vaguely... *so warm....*

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When she woke again, it was morning, and Hermione felt stiff and sore. She was back in her room, fully clothed on her bed, and sunlight was breaking through the doorway. Her head pounded. *Too much falerian*, she thought ruefully. By her side, on the stool by her bed, she saw a small bottle and a scrap of papyrus. She squinted at the bottle. "*For the headache*," a familiar spiky hand had written on the parchment. Rolling her eyes and flushing slightly (but gratefully), Hermione unstopped the little bottle and downed the contents. She thought back to the night before and grimaced. He must have put her to bed *again*. She remembered her meltdown in the garden and the way that he had allowed her to collapse on him. Looking back on his response, she was baffled. In their first conversation in the morning, he had been very much as she had remembered him: sarcastic, defensive, patronising and, frankly, unpleasant. Once she started crying, however, he had behaved entirely unlike her old and bitter professor. It occurred to her that a lot could have changed in the past eleven years.

She swung her legs from the bed and stood up. Her nose wrinkled as she caught an involuntary whiff of herself. It had been two days since she had had a wash, and she certainly needed some sort of bath right now! She saw a large bowl near her bed, the same one that Pertus had proffered yesterday, and muttered a quick *Aguamenti* Charm, envisioning warm water to wash in. A pity she did not have any soap or shampoo.

A few minutes of splashing and a quick Cleaning Charm later, Hermione was feeling much better. There was very little she could do with her hair, as usual. She twisted it into a knot at the back of her head and secured it in place with a hair band from her jeans pocket. She picked up her wand and searched for somewhere in the *stola* she was wearing to secure it. Yesterday she had walked around the city with it in her hand. It seemed unnecessary to do that while she was in his house, but... was she really safe here? She dithered for a few moments more and then made a decision. She stuffed it under her jeans in the pile of her Muggle clothing and left the bedroom.

The morning smelled very fresh. She had no idea of the exact time, but she thought it must be early. She could not hear anyone else moving about in the house, and she was hungry. Perhaps she would be able to find Snape and apologise for her breakdown yesterday. She might also make the first steps in trying to work out how to get out of there, logically. She also realised that she needed to go to the loo. She had to have a look around for the toileting arrangements in the house.

She did not remember much of the layout of Snape's *insula* from yesterday; her panic and anger had so dominated her thoughts as she had argued with him that the

arrangement of rooms had passed as a blur. She pushed open her door carefully, trying not to make any noise, and walked out to explore his home.

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Very quickly, Hermione realised that Snape's house was luxurious by Pompeian standards. This was interesting and unusual. Whatever he was doing for work here was clearly lucrative. Briefly she entertained various ridiculous ideas of what Snape might be doing to earn himself the amount of money he would need to live in a house the size of this one.

Pressed by the need to relieve the pressure in her bladder, Hermione turned left out of her door in order to walk through the house towards the main street at the front of the house. She knew she had to look for the kitchen in order to find the toilet.

Nobody seemed to be around. Hermione gazed with appreciation at the cool whitewashed walls of the north side of the *peristyle*. She could now see the beautiful little square of garden that filled the courtyard space, surrounded by a colonnade of pale marble-fluted columns. Briefly she lingered, looking at the flowers and plants in the garden. She recognised many of the plants and noted that some of them were magical. Her eyebrows raised in interest. *Potions supplies?* She moved closer and stood looking over the low fence that surrounded the vegetation, quickly cataloguing different species. As she leaned over to look at a particularly interesting variant of *Amales potamos*, a plant that was used in the creation of memory potions, her nostrils twitched and flared. She could smell food. Turning, she walked through the passageway at the end of the *peristyle* towards the covered courtyard near the front of the house called the *atrium*. The *atrium* was a small room with a roof that sloped inwards. Hermione looked at the shallow rectangular basin cut into the floor directly underneath the large rectangular hole in the roof, where rainwater could flood in, providing more fresh water at one time than the house would be able to get from the aqueducts feeding the city. A series of small and beautiful paintings were decorating the walls of the atrium. She would look at them in more detail later. To her right, off the *atrium*, was an open doorway.

Hermione smiled. Her instincts had been right; she had found the kitchen. Again it was deserted, although a pot of what resembled a porridge-like substance was cooking over the small flame in the grate of the waist-high barbeque on the back wall of the room. She looked in without much enthusiasm. As she stepped away from the boiling gloop, Hermione's nostrils caught another odour, and she spotted the toilet at the other end of the room. Roman hygiene, she knew, left something to be desired as far as modern sensibilities were concerned, but there was little choice, and at least she was on her own.

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A few minutes later, she was heading back towards the *peristyle* garden. There was no noise in the house apart from the faint scrunch of her slippers on the fine sand that was scattered on the flooring beneath her feet. As she reached the lovely little square of the *peristyle*, she walked forwards towards the opposite end of the garden, past her bedroom and other small rooms on her left and towards a two-story-high building on the northern side of the courtyard. In front of her, a set of steps on the right led up to a galleried room with a colonnaded view over the garden. She assumed that this would be the summer dining room. On the left, a set of steps led downwards into darkness. Without hesitation, Hermione moved to the left. She had an idea about what rooms might be found underground in Snape's house.

She peered down the steps into the gloom below. The steps were steep and uneven, but there was a handrail that she could use. As she walked down, her eyes began to adjust to the dimness, and she saw that there was some illumination from the rooms below. She quickened her pace, feeling a small flutter of anticipation in her stomach as she did so. The steps ended in a small cellar with stone flags on the floor. The ceiling was high and the walls dark and unadorned. A mingling of scents reached her nostrils. He had recreated the Hogwarts dungeons in his home. The door on the right of the steps was ajar. She pushed it open further and looked into the room.

Inside was a large rectangular space, laid out in the familiar manner that she remembered from her six years at school. Around the edges of the room were shelves of flasks and vials. Light filtered in to the lab from magical apertures in the barrel-vaulted concrete ceiling. They gave the impression that sunshine shone into the room, thin columns of light reaching to the floor. The floor was stone. The air was cool but not unpleasantly so. One of the key reactants in potions was heat. Placing the lab underground was clearly a sensible way of preventing the Italian summer from causing untold damage to potions and ingredients. Hermione was hesitant about entering the room further, but after a quick check again that she could hear no one nearby, her innate curiosity won out, and she walked further into the laboratory.

She was drawn immediately to the heavy wooden bench in the centre of the floor, on which stood a small, unlit brazier and a cauldron. The shimmer of a stasis charm rippled across the metal surface of the cauldron. Intrigued, she stepped further and carefully looked inside, mindful to hold her breath as she did so. The potion was a shimmering silver in colour. *A mercury base*, she thought.

She moved on, away from the cauldron and towards the ingredients that lined the shelves on the wall, past the benches around the edge of the room. Her eyes moved over the neatly labelled bottles and jars, cataloguing the dried substances. It was obvious that Snape was maintaining his stores as efficiently as ever. She wondered if he had any Boomslang skin still and smiled slightly at the remembrance.

Her steps had taken her around the room, and she found herself back at the entrance to the laboratory. Looking across the hallway in front of her, she saw another door on the opposite side; again, it was slightly ajar.

Fighting her trepidation, she crossed the hallway and gently pulled the door open, revealing a small antechamber, lit, as the lab had been, by the same magical light sources in the ceiling. The room had clothes hooks on the wall and a low seat underneath them. It suddenly seemed to be warmer. She walked in and noted that the changing room led on, through a narrow arched opening, to another space beyond. Vapour issued into the room from the far entrance, and the walls nearer to the adjoining room were damp with condensation, making the tiles of the mosaics on the wall glisten in the magical sunlight. She knew then where she was. She had found a private bathroom suite.

She also realised in the same moment, from the noises that were coming from the room ahead, that it was occupied.

Unable to stop herself, she moved closer to the opening, until she could see inside.

The room was darker, lit by only one shaft of light from above and a few of the smaller oil lamps that she had seen before. It was stiflingly hot. The steam in the room diffused the light, lending it an ethereal quality and obscuring her view of the figure in the bath. Distracted, Hermione looked down at the floor. The mosaic pattern on it was that of a giant black skeleton, its mouth open and gaping. In one clawed hand, it held a jar, and in the other, a stick. *No, a wand*, she corrected herself, frowning.

The chamber was dominated by a large marble bath, set back against the far wall. It was easily as big as the prefects' bath at school and was rectangular in shape and about two feet deep. Naked, sitting awkwardly on the edge of the bath, his back hunched over and facing away from her, was Snape. He was rubbing something into his shoulder and left arm and breathing quickly and shallowly. He turned his attention to his chest and ribcage and uttered a low moan as his fingers smoothed the substance (she supposed it was bruise-healing paste or something similar) over his body, paying particular attention to the ribs on his left side. The steam cleared for a moment, and Hermione saw that his back had an ugly red wheal across it, and the skin of his left arm was darkened with bruising. He looked like he had been badly beaten up. She watched as the muscles across his back played and twisted as he applied the healing ointment. His skin glistened with sweat and the moisture from the bath.

Snape carefully placed the pot of unguent on the edge of the bath next to him and ran his right hand through his hair. He straightened his back carefully and moved his left arm tentatively out to the side and back again. Seemingly satisfied, he gingerly eased himself forwards and into the hot water, taking the weight of his body on his right arm. He hissed in relief as he slid into the water and relaxed slowly against the side of the bath.

The steam in the room swirled and curled about.

Hermione came back to herself. Her mind was full of questions. Principal among them was, *Who in Pompeii was capable of causing such physical damage to him?* He had not mentioned the presence of other wizards here, and he had clearly lied about the safety of his supposedly perfect world. She felt a familiar rush of adrenaline at the thought of unknown enemies in this strange place.

He took a deep breath at that point, and she heard his quiet whimper as the movement of his ribcage caused him pain. Inadvertently, she took a step towards him, her

hand raised to help. Her foot scuffed on the floor, and her breath hitched.

Instantly, he whirled around in the bath, despite the pain that such a movement clearly brought him, and his wand had appeared in his right hand. Snape was staring at her with a mixture of fury and discomfiture, clearly poised to attack. The steam vapour rushed around him as he gathered his powers. With horror, she realised that she was silhouetted in the doorway, and that the atmosphere made her appearance hazy and obscure.

"Professor!" she called out shrilly, holding her hands up in front of her while imagining a hundred ways he could hex her into oblivion, "It's me! Don't..."

She felt the crackle of electricity in the air dissipate, and his wand hand dropped.

Snape's expression was thunderous. "What the hell are you doing in here? How long have you been watching me?" he asked roughly, his face flushed and angry.

"I... I was... just looking around. I'm sorry!" she answered lamely, aware of how awful this looked.

"Get out!" His breath was rasping in his chest. He clutched at his side.

Hermione took another step forwards. "You're hurt," she countered. "Do you need me to...?"

"Out!" he repeated furiously, raising his wand in a sweeping movement.

She fled.

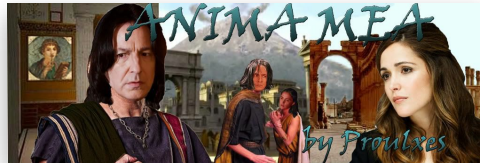
## Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 32

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: All the characters you recognise are JKR's and not mine! Again thanks and hugs to the wonderful beaweasley2 for her alpha reading and to lyn\_f for her beta work and her patience! Thank you also to my lovely reviewers; I really appreciate your time and effort.



Thank you to beaweasley2 and Jay for the wonderful banner!

Now it's time for some introspection....

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### Chapter 5

Hermione stormed out of the staircase and out into the fierce sun of the new day. *That... that insufferable man!* she fumed as she stomped across the courtyard towards her room. *How bloody dare he? Flourishing his wand like some sort of... sort of...*, her mind searched for a particularly offensive epithet as she rushed into her room and began to tear off her borrowed clothes.

"I like it here," she mimicked him savagely, pulling her T-shirt over her head. "*Here I am safe and protected... I am no longer the plaything of others.* Bloody rubbish!" She dragged her jeans on, shoving her legs roughly into the clothing, pulling hard on her belt to secure them. She heard his condescending sneer echoing in her mind. "... *now I can live quite comfortably....*" Bollocks!" She shoved her feet into her boots and tied the laces quickly. "*this life here in Roman Italy is in so many ways much more... satisfying than my life in your time....*" Bloody... unbearable... *Slytherin!*" She picked up her wand. The adrenaline rushing around her system was invigorating. She shoved an errant strand of hair out of her eyes, and her jaw jutted out defiantly. Dressed again in her Muggle clothing, with her vine wood wand firmly in her grip, Hermione felt much, *much* better.

She sat down with her arms crossed on the cushioned seating area outside her room to wait for him to come out of the baths. As she calmed down and the thumping of her heart receded, she brought out the little pendant on its silver chain that she always wore and rolled it between her fingers.

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Severus Snape watched her leave his bathroom with a baleful glare, acutely conscious of the pain returning to his body as the adrenaline rush that had fuelled his furious response to her presence subsided. Slowly he allowed his wand hand to drop, and he took a careful breath. His chest still felt as if it had been battered with broken glass, and his left arm ached very badly. The enhanced bruise-healing paste would do its job soon; he could already see the deep blue haematomas on his arm begin to fade, and the heat of the bath was soothing his lower body. Thanks to the Dittany he had administered earlier, the injury on his back had already closed, and he knew from past experience that the new skin would knit well and not scar too badly. It was just his ribs. He could feel that at least two of them were broken and more than that were probably bruised. It would be a short while longer before he achieved a better recovery. This morning's visit had been punishing.

Slowly, gingerly, he turned around again in the bath and forced himself to relax once more into the water. The steam helped him to breathe more easily, lessening the burning in his lungs, and the heat of the water eased the pain in his torso. He needed to think. He had to stay calm and keep focused. He breathed in again, more easily this time. He allowed his eyes to close. He breathed out. He had overreacted. He should have stayed calmer and kept control. He could have warded the doors to the bath

suite, but he knew that Pertus would not disturb him, and he had assumed that she would sleep for a longer time after the exertions of yesterday. Only once his breathing had returned to normal did he allow his thoughts to return to Hermione.

He had, of course, lied to her yesterday when he said that he had done nothing to bring her there. He'd all but summoned her though that bloody portrait.

He had commissioned the portrait when he had begun to fear that his memory was losing the clarity of her face. He had carefully described her features to the painter who had drawn a number of sketches in charcoal before he had been satisfied.

The painting had been done into wet plaster. As it dried, he had watched in fascination as her face began to emerge. Her eyes were its most compelling feature. Soft, amber hues shone out of a broad and pale visage. Her unruly hair was coiffed so that it framed her face in the familiar hairstyle of highborn Roman ladies. Initially she had seemed too young to him, and he was more than uncomfortable that his memories had been dominated by his image of her as a child, but as the painter refined his work, under his direction, she grew and aged in front of him until the face that he saw became that of the young woman who had shared his last moments in her reality.

*Why was she so important to me? Did she remind me of Lily?* He cast off that thought almost immediately; Lily had rejected him, had left him wretched and squirming with shame and self-loathing on the staircase outside the Gryffindor common room. He had thought he loved her above all others and was incapable of doing any more, but that emotion now seemed ages away. Time and distance had lent him perspective. He had paid his dues to her memory.

Lying in the bath, as the hot water and bruise-healing paste eased his injuries, he allowed the memories of that time in the Shrieking Shack to fill his mind. He remembered Hermione's fingers on his chest, the awful burning of the liquid that she poured over his neck and chest and the feeling of the potions that she had forced down his throat. He remembered the profound and pathetic sense of gratitude he had felt because someone would be with him when he died but, *oh god! It had hurt!*

He shifted his body in the hot water of the bath and remembered how the paralysis from the venom had felt as it spread through his veins. He thought what an odd sensation it had been, like burning hot needles, and then he recalled how he had thought the balm of the potion was spreading faster, overtaking the venom and attempting to cleanse his body of the poison. He remembered his gratitude again, but then how his shame and anger had overtaken that emotion. *Yes, I'd been grateful, but why should I have been lying there in a pool of my own blood and piss on the floor of a shack while a madman fought a war outside? Surely, that had been the final humiliation?*

She had leaned over him and something had flashed golden in the periphery of his vision. He had grabbed it *a Time-Turner!* Perhaps there was a way of escape after all. *Was that cowardice? I'd done my fucking job, hadn't I?* Potter had the memories only swirling mists remained for him. He had coughed blood and potion up and struggled for breath. It was getting worse. He'd known that he was surely dying, but he'd also understood what he had to do.

Dumbledore had told him nothing about what Voldemort had created to preserve himself, fearing that the Dark Lord would break him. In those circumstances, Dumbledore's plan would have surely foundered, and Potter's sacrifice would be for nothing. Once again, however, the old man had underestimated his spy. Snape had known anyway. There could have been no other explanation for how Voldemort had survived the Killing Curse that had rebounded onto him all those years ago at Godric's Hollow.

Lying on that filthy floor, he had looked up at her again as his eyes began to clear. She was still crying over him, and snot was running from her nose. Blood pounded in his head. He remembered thinking, *Try to focus, damn you! Got to get away, regroup, recover... Can't stay here.* He could not focus enough to know how far he had twisted the golden thing in his hand. *Will I see her again? Can I get back? How can I anchor myself?*

Severus Snape understood Horcrux-lore and knew what it cost the wizard who invoked it. To create such a thing, a person's soul had to be rendered by an action so damaging that one's essence, one's *soul*, literally fragmented. Murder was the most commonly used mechanism to create the damage required, but Snape now knew that other actions could bring about the same outcome. The cumulative effect of his actions during the last year, the murder of Dumbledore (no matter that the old man had begged him to do it), his complicity in the death of Charity Burbage, his allowing the Carrows to torture and maim children at school while he, their headmaster, had made only token efforts to protect them. He was broken in ways that could not be healed, and his soul was torn, scarred, battered and broken.

He knew that nothing could be done to mend the damage that had been caused to him. It had been a long time forged. He thought back to that evening in the headmaster's office and to the look on Dumbledore's face as he had asked him to kill him to protect Malfoy. He remembered the burning sense of indignity and anger that had come with this revelation. At that moment, he had known that Dumbledore really would sacrifice him without remorse and that his loyalty, therefore, should be to himself alone and to his own survival. His pride had flared at that moment, and a new determination had surged through him. He had sworn to himself that whatever happened over the next few weeks or months ahead, he would refuse to accept a meaningless and degrading death in this war. Whatever happened, Severus Snape would endure.

So, that evening he had begun to prepare his own receptacle for a Horcrux.

He knew that the vessel had to be something he valued, something that was *significant* in some way to him. He had chosen one of his mother's possessions, a beautiful Daum perfume bottle. It was one of the few things he still had from her. The bottle was made from French cameo glass with a silver cap and chain. It was something she had worn round her neck to refresh her perfume. She had charmed it to shrink to the size of a small coin and always wore it around her neck. He remembered how he had loved the smell of her perfume as she rocked him to sleep as a small child. For months after she died, he had only to open the little vial and he could be transported back to those happier times before the drink had taken hold of his father and had soured their lives.

Another wrenching spasm had shaken his body as Nagini's venom warred with the antivenins Hermione was administering. He had tried to focus. There was not much time, he had realized, before he succumbed. He had struggled to concentrate once more on the little perfume bottle in his breast pocket while beginning to chant the incantation that would place part of his broken soul within it. Hermione had been scrabbling through his clothes, looking for more potions to administer.

Suddenly, she had captured his hands in hers, slick with blood, and had leaned forward even closer to him. He had felt her breath on his skin. He had coughed and inhaled in return. She had smelled of smoke and sweet lavender. He had realized that she had been wearing a perfume that was not unlike his mother's scent. Hungrily, he had breathed in again, distracted by the aroma that was so familiar. His hands had flapped weakly on his chest as he had sought to show her the little bottle as he fought for breath. *Perhaps*, he had thought foolishly, *she will keep it and, in so doing, keep me safe too...* He had begun the curse again, watching her try to hear what he was chanting. As he had completed the first phase of the Horcrux invocation, her eyes had grown even wider in her pale face. She could not have understood what was happening. She had shaken him. "Professor what can I do? I have tried everything I can. We need to get you to the Infirmary; I'm sure that Madam Pomfrey will be able to help you..."

He remembered locking eyes with her and marveling at the flecks of light in her amber irises. He had continued to utter the words of the enchantment voicelessly and had felt, as he did so, the ripping sensation that he had expected to feel in his chest, but her fingers had dug into his body again, and his breath had snagged. Undeterred, he had continued to work through the incantation, focusing on the words, the *intent*, directing his soul to inhabit the perfume bottle and to rest there within its charmed protection. Only then, as he had stared into her face, he had realized that he could suddenly hear her thoughts, sense what she was feeling... and it was overwhelming. He had felt her anguish over his injuries, over his impending death, had felt her confusion and compassion towards him, her sorrow and regrets. Her emotions had flooded into him, soaking him with their intensity. *I can't bear it*, he had thought frantically, *I can't contain it....* Desperately, he had wrenched himself away, completing the spell and feeling the final tear and the strange sense of loss that it had brought.

His fingers had twisted the Time-Turner once again convulsively. He had felt it activate as he took one last, final breath, and he had watched as her face suddenly contorted in front of him and her body had become rigid as the room spun.

As the room had disappeared, the pain in his torso had suddenly blossomed a wrenching, hot and burning thing in his chest and belly. For an insane moment he had thought he could see her lurching forward over his body, her face contorted, screaming with pain

*Gone.*

Heat, light.

Peace.

Lost.

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At first he could not believe that he had survived, or that the incantation had been successful. As he had lain in the stinking street under the boiling Italian sun, surrounded by concerned people who were trying to help him to stand, offering him wine mixed with water and asking him (in an archaic language that he struggled initially to understand) who he was and how he had simply seemed to appear in the street in front of them, he had realized that the Horcrux had been made and he was safe.

Whatever else had happened in the shack, the Time-Turner had activated and he had woken in a new world and a new *time*.

Hours, then days, had passed, and he had continued to endure, as he had promised himself he would, building a new existence away from the idiots and dunderheads of his classrooms, those whom he had betrayed and protected, lied to and suffered for. As the weeks passed his Mark had faded and did not burn, and he had begun to feel a nervous and tentative sense of relief and freedom. Severus Snape had found his place in the world and, finally, a sense of peace and calm and liberty. He was content under the patronage of a rich and civilized Pompeian.

Of course, he quickly realized that his freedom and independence had once again been a mirage. Very soon, he had found himself in a familiar arena of danger and betrayal...

... And as that danger had grown over time, so had an increasingly desperate desire to see her and to be joined to her again.

How could he explain how his feelings had swirled and developed over the last few months in his exile? How he had relived those few precious minutes in the Shrieking Shack over and over again as she had tried to comfort him, had cried over him, had pressed *against* him and *into* him? He had thought of her face above his, her image fading in and out of his memory. This passion those memories had stirred had prompted the commissioning of her portrait and led him on that extraordinary day.

He had pressed his forehead against the cool of the painted wall. He had felt the smooth texture of the plaster through his cheek and his fingertips. He had dug his hands into the image as if he could physically feel her skin, warm and vital and real, rather than her cold and imaginary image. He had thought of the last time he had looked upon her face, stricken with despair and confusion, mud and blood smudged across her cheek. Her eyes had been wide and bright and full of such emotion. He had not been able to focus properly, his mind a whirl of emotions, memories of another face that had blurred into obscurity as he had offered them to Potter. He had also felt a profound and childish sense of the unfairness of it all. Of course, he also had felt remorse a feeling that burned within him like a cancer, stunting his emotions.

As he had stood leaning against her image with his forehead and hands placed against the cool of the plaster fresco, murmuring words of need, want and desire, he had felt the magic build in his body to a point where it had felt like his fingertips were conductors and his body was about to shatter. His eyes had closed in a kind of rapture as the power built and built, the tension thrumming in him like a sweet pain looking for release.

Abruptly, something had hit him hard in the chest and face, pushing him roughly backwards until he fell onto the stone paving.

As if a sack of fluid had burst, disgorging its contents over him, there suddenly had been a body in his arms, all flailing arms and legs and hair and awkward angles and corners. She had fallen across him, and her face had smacked hard into the concrete floor beside his ear. He could not breathe from the shock of it as well as the sudden weight of her body on his.

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Now she was here. She was real, a *fact*, not just a memory. She was taller than he had remembered her and not as delicate. He thought about what she had told him. The Dark Lord was dead and gone. Potter was alive and victorious. He searched his feelings for a reaction to the news but felt nothing but a dead sense of emptiness. He had other more immediate threats and concerns.

His memories of her face, anxious and desperate above him, had long been his clearest link to his previous life. This image was now mingling with other, more recent, impressions of her. Her look of horror and dismay when she had realised what had happened to her, the set of her jaw as she had argued with him yesterday morning before she strode out into the city, the capable way that she had assimilated her experiences. The thoughtless swing of her hips as she walked.

Her emotional collapse in the evening after she returned to his house.

Now she had seen him naked, and she had seen the damage that had been done to him. From his reaction she would have known that this was not the result of some accident. For an absurd moment he had been grateful that she had seen his injuries. It would be good to have an ally.

*Fucking hell, stop being an idiot!* he thought. *You don't know her; you can't trust her!*

He wondered what she would do next as he shifted a little. He felt his chest easing further under the influence of the healing paste. She would not run again. The city's wards meant that there was no way for her to leave Pompeii, and with no money and little experience, she would not survive without his protection. He allowed himself a little smile at the memory of her wandering around, blundering from one unrealised disaster to the next.

Then his smile died on his lips. He must not forget that she was not a fool. She had evaded capture with Potter and Weasley for months he had forgotten that she could be resourceful and tenacious when required. This time she would not be fobbed off with blandishments and vague assurances. He scowled. *Would she help? Can I trust her?* His survival in the past had always been based on his reliance on nobody but himself. He knew she was loyal, but he was not Potter, or Weasley, or Dumbledore.

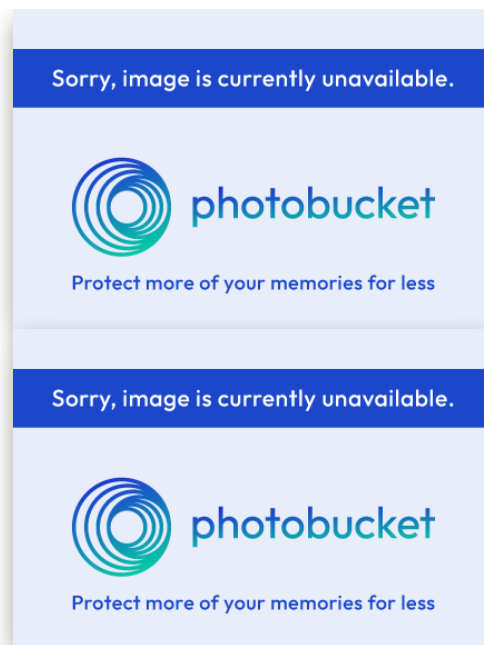
His chest was definitely feeling better. He took an experimental deep breath and knew that the paste and healing potions were working. He would have to be far more careful in the future. Banishing the introspective thoughts that had been consuming him, he scrubbed his right hand through his hair and stood up, water sluicing off his body. He stepped out of the bath and walked over to collect a sheet of linen towelling. He placed his wand down beside a fresh tunic and began to dry himself gingerly.

She could not know that he had in some way summoned her. He would need to give her some answers and at least indulge her futile attempts to find an escape. In doing so, he might be able to judge whether she was worthy of his trust.

His complicated plan may still work. He shook himself mentally. No it *would* still work if he held his nerve and followed through. Whatever happened, Severus Tobias Snape would continue to endure.

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(The Daum Perfume Bottle a 1920's antique something that Severus' mother might have owned...)

## Chapter 6

*Chapter 7 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: All the characters you recognise are JKR's and not mine! Again thanks and hugs to the wonderful beaweasley2 for her alpha reading and to lyn\_f for her beta work and her patience! Thank you also to my reviewers I love reading what you think of this story.



Thank you to beaweasley2 and Jay for the wonderful banner! Things will heat up in a while, and so will the rating... but for now....

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### Chapter 6

Hermione sat alone on the couch looking across at the *peristyle* garden, waiting for Snape to emerge from the bathhouse. Pertus had brought food out to her on a tray. Olives, fruit and bread lay before her again on the low table. Pertus had not spoken to her when he set out the food, and beyond a quick thanks, Hermione had not asked anything else of the slave. The food had remained untouched before her.

For the past ten minutes, she had rehearsed the events of the last two days in her mind. Then she had calmly catalogued her situation and formulated a list of action points to determine her next course of action. She had identified priorities and used some standard Arithmancy formulae to assess her chances of success. Unfortunately, there had been so many variables that this had proved a virtually fruitless exercise apart from working as a meditation technique. The breathing exercises her Muggle psychologist had taught her during her short-lived period in therapy had also helped her to rationalise her concerns and make plans. Her immediate concern was quite obvious.

She could not see it from the house, but behind her, she could almost *feel* Vesuvius looming over the city. The mountain sat like some sort of squat, brooding menace to the north of the city; it was ready, she knew, to rain down its deadly destruction on the city's inhabitants.

Last year, at the end of September, she had been with a group of academics invited to climb up to the crater by the Italian volcanologists from the Vesuvius Observatory. Hermione had jumped at the chance to visit the shattered summit of the modern volcano with the scientists who were monitoring the growth of the lava chamber underneath the volcano for the 20089 report.

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Although she had been working on the Pompeian dig for the whole summer, she had never before climbed up to the crater. As she had walked up the broad mountain track with her scientist escorts, a fairly stiff thirty-minute hike carrying equipment and protective clothing, she had idly tried to imagine herself back in time in 79 AD, climbing through the vineyards that had criss-crossed the sides of the mountain in those times.

She had tried to hear the rhythmical chanting of the slave gangs, driven onwards by their overseer, the *vilicus*, who maintained the vines and other crops on the rich ground for their Roman masters. The quality of life for a slave in Roman society was dependent on where they served, and the poorest life expectations were generally reserved for these agricultural labouring bands. The men worked alongside each other, chained together with rough iron, strips of ragged cloth wrapped around their ankles to prevent the metal from rubbing sores in their flesh, much like the famous chained prison gangs of later centuries. Trying to visualise the scene even more exactly, Hermione had allowed her eyes to become unfocused while she had looked down the steep slopes of the volcano, striving as she had done so to picture the ancient, bustling agricultural society below.

Hermione's reverie had been ended as the team reached the summit of the volcano. Standing at the huge, gaping throat of the crater, grateful to be able to put down her rucksack, she had felt a thrill at seeing the gasping fumaroles and the white wisps of smoke and sulphurous gases floating starkly against the reddened bedrock that surrounded it.

She had understood, of course, that the volcano was still active, but seeing it in front of her and ~~around~~ her was still quite a shock. She had gingerly descended into the crater itself, following Bernardo Revini, one of the young volcanologists who was accompanying her, to check on the sensitive seismological recording equipment that the volcanology research team had set up to record any changes in the mountain. Their primary goal was to try to predict its next eruption, and as she had done so, a fanciful part of Hermione's imagination thought she could feel the mountain *breathing*. Automatically, she had thrown out her magical senses, trying to identify any latent magic in the area, but she could detect none. Even so, the effect of the gases in the crater had been eerie and spectral.

Clambering back up to the lip of the crater, she had listened attentively as Bernardo had explained that they were monitoring the magma chamber, which was rising at a rate of about seven centimetres per year. It was inevitable, he had said, in politely thoughtful and measured English, that the volcano would erupt again in their lifetime.

"Like it did in 79 AD?" Hermione had asked, staring at one of the fumarole's lips, its edges encrusted with the telltale yellow-green signs of sulphur dioxide deposits.

"We don't think so, no," Bernardo had shaken his head. "The magma chamber is too close to the surface." He had smiled as her eyebrows rose, his teeth flashing white in his sunburned face. "If the magma is near to the surface, the pressure is not so great. The magma is in a colder and more viscous state. Therefore, the eruption will be like the one that happened here in 1944. Some tremors beforehand, some fissures opening up in the crater and an ash cloud of a few thousand feet. Slow lava flows with property damage but no great loss of life, even though so many people live so close to the mountain." He had paused. "No pyroclastic flows," he had added softly.

Hermione had frowned at him. "Pyroclastic flows?"

"Giant masses of superheated gas, coming out of the volcano and sometimes travelling at more than four hundred kilometres per hour," the young man had explained. "Pyroclastic flows are unstoppable and deadly. They kill and burn everything in their path. In an explosive eruption, like the one here in 79 AD, the magma comes from a great depth, and it is under great pressure. When it explodes outwards," his hands had mimicked the top blasting off the mountain and shooting upwards, "there are usually many pyroclastic flows in a big eruption. That is what killed the people in Pompeii. They could not outrun the pyroclastic flows. The ash in the air meant that they could not breathe, and then they burned." Hermione had shuddered, suddenly cold. She had known that the people of the city had been buried under tonnes of ashes during the eruption but had not realised how *violent* the process had been. Her mind had turned to the plaster cast figures of the Pompeian dead in museum on her dig site, their limbs twisted and misshapen, their mouths open and gasping in death.

"It must have been a horrible way to die." She had looked down into the plain below Vesuvius, towards the ruined city, and shuddered again. She had been very glad at the time that the danger of such a similar explosive eruption was remote.

Suddenly, she had found herself in her imagination, staring at more broken and dead bodies, this time not plaster cast figures, but bleeding and rendered flesh. She had looked with dull horror at the dead, as they had been laid out in the Great Hall in the shocked peace of the aftermath of the final battle. Her eyes had swept past the bodies and those who mourned them and onwards to the devastation that surrounded them. Dust, debris and broken masonry lay all around her; lumps of wall and staircase and windows that had been blasted apart by the fighting. There had been bloodstains everywhere.

She had been frozen in the memory, trapped in that horrific time at the end of the war.

Her perception had shifted again, and then she had been standing immobilized as the battle had exploded around her; she had heard the screams and curses and seen the flashes of wand light as the Death Eaters had battled Harry's supporters. She had witnessed the charges of the giants, the centaurs and house-elves. She had been terrified and impotent with fear. It had felt like she was watching everything rip apart around her.

She had been jarred out of her immobility by Ginny's bellow, and she had realised that Bellatrix had been coming closer, the witch's face distorted in a gleeful rage, her wand hand flicking and twisting with frightening dexterity as she had begun to duel. Hermione had acted out of our sheer instinct, throwing hexes and shields around her friends, thinking a desperate mantra in her head as she fought: *I can't lose them! I can't lose them! I can't lose them!*

Her memory had shifted even further back before the fighting had begun and so many lives had been lost. She then had stood with Harry and Ron and the others in the Great Hall, listening to Minerva McGonagall making plans to evacuate the younger students behind the defences of her school. She had relived that horrified rush of dreadful anticipation as Voldemort's words had echoed through the Hall, and she had known with dreadful certainty that the school's shields could not hold and that the Dark Lord was coming, like a mighty, roiling cloud of hatred and destruction bringing death and annihilation and heralding the fulfilment of a prophecy

"...Dr Granger? Dr Granger?" She had realised that Bernardo was trying to break her out of her reverie and worriedly pulling on her sleeve to attract her attention. Dimly, she became aware that the young Italian's anxious voice was growing deeper, richer, and more exasperated. Hermione felt that she was pulling away from her memories...

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"...Granger!"

With a start, Hermione came back to reality and realised that her former Potions master was standing in front of her, his brow furrowed and lips drawn into a thin line. He loomed over her, watching her intently as if weighing something up in his mind. He was holding himself very stiffly, still favouring his left side, but he was in control again, and she knew that if she were to get out of Pompeii, she needed his help.

She took a deep breath and focused all her attention on him. She folded her arms on her chest, tapping her wand on her bicep.

"Professor," she said, her voice flat and calm, "I need some answers from you. *Right. Fucking. Now.* First of all: *what is today's date?*"

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"Brilliant, brilliant, Septima! Oh, come in, come in," Filius Flitwick called as Harry tapped on the door to the Headmaster's office.

When Harry entered the familiar room, he saw Flitwick conversing with the Arithmancy professor, Septima Vector, in front of the portrait of Snape and Hermione. Flitwick was standing on a small set of stepladders, balanced precariously so that he could look at the portrait on the same level as his companion. Vector was pointing to the mosaic and explaining something to the Headmaster. Both turned as Harry walked in, Flitwick wobbling unconcerned on the top of his stepladders.

"Come in, come in, Harry; this is fortuitous indeed!" Vector nodded her greeting in her friendly but rather stiff manner while Flitwick was far more effusive. "Good morning, Harry! Do come here and see what Septima has pointed out! We may have made a breakthrough." He waved his hand, bidding Harry to come closer. "And how was our

Mr. Weasley?" he enquired. "Has he heard from Hermione at all?"

Harry shook his head. "He's fine, thanks, Headmaster. You know Ron; he's doing really well. The Cannons might actually reach the quarterfinals of the Cup this year... He hasn't heard anything from Hermione, though not a word. But he did remind me that Hermione gets so excited by her work that she drops out of sight sometimes." Harry took a breath. "So, actually, Professor that's why I have come here to talk to you this morning. I'd like to..." Harry had drawn level with the other professors in front of the picture, but his voice died as he did so.

The figures in the portrait had changed again. If it was at all possible, Snape now looked even more murderous and stubborn than he had before, and he was now facing Hermione in the portrait, his arms folded defensively against his chest. In turn, Hermione's body language was equally determined and her expression resolute, her wand still visible in her hand down by her side. Harry felt a familiar and proud surge of emotion as he looked at his friend's image.

Flitwick was positively thrumming with excitement beside him. "Septima," he urged the tall, dark-haired witch beside him, "this is so exciting! Please let Harry know what you are working on!"

"Thank you, Headmaster." Vector's voice was deep and clear, its faint Massachusetts accent lending her vowels a rich and melodious tone. "Harry, I think the key to why this portrait is not working properly may lie in these numerals here around the frame." She pointed her finger at the edges of the portrait, directing Harry's attention to a series of runes that surrounded the perimeter of the central image in a geometric pattern.

Harry frowned at the mosaic. "I thought that was just a pattern around the edge," he said, "like a border. I don't remember seeing them before."

"Isn't that simply *brilliant*, Harry?" Flitwick enthused, practically jumping up and down on the top of his stepladders. "We were all concentrating on the central image after all, it's pretty remarkable but trust Septima to find something that we had not even *seen* before!"

Vector rolled her eyes, but smiled, clearly flattered. "I will need to do some more research here," the Salem-born witch continued, "but I think that I have come across something like this equation before."

Harry furrowed his brow, desperately trying to cudgel his brains into action. He hadn't taken Arithmancy at school, opting for Divination and Care of Magical Creatures instead. "It's an equation?" he ended up saying, wondering what that meant.

"Yes, I think so... if one reads it as a continuous wave pattern around the edge." Vector gestured with her wand at the portrait, and Harry watched as a pale copy of the numerals floated away from the frame and then settled onto the parchment in her hand. She muttered a quiet fixing charm and then, satisfied, rolled up the parchment. "If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I have some work to do in my office. Harry." She bowed in her formal manner. "Headmaster," she added with another slightly deeper nod of her head, "I will let you know immediately I have anything further to add." Her work done, parchment and wand in hand, she left the room.

Flitwick watched her go, a rather wistful look on his face. He sighed. "Such a brain, Harry!" He tapped his fingers on the stepladder's handrail, lost in thought.

Harry grinned again at his Headmaster, running his fingers somewhat nervously through his hair. Flitwick's fondness for the Arithmancy Professor was the subject of gentle gossip in the teachers' common room at Hogwarts.

Harry cleared his throat. "Professor, I'd like your permission to go to Italy to try to track Hermione down." He held up his hand as the diminutive Headmaster opened his mouth to reply. He rattled on, determined to explain his reasoning before Flitwick could say no. "Yes, I know that she's done this before, Professor, but I'm really worried that she hasn't replied to Ginny's owl, and I know that she's supposed to be in Pompeii until October, so there's no reason for her to have disappeared like this. I want to see if anything has happened to her and try to bring her back if it has."

"Harry," Flitwick said, smiling, "I think it's a very good idea for you to try to find her. I'm sure she will be as anxious as we all are to solve this mystery and repair this portrait so Headmaster Snape can be properly represented among his fellows here in the office!" He chuckled indulgently, turning his attention once again to the central figures in the mosaic. "I rather think that Severus would prefer to be alone in his own portrait as well, from the look he is directing at her."

Harry smiled too, seeing the stubborn determination on Hermione's countenance in the face of Snape's sneer. *I recognise that look*, Harry thought to himself and grinned, despite his misgivings about his friend's whereabouts.

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Hermione barely breathed as she faced Snape down. They had been looking at each other unblinkingly for what seemed like minutes. He was clearly uncomfortable standing before her whether just physically from his injuries or because of some other reason, she could not tell. His eyes were as unreadable as ever, and his hair fell across his face as he looked down at her. She continued to stare at him with as much confidence as she could muster.

Eventually, she saw his eyelids flicker, and a strange, amusingly resigned expression crossed his features.

"As far as I can be sure, it is the twentieth of August," he said eventually, and she felt herself relax fractionally.

Her mind raced, calculating. "That's four days before...", she began.

"*Before*. Yes." He nodded slightly. His eyes darted in the direction of Vesuvius. "May I join you?" He indicated the seat beside her. She shifted slightly to the right, offering more room for him to sit down. He did so, carefully mindful of the damage to his ribs.

"Thank you, Professor. Now will you tell me the rest?"

"It appears that you are as affected as I am by the wards on this city, Doctor Granger. I seem to have little choice but to confide in you," he said stiffly.

She reached for an olive from one of the bowls on the table. *No sense in being hysterical about this situation*, she thought, and she was starving hungry. "Why are there wards on the city?" Hermione asked. "I've never felt such a strong power."

Snape leaned forward. His hair fell across his face again, and his face was in shadow. Reaching over to the table in front of them, he picked up a boiled egg and began to peel it carefully, his long fingers working efficiently to shed the outer shell. He placed the peeled egg on a platter and offered it to her. She flashed him a doubtful look, but picked the egg up and bit into it. It tasted wonderful.

"I think what we need to do is establish how we both got through the wards in the first place." Hermione continued, carefully trying not to spit bits of egg out as she spoke. "After all, both of us passed through them in order to get into Pompeii, so that might help us to work out how we can reverse the process and get away."

As she spoke, he leaned forward again and picked up a fig from the basket in front of him. She watched, almost mesmerized, as he brought the fruit to his lips and bit into it, his teeth sinking slowly into the soft purple flesh. "I mean," she continued, as if it were perfectly sensible to discuss the warding of an ancient city in the company of a man who had bled to death in front of her eleven years previously, "there must be other wizards here. Have you made contact with them?"

Snape continued to eat carefully. It appeared that he was thinking hard about his response.

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*She really is impressive*, Snape thought. It had taken roughly thirty-one hours for Granger to progress from vomiting and bleeding all over herself, to accepting the impossible that she had been transported through a painting to ancient Pompeii (of all places), and on to contemplating a rational analysis of their situation. He thought how

lucky those idiots Potter and Weasley had been that she had stuck with them. *The brightest witch of her age*, he thought. Could she be the ally he so desperately needed? Perhaps that was why he was so absurdly relieved to see her again. Despite the throbbing in his side, he felt a refreshing sense of calm and purpose sitting next to her. He caught himself sharply; letting her see how pleased he was to have her near to him would never do, and he wasn't about to confide in her before he knew that she could be trusted.

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"Again, you are assuming that I wish to be a part of your... escape committee... Doctor Granger," he said languidly, savouring the taste of the fig. "As I believe I have already told you, I like it here."

Hermione scowled. "Oh, come on! The Severus Snape I knew would never have been happy as a prisoner, no matter how gilded the cage. I don't understand how you can be comfortable here. You have spent the last forty years being part of someone else's plan. When Harry showed me your memories in Dumbledore's Pensive, I could see how trapped you had been in your previous life... Have you never tried to get out of here?"

Snape scowled as he bit into another fig. "I told you," he replied shortly, "I am perfectly happy here within the city."

"Besides," she continued, taking a draft of water from an earthenware goblet and wincing a little at the metallic taste, "it's not going to stay bright and shiny for long. Once the eruption begins, there will be nothing left of the people or the city."

He raised an eyebrow at her slowly, reaching for some cheese and recoiling slightly as the movement caught his damaged ribs. The silence between them extended to a minute.

Hermione stared. "Oh, don't be so infuriating!" she exclaimed in exasperation, "you must have a plan to get out of here."

Before any more could be said, however, there was a commotion outside, and Pertus came trotting anxiously towards them from the direction of the kitchen. Snape immediately was alert, his eyebrows furrowed as he watched the little man's hopping gait. Pertus came to a halt in front of his master and bobbed his head.

"Master, the *Aedile* is come to the house!" he said urgently. "He comes now to see you. He asks why you did not attend him this morning as usual. When Pertus tells him that the Master is not well, he wishes to see you for himself."

"He comes now?" asked Snape, standing and casting a worried glance at Hermione, who was looking at him in confusion. "Try to delay him for a moment, Pertus, while our guest retires." The little man nodded and scurried back towards the front of the house. Snape rounded on Hermione, his face was flushed and his eyes glittered. "There is no time to explain, Hermione," he ground out quickly, "you must get out of sight. You cannot be seen in those clothes here by *him*."

She opened her mouth to question and immediately felt the strange tingling sensation of a Disillusionment Charm settle over her. The expression on Snape's face brooked no further argument, and Hermione stood up, backing away from him towards her room, her booted feet making little noise on the tiled floor.

An *Aedile* was a low ranking city official, she knew, usually someone who dealt with the running of festivals and public works. Why such a fellow would be visiting Snape and why Snape was so nervous about the prospect was a riddle that needed answering, and Hermione was damned if she was going to allow Snape to keep yet more secrets from her.

Once in her room, a muttered Finite Incantatem made quick work of Snape's Disillusionment Charm, and she changed quickly back into her Roman *stola*, tying her hair back once again with a quick charm and slipping her wand into a little pocket she conjured for herself in the skirts. *Well, he didn't say that I shouldn't be seen by the Aedile in these clothes, did he?* she thought flippantly. *Let's see who this Aedile is and why Snape is so nervous about meeting him*

Walking quietly back out of her room into the walkway surrounding the *peristyle*, Hermione stared at the stranger who was approaching Snape in the garden courtyard. He was about fifty years old (too old, surely, for an *Aedile*, she thought incongruously), quite thin and tall, with a lined and clean-shaven face. His hair, which was cut short in the Roman fashion, was graying at the temples and stuck out from his rather large head in awkward clumps. His face was wreathed in a friendly smile, which did not quite reach his eyes. Nevertheless, as he approached, Snape immediately smiled in response, stood and grasped the other man's proffered forearm.

"*Aedile*." Snape dropped his head in a short nod of deference.

"*Marcus*, please, Severus! After all, we are old friends, are we not?" the other man chided, shaking his arm with affection. "Are you well? I'm sorry I have not been to see you in a while, my boy... busy, busy. Trouble with the water supply again; you know these engineers and their ideas..."

Hermione approached the two men, ignoring Snape's furious glare as she did so. The visitor immediately turned his attention to her, his smile growing even wider, but his brows furrowed slightly. She saw his eyes flicker to her clothing quickly and then return to her own. He *twinkled*. She stared.

"And who is this young lady, Severus? Has she been keeping you from me?" he enquired softly.

"She is..." Snape seemed momentarily lost for words. He cleared his throat and dipped his head towards her. "Hermione, this is *Aedile* Marcus Aurelius Fiducius. My Patron. *Aedile*, this is Hermione. She is..." Again, he faltered. Hermione scowled at him quickly, then walked forward and offered her hand to the official.

Fiducius laughed, throwing his head back, and took her hand lightly in his for a moment. He stared at her again. "But, Severus, I recognize her from her portrait! It is a fine likeness you did not exaggerate her features at all!"

Snape seemed to wince slightly at the older man's words. The suspicion of a blush seemed to spread across his cheeks.

Hermione was bewildered. *What portrait? What are they going on about?*

"You must be Severus' niece!" Fiducius continued, smiling at her once again. She did not warm to his smile at all. "He speaks of you very often, my dear... I had heard you had come to the city. It is so lovely to see you here in the *flesh*, so to speak." The tall man bowed to her, his eyes never leaving her face.

"Really?" Hermione turned to Snape in some confusion. *His niece? What on earth is happening here?* She suddenly felt about twelve years old. Snape positively glowered at her. She kept her silence but her stomach roiled inside.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your company this morning, *Aedile*?" Snape asked. The older man smiled once again, showing his teeth. Hermione was suddenly reminded of someone through that smile but could not quite think whom.

He stretched gingerly, wincing as he moved his shoulders. "I am afraid it's the old trouble, my boy," he said, favouring Hermione with a measured look. "A war injury," he explained to her smoothly. "I got in the way of a Parthian arrow when I was a young tribune. The wound did heal, but it has never quite stopped giving me pain. Yesterday it seemed to flare up again, and I thought it would be a good opportunity to see my good friend and *client* Severus. Actually, I was expecting to see him this morning at my house, but his slave has explained that he was unavoidably delayed. I wonder, Severus, if you might have some of that healing tonic I have used before for the pain?"

There was a short, meaningful pause. Hermione was beginning to regret her rash decision to meet this visitor.

"Of course, *Aedile*. I shall fetch some directly." Snape rose to his feet and paused. Clearly, he was uneasy about leaving Hermione alone with the *Aedile*.

Fiducius read Snape's emotions and waved away his concern with assurance. "Please, Severus, allow Hermione and me to get to know one another a little while we wait for you to return."

Snape turned to look at her again, his eyes fathomless. She felt Snape's wandless invocation, and then his mind gently touched hers with enough time for her to hear the words *take care* in her mind before he slipped away. With a final look of warning, Snape disappeared down the steps to his laboratory. Hermione watched him leave.

"So, my dear," Fiducius began, indicating that they should seat themselves on the couch, "how long will you be staying here in Pompeii?"

"That depends," Hermione replied cautiously. She was beginning to feel that there was something deeply unsettling about this man. The feeling that he was, in some way, familiar to her returned, and she found herself pulling her hands away from him and toward her stomach.

The *Aedile* tilted his head to the left, and his eyes narrowed slightly as he regarded her, although his wide smile remained. "Depends on what, my dear?"

Hermione blushed a little and looked away. "Oh, I cannot stay for long... I have to return home soon. I do not wish to impose on ... Severus' ... hospitality for too long."

"Quite," Fiducius agreed. "Quite so, Hermione. It is a terrible thing to be *unwanted*. How do you find our city? I gather that you have been out exploring since your... arrival?" At Hermione's nervous start, he chuckled expansively.

"I am *Aedile* of this city, Hermione. That means I am responsible for its day-to-day administration. I make sure that the water runs, the streets are cleared, the markets function and the whores are paid. *Nothing* happens here without me getting to hear about it." The final statement hovered in the air between them for longer than was necessary.

Hermione cleared her throat uneasily. "How did you meet Severus?" she asked in order to change the topic of conversation.

"I found him selling his healing lotions on a street corner one day," the *Aedile* replied. "He was in need of financial support, and I was in need of pain relief." He shifted his body slightly, picking up a plump black olive as he did so and popping it into his mouth. He chewed it carefully and swallowed. "We struck a bargain and have continued in our... *relationship* ever since. Severus has done well for himself, and I too have benefitted both personally and financially. He really is a talented *potioneer*."

She did not mistake the emphasis on the final word but made no reaction. Her heart was beginning to thump irregularly in her chest.

A crisp footstep announced Snape's reappearance in the courtyard. He was carrying a small glass bottle in his hand. Fiducius looked up and rose to his feet.

"Thank you, Severus," he said, taking the bottle into his pale hands. He smiled again, his yellowing teeth once more in evidence. "Your niece is a charming young woman, but she says that she is staying only as long as you wish her to. I do hope that we will be able to see her at our home this week for the festivities. Do bring her along. I am sure that our master would enjoy meeting her."

He regarded her again for a long moment, as if weighing something up in his mind, and then his attention refocused on the bottle in his hands. Once again, he smiled. "Well, no time like the present," he said lightly and flicked the bottle open, greedily tipping its contents into his mouth. For a short while he stood quite still, and then he seemed to shudder as he closed his eyes, clearly savoring the delicious sensation that the liquid had caused him. As he opened his eyes again, Hermione thought that she saw a shimmer in the air surrounding him. She caught her breath disbelievingly and was doubly disconcerted when the *Aedile* laughed at her, a carefree and hollow sound. Taking a deep breath, the Roman plucked a stray daisy bloom from a nearby shrub and concentrated for a moment. Hermione stared as the flower changed into a small lacewing in his palm. Gently, he blew at the tiny insect and watched with a hungry expression as it fluttered away in the morning breeze.

Fiducius turned to Snape, the smile that did not quite reach his eyes still lingering on his face. Hermione realized that the *Aedile* had been testing her and that he had carefully noted her reaction to his Transfiguration spell.

"So, Severus," he spoke softly again. "Now there are two of you." He looked once again at Hermione, and she thought that his eyes had become even more calculating in their intensity. Fiducius returned his attention to the Potions master. "Your slave at the entrance said that you were injured this morning. I trust that you were still able to harvest what you needed for the final fixative?"

Snape's eyes were flat and unreadable. His face set in a polite mask as he nodded. "The injury was not severe enough to prevent me from collecting the blood, my Lord," he replied. "The potion continues to brew successfully. I expect the first batch to be ready for testing in four day's time."

Hermione looked at Snape quickly, and then she returned her eyes to the *Aedile*, hoping that he hadn't noticed her reaction to his comment.

The *Aedile* appeared to be satisfied. He stared hard once again at Snape, then nodded. "Good," he said shortly. "See to it that you are more careful in the future. Perhaps you will consider taking your *niece* with you the next time you need to bleed the creatures. She may be able to help you in your endeavours." He smiled at Hermione, and she watched him warily, her senses alert and her hand unconsciously resting over her concealed wand. The *Aedile* turned to leave, half spinning on his booted feet, before he stopped again and regarded the wizards.

"I have protected you thus far with our master, Severus," he said, and his voice was formal and harsh. "I cannot promise to do so in the future, particularly if I believe that your attention has become... *distracted*... by your pretty *niece*. I will see you tomorrow morning at my villa for my daily update, Severus." His eyes flicked meaningfully to Hermione. "Our master may wish to speak to you, my dear, as well."

With one final, broad smile, the *Aedile* held his palm outwards again. He frowned and then watched, delighted, as a small blue flame danced across his palm. "Only four days to wait," he said, and Hermione noted the triumphant timbre in his voice. "Four more days," he repeated, "and then the new Gods of Pompeii will rise." He closed his fist with a flourish, turned, and stalked away.

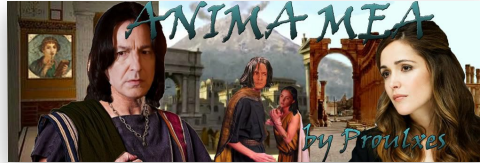
## Chapter 7

Chapter 8 of 32

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: All the characters you recognise are JKR's and not mine! Again, thanks and hugs to the wonderful beawesley2 for her alpha reading and to lyn\_f for her beta work and her patience! Thank you also to my reviewers I love reading what you think of this story.



Thank you to beawesley2 and Jay for the wonderful banner!

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## Chapter 7

"Umm, I thought I'd give Gabrielle a call before I leave for Italy," Harry called carefully through the open door between their bathroom and bedroom. "What do you think? Have you seen our spare toothpaste?"

"What?" Ginny's voice sounded dangerously charged from the adjoining room.

"Toothpaste?" Harry projected his voice a little louder and paused in his search through their bath things as he waited for his wife's reaction. He jumped when Ginny appeared suddenly at the doorway.

"Harry James Potter," she began, her eyes flashing. "What do you mean, 'give Gabrielle a call'?"

Despite his best efforts, Harry felt a blush spread to his ears. He busied himself filling his travel wash bag with various items. Soap... shampoo... shaving cream... toothbrush... flannel....

He realised that his wife had still not spoken further, and he risked another look in her direction. Ginny was standing with her arms folded and her eyes narrowed. He favoured her with what he hoped was his calmest and most winningly sincere smile.

"Darling, Gabrielle is working in Italy now," he pointed out reasonably to his wife, abandoning his search for the spare toothpaste tube and zipping up the bag. "She could be really helpful when I get out there. You know? Helping me with the language and getting around when I get there? Don't you remember Fleur telling us at Christmas that Gabrielle had that new job working for the French Ministry as a liaison officer in Rome? I thought that she might be able to help me out... Come on, Ginny! You know that there's never been anything to worry about with me!" He wrapped his arms around her waist, hugging her tight and resting his chin on her shoulder. He tightened his grip and chuckled as he felt her begin to relax slowly.

When Ginny had first met Fleur, she, like the rest of her family, had disliked her intensely, and even after nearly fifteen years, his fiery wife had not quite lost her jealous attitude towards her part-Veela relatives. It was true that when Ron and Harry had first met Fleur, they had behaved like, well, prats. But that was a long time ago. Harry snuggled closer to his beautiful wife. Ginny's hands were pressed flat against his back, and Harry risked moving his head to kiss her.

"Not so bloody fast, mister," she said, but there was a small quirk of her lips and her eyes gentled. Not giving up, he nudged her cheek with his nose and smiled, relaxing his grip on her waist but moving his hands slowly around her flanks and up her back. He nudged again and felt her laugh and twist in his arms, her lips finally pressing to his own. Harry felt that familiar swooping sensation in his chest as their tongues entwined and he growled happily into her mouth. He wondered if they had time before the kids got back to the flat from the nursery, but then Ginny pulled away laughing and picked up his wash bag. She swung it in her hand and walked back into the bedroom.

"Okay," she said, chucking the wash bag into his small suitcase on the bed, "there are rules about this arrangement."

Obediently, Harry nodded and grinned; he had been expecting this. As he moved towards her across the room, Ginny held up her right hand and counted off her fingers. "One...absolutely no snogging. Two...no touching beyond a quick 'hello hug'. Three...no mooning or behaving like Ronald did three years ago at The Burrow. Four..."

But Harry had caught up with her and wrapped his arms around her again, and she dissolved into a fit of giggles as he began to tickle and nuzzle her in just the way she liked.

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Three hours later, Harry walked into Level Six of the Ministry of Magic and approached the entrance to the Department of Magical Transportation, hefting his travelling case awkwardly in his left hand and holding a copy of the authorisation letter for his journey in the other. It had been hand signed by Kingsley himself a few minutes ago.

As his trip was an emergency, Harry had decided to travel to London to catch the regular, authorised Portkey to Naples from the Ministry of Magic because of the frequent availability of departure dates, instead of waiting for the paperwork to be approved by the Department of Magical Transportation.

Harry had travelled abroad on a few occasions when he had worked for the Ministry, but he had always travelled directly from the Minister's Office with Kingsley, so travelling from the Department of Magical Transportation's International Portkey Departure Division was a new experience that he was quite looking forward to.

Unlike the dark, Gothic splendour of the Entrance Atrium of the Ministry, the ceiling of the reception foyer for the Department of Magical Transportation was far higher, with large arched recesses decorated with statues that led to the doorways of various offices and regularly spaced magical windows set into deep-set windowsills set into each side of the cavernous space. The windows, which flooded the lobby with light, showed spectacular views of various locations from around the world despite the fact that they were still deep underground. The room was about two hundred feet long and seventy feet wide. Its floor was decorated with dark grey and cream marble tiles that were arranged in a chequerboard design. The walls were covered in a fine, pale cream stucco. While the Entrance Atrium felt dark and oppressive, its glistening walls redolent with authoritarianism and the sense of magical power and responsibility, this hall gave a far more light-hearted and welcoming impression. Harry's buoyant mood continued, although his arm was beginning to ache a little from carrying his heavy bag.

As Harry followed the floating signs in the foyer for the International Portkey Departures Lounge, walking briskly towards the escalators at the end of the hall, his eyes were drawn to a series of brightly coloured, framed magical posters on the walls between the windows. Each poster exhorted the reader to travel with greater care and safety than the first. Harry's eyes lingered in particular on the image of a serious looking wizard explaining: 'Splinching Can Kill; Don't Apparate ANGRY!' In the next one along, another similarly concerned wizard advised the viewer not to use unauthorised Portkeys because 'What the Ministry does not Authorise, We Can't Support!' Another, a bright yellow poster showing a slow-moving picture of the Knight Bus, read: 'Don't Drink and Apparate; Summon the Knight Bus. Let US Do the Driving!'

When he reached the escalators at the end of the hall, Harry found himself queuing up behind two families who were marshalling their luggage and children up the moving stairway in front of them. The escalators were long, steep and narrow, rising about two hundred feet above to the International Portkey Departures Lounge.

The children ranged in age from about four years old to mid-teens. After a short time, both families were safely ascending, and Harry followed. The progress of the escalator was smooth, but still Harry saw the second mother put her arm carefully about the shoulders of her very young daughter to prevent her from wobbling on the moving stair. Her protective action reminded Harry of Ginny, and he wondered what the children back at home in Hogwarts would be doing. James and Al were no doubt chasing about the castle grounds fighting each other and causing trouble while he knew Ginny would probably be putting Lily down for her lunchtime nap just about now.

Ginny would make a cup of tea and probably curl up on the sofa to read or listen to the radio while Lily slept.

Harry was pleased that his family was so content living at the castle. For many years Hogwarts had been his home and his refuge from the Dursleys' neglect, the place where he had met his lovely wife and made the sort of friends that would last a lifetime. Regardless of the war and the horrors that he witnessed within and around the walls of the old castle, it still felt like home. He certainly preferred their suite of rooms in Hogwarts to his godfather's old house, which he and his family had lived in when he had worked in London. Despite Kreacher's changed attitude and the work that had been done to modernise and brighten the property, Harry still found that there were still too many difficult memories in Grimmauld Place for him to be truly content there.

He was reaching the top of the escalator now, and he shuffled off the moving staircase, finding himself on a smaller landing area which led through a barrel-vaulted corridor to another hallway, this time marked, *International Portkey Departures Lounge*. Harry found himself in a long queue of travellers, still behind the families he had followed up the escalator.

After a while, the slow progress of the queue made his shoulder ache, so he dropped his bag at his feet, charming it to float alongside him as he progressed forward. When the two families ahead of him moved up to the registration counter, he had his first clear view of the room beyond.

The Departure Lounge was huge, almost as cavernous as the Entrance Atrium itself and, like the atrium, it echoed with noise. Along both sides of the hall were a series of magical benches, which expanded and contracted depending on how many people needed to sit down. The benches were mostly occupied by a variety of witches and wizards who were waiting for the next Portkey to be activated. Various open doorways led off from the foyer to smaller rooms with magical rope barriers. Shimmering in midair was a series of notices, informing the seated wizards when the different Portkeys were due to be activated and from which room. Periodically, a bureaucratic female voice made announcements, thus adding to the noise in the hall.

Apparently, he had the misfortune to be travelling on an August weekend alongside what looked very much like half the magical population of London. An orb above the registration counter turned green, indicating that he should approach the available receptionist. Taking a deep breath, Harry walked towards a vacant-looking dark-haired witch behind the registration counter and passed over his authorisation letter.

"Portkey to Naples, Italy," he said unnecessarily, as the witch seemed to be taking a very long time reading the authorisation letter. She paused in her perusal of his documentation and looked slowly up at him. Harry was reminded of Pansy Parkinson and wondered if the slack-jawed girl was a relative of the unlovely Slytherin. "Mr. ... Potter?" she asked slowly, disbelievingly.

Harry nodded, ducking his head self-consciously as he did so. Having spent the past few years in the protective obscurity of Hogwarts, Harry found it hard to return to the wider wizarding world and all the attention that his reputation brought him here. He had the absurd feeling that he should show her his scar to prove that he was, after all, who he claimed to be. He resisted the urge to do so. It was barely visible anyway, having faded to a faint silver line after the Horcrux had been removed. Eventually, the receptionist moved her hand slowly to a large metal stamp on her desk and stamped the parchment with purple ink.

"Wand please," the receptionist said in a formal tone that wavered slightly as if she were still impressed to be serving him, but trying to appear professional while doing so. She indicated that Harry should place it on the pair of golden scales on the counter, staring at his forehead as she did so. Harry pulled it out and placed it on the scales. "Wand core?" the witch asked him, checking his answer against the letter before her.

"Did you pack your own bag, sir?" she asked, still staring at him.

"Uh-huh." Harry nodded and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He hoped this process would not take long, as he could do with the loo.

"The Portkey to Naples will be activated from Room 32B in forty-five minutes. Please take a seat and keep your luggage with you at all times. On behalf of the Minster for Magic, we wish you a happy journey and a safe landing at the destination of your choice," she gabbled, holding out Harry's letter. He took it, but she seemed reluctant to let it go. He tugged it carefully free from her fingers and asked her where the nearest public toilets were. She looked astonished (*Harry Potter needs to urinate*) and then directed him to a discreet side door on the left.

Harry thanked her and picked up his wand and his bag. All in all, he was very pleased about how things had gone so far. It would not be long to wait, and he'd be meeting Gabrielle at the Apparition point in Naples. He turned and went to relieve his bladder.

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"Why the *hell* didn't you do what you were told?" Snape snarled furiously. He was white faced and shaking with rage. She could tell that it was all he could manage to keep his voice low so Pertus did not hear them. "You could have ruined everything! Everything! I don't know what Fiducius will do now that he knows you are here. I cannot protect you like this!"

Hermione knew what he was so angry about; he had lost the element of surprise that her presence might have lent him.

"*Some ally*," he scoffed, "You cannot even be trusted to follow simple instructions that have been clearly given!"

Hermione stood very still, staring at him, her hazel eyes wide and steady.

For a moment it seemed as if she could feel his magic swell, as if his chest had began to thrum with a dark and powerful energy with each deep breath she watched him take. The power this wizard had amazed and frightened her, but she winced as he laid a hand on his ribs, as if they hurt him. She remembered his bruises and recoiled in sympathy; sympathy that vanished as soon as he said, "You... you can't be trusted at all, can you?" his voice little more than a hiss. "Blundering about, *idiot* girl. Fuck! *Fuck!* I told you to stay out of sight, for Merlin's sake! Now he knows about you...." Snape ran his fingers through his hair and over his face, scrubbing at his cheek as if trying to erase something.

"Well, perhaps if you had told me all about *your bloody Patron*, I wouldn't have come back out to meet him!" She matched his anger and resentment with her own, stubbornly jutting out her chin and standing with her feet self-consciously apart. "What the hell was all that about? Is he a wizard? I thought you said that you had not contacted any other magical people here!"

"He is not magical!" Snape was standing very close to her now, his face less than six inches away from her. "I thought your famed intellect and acumen, not to mention your magical senses, would have picked up that glaringly obvious point, *Doctor* Granger. Did you not see him take the potion and *only then* transfigure the plant? Or were you too busy *flirting* with him to notice?" He stopped short suddenly and blinked.

"I did pick up on that fact, *actually*, *Severus*," she retorted furiously, feeling the blush creeping across her cheeks, matching the one slowly spreading across his. "I remember thinking that he was a surprisingly knowledgeable Muggle with no magical signature but a surprising familiarity with, and knowledge of, our world just before you gave him the potion that imbued him with sufficient magical strength to undertake a rather tricky Transfiguration charm that created a *living form*. I am *not* the one at fault here!"

"Are you suggesting that I do not know what I am doing?" he was practically shouting at her, and she could detect the faint trace of aggressive uncertainty in his voice.

"I don't know what I am suggesting!" she shouted back, refusing to back down, "because you won't *tell me* anything! I don't know exactly what is going on here, but I'm starting to realise that we seem to be in even more trouble than just being trapped inside some of the most powerful wards I have ever encountered in a doomed ancient city that is thousands of miles *and years* away from home. Oh, yes, and I also found out, incidentally, that you have a portrait painted of me somewhere in your home and that I am suddenly *your niece*! The situation is clearly more than you can handle on your own your injuries attest to that fact," she said as she gestured at his damaged

side.

She paused for a moment, recognising the importance of this moment and knowing that she had to do something to try to convince him of her sincerity. Then, some odd impulse made her reach out to touch him with one hand, spreading her fingers across the centre of his chest to try to feel his heart, her fingers catching on the pendant that he was wearing on the thin gold chain around his neck under his *tunica*. She felt an erratic thumping beneath her fingers, which matched the uneven rhythm in her own chest. "For Merlin's sake, please let me *in*, Severus. I can help you, and we can help each other to get out of here!"

He flinched at her touch, and with a frustrated growl, he grabbed her upper arms. Without thinking, she clutched his forearms defensively in return, her fingers digging into his flesh to prevent him from shaking her. His face immediately contorted with a hiss of alarm and pain, and he broke away from her, taking a jolting step backwards, holding his left forearm as he did so. He backed up against the frame of the couch and sat down heavily upon it.

She was breathing thickly, watching him as he sat gently cradling his arm. She realised with a sudden jolt that it must be his Dark Mark. The Mark had faded so much that she had not even noticed it before. There was little more than a faint silvery outline on the flesh of his arm, but as she looked more intently, she saw that the skin around it had a sickly pallor. They both watched as he stroked the old curse scar lightly with his fingertips. He seemed to be soothing it.

Once more, his hair obscured his face. She had always thought him difficult to read when she knew him before as her professor, but here and now, his body language spoke volumes. There was tension pulsing about him, as he seemed to be fighting an internal war within himself. His shoulders were stiff with pain and possibly anxiety, yet his hand moved gently on his arm. She watched the tender motion with renewed sympathy.

Thanks mostly to Harry's post-war zealotry on Snape's behalf, Hermione knew a lot about the taciturn Potions master's actions during his time as a spy for the Order. She knew that he had worked obsessively alone, not confiding in anyone, even those who had been so badly wounded when he killed Dumbledore and suffered under his tenure as Headmaster. For him to trust another person in a dangerous situation would be a supreme act of faith that would go against years of deeply ingrained survival mechanisms. She took a slow and steady breath and sat down beside him, placing her hand lightly but firmly on his right arm.

"Severus," she said quietly but compellingly, "don't you think it is time that we started to *worktogether*, rather than apart?"

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Harry sat with his head in his hands, despairing that he would never get out of Britain.

The last time he had travelled via Portkey, he had been travelling with the Minister for Magic on a trade mission to Southern California. The process had been effortless and smooth, in stark contrast to the hell that he was currently experiencing.

He was sitting on one of the magical benches between a short and angry elderly witch who was returning home to Naples after visiting relatives in the UK for the holidays and a young family who was clearly inexperienced in travelling with children. Harry paused in his musing to thank the planets for Ginny's family, who had so much experience in travelling with babies and youngsters that they had bomb-proof preparations for doing so. Clearly, the young witch and wizard had never heard of drawing pads and permanently charmed Nintendo DS computer games. As he shifted sideways to avoid the wailing infant who was currently throwing a strop simply because he was bored, he jolted his angry neighbour on the other side who directed a tirade of irate Italian in his direction until he was in no doubt what she thought of him.

He checked his watch. The Portkey was now nearly two hours overdue. This was owing to Harry had been informed by the receptionist who he had eventually gone to speak to again 'local difficulties' at the destination site in Naples. What those 'local difficulties' were she really could not say, although she did hope that he was having a nice day. He had not been able to send a message to Gabrielle (now that he had checked in, he was not allowed to leave the Departure Lounge for 'security reasons'), and he was just hoping that she would still be waiting for him when he arrived.

He returned to his seat, apologetically insinuating himself back between the angry Italian witch and the helpless parents and their offspring. With a heavy sigh he pulled a handful of parchments out of his rucksack and turned over the front page.

Before he left Hogwarts for the Apparition Point outside the school gates, he had visited Minerva to see if she might be able to shed any light on what Hermione was working on before she had disappeared. Harry had explained in a somewhat embarrassed fashion to his old Head of House that he was searching for clues to her disappearance. Smiling, Minerva had pressed a number of academic journals into his hands, all written by Hermione during the last five years. "Hermione always sends me copies of any article she writes," the Head of Gryffindor had said with a proud tilt of her head and her eyes sparkling with mischief. "I am sure that you will find some of them very...." her eyebrows had wiggled suggestively, "... instructive."

Experimentally, Harry had opened the front cover of the article on the top of the sheaf of papers. Underneath the title *The Development of Eastern Mystery Cults in the Early Roman Empire: an Arithmantic Perspective*, there was a short dedication. *For STS*, it read, *to keep this memory alive*. "What's that?" Harry had asked, frowning at the words in his hands.

"Oh, Hermione always signs her papers like that." Minerva had shrugged. "It's her signature dedication. Odd, really, that she can't seem to let Severus go."

Sitting uncomfortably on his section of the bench, Harry returned to Hermione's most recent academic article with a sigh. Turning past the initial title page with its baffling dedication, Harry's eyes caught a few choice words, and his eyes widened fractionally. "Castration ... Orgy ... Phallic structures," he read. *What in Merlin's name was she working on?* His eyes fell back to the pages.

Much of the paper was taken up with a detailed site report from her most recent excavation season in Pompeii, written in technical language which baffled him, but Harry's attention was drawn to what seemed to be a particularly lurid description of an animal sacrifice to a goddess called *Magna Mater* or *Great Mother*. Hermione's neat script carefully described a small underground chamber, long and narrow, with a deep pit dug at the far end. A sturdy metal grid had been placed over the pit. Hermione suggested that this was evidence of a bull sacrifice called a *taurobolium*. An accompanying illustration showed the bull's throat being slit open and its blood pouring down through the grid to bathe the naked initiates below.

Hermione went on to maintain that while the other *taurobolii* took place with wooden slats preventing the animal from collapsing on top of the initiates below, this one seemed to be preventing an even larger or heavier creature from crushing the worshippers. Either way, the moment of the sacrificed creature's death appeared to coincide with the ecstatic release of the mystery. Harry wondered, with some confusion, what kind of 'ecstatic release' Hermione could have been talking about.

*Bloody hell, History of Magic was never like this at school!* Harry thought to himself, carefully moving his reading matter away from the suddenly interested eyes of his elderly next-door neighbour who was ogling, with increasingly horrified offence, at another picture from the article of unclothed initiates dancing around a central figure who was wrapped in a snake and carrying a weird-looking staff.

Before he could read any further, the apologetic voice of the receptionist, magically magnified, announced, "Attention please, Transportees for the International Portkey to Naples, Italy. Your Portkey will be departing immediately from Room 32B. Will anyone who is intending to travel via this Portkey, please come forward. Thank you. The Ministry of Magic apologises for the delay in this transport."

Scrambling to his feet, Harry hurriedly stuffed Hermione's papers back in his luggage and followed the small crowd of his fellow travellers to the relevant room.

In the centre of Room 32B, on a small table dramatically lit from above, was an articulated table lamp. Beside it, an officious little wizard wearing a dark blue set of robes and a peaked cap waited for everyone to file into the room.

"Good afternoon, everyone," the Portkey wizard intoned in a faintly nasal voice. "Please ensure that you have a firm hold of your luggage as you approach the Portkey and place your finger somewhere upon it. Travellers with young children are requested to ensure their safety by holding on to them very tightly." This prompted a flurry of panic



from the young family, as the mother attempted to swap the luggage that she was holding for their son, whom the father was carrying. The father, in turn, tried to grab the bag without dropping the infant until he was certain that his wife had him firmly in her arms, and in doing so, he accidentally bumped the Italian-speaking witch's ample bosom. Unfortunately, the infant, who was therefore jostled around, began howling again at his treatment, and the Italian witch smacked the father on the head with her handbag, swearing loudly at him in Italian.

Harry looked with some desperation at the Portkey wizard. *Please, please let me get out of here!* Harry thought earnestly, swearing once again that he would never travel by a regular, authorised Portkey ever again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Portkey is due to activate in...", the wizard consulted a large magical fob watch, "ten seconds, *nine, eight, seven, six...*"

Harry hurriedly placed his fingers on the cool metal of the lamp and watched the Portkey wizard flourish his wand. The table lamp glowed blue and trembled briefly, marking its activation as a Portkey. Abruptly, he found himself to be travelling.

Harry quite enjoyed transport by Portkey. During his time working for the Ministry, Harry had become comfortable with the initial jarring sensation that resulted from touching the Portkey, and he was also now able to remain upright and cycle his legs carefully so that he could control his landing, which in this case was in a small clearing of an urban park.

Immediately, he felt the change in temperature, and the sun seemed to be so much fiercer on his face and neck. His fellow travellers were picking themselves up off the grass, either wailing loudly, arguing about who was carrying what, or remonstrating angrily with the luckless relative who had been nominated to meet his aged *nonna*. As he got his bearings, Harry saw a tall, lovely silver-blond witch, striding purposefully towards him with her hands outstretched in greeting and her eyes shining with recognition.

"Harry!" she called out, rushing to embrace him tightly.

Harry experienced the heady rush of physical intoxication that meeting Gabrielle Delacour usually caused. Carefully, he squeezed her back, before (mindful of his promise to Ginny) stepping backwards. He knew he was blushing, but he hoped, as always, that she would not call attention to his embarrassment. Unlike her sister, Gabrielle was quite self-conscious about her Veela heritage and certainly did not enjoy the attention that she attracted from men and wizards as much as her older sister. Harry took a deliberate breath and pulled his suitcase in front of him in an unconsciously defensive gesture. "It's so good to see you again, Gabrielle," he said smiling, feeling his heart rate even out as his body got used to being so close to her. "I'm sorry I'm so late. There was some sort of a problem with the Portkey. Thanks for giving me a hand. Fleur said that you knew the area around Naples quite well?"

"But it's my pleasure, Harry." Gabrielle smiled charmingly in response. "I studied for a while near to *Napoli*, so I know the city well. Fleur said that you had never been to *Italia* before, so you would be happy for me to translate for you and help you to find your hotel. I had some vacation time due to me, and so it was easy for me to be here for you."

She placed her hand on his arm, and Harry felt his body betray him once again, but if she noticed his discomfort, Gabrielle did not comment. Instead, she smiled once again, and Harry was bathed in the warmth of the sun and her friendly affection. "It is so lovely to see you again Harry; welcome to Naples! Shall we get a coffee?"

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"It began a few months ago," Snape's voice was low and quiet. He was still looking down at his arm, his fingers now stilled over the remnants of his Mark.

Hermione sat quietly and waited for him to tell her more. She realised that her heart rate had increased, either from fear or from anticipation, she could not tell. She stifled a breath and waited.

Snape sighed quietly, straightened his back and turned to face her. "But I suppose it began even earlier than that," he amended. "Fiducius was always ambitious, and even with all my *personal experience*, I did not realize how corrupting that ambition could become. Marcus comes from an old family. Naturally, he had harboured political ambitions since childhood. You will have noticed that he is rather old to be a humble *Aedile*, no doubt." Hermione nodded, so Snape continued, "His family was closely linked with the family of Poppaea Sabina..."

"Emperor Nero's second wife," Hermione interjected, unable to stop herself.

Snape scowled. "Of course. Do try to control yourself, Granger, I thought you wanted *me* to talk to *you*? Perhaps *you* would rather continue this sorry tale?" He raised a long eyebrow at her, some of the old sarcasm returning to his expression.

Hermione held up her hands in apology and a polite invitation for him to continue.

Snape took his time returning to the subject, drawing out the moment to irritate her further. Hermione refused to rise to the bait and waited (with gritted teeth) for him to carry on.

"Very well." Snape cleared his throat. "When Nero was murdered in the year 68, his family and supporters fell from power with him. Fiducius could not stand again for local office. Suddenly, his hopes of a glittering political career had faded to dust. He did not take the sudden loss of status and power *well*." Snape's face twisted into a small grimace. "I owe Marcus Fiducius a life debt. When I came to the city, he sheltered me, gave me money and helped me to establish my home and business. Without him I would not have survived those early weeks here. I owed him my support and thought he was a true friend. For many months after Nero's fall from power, Marcus was inconsolable. He suffered the loss of his local prestige badly. I did what I could to encourage him to endure the period of his family's political disgrace. After all," the faint trace of a sneer crossed his features, "I have some experience of being hated and resented by my peers." Snape stared out across his garden.

"Ever since I have known him, Marcus has been looking for a way to regain his authority and revive his ambitions. He is eager to explore all the means to enhance his power, and he is quite ruthless in exploiting every opportunity to do so."

"Is that where that potion came from?" asked Hermione quietly.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Granger," he admonished her. *"Patience."*

Despite her irritation at his supercilious attitude, she suddenly knew that he was enjoying having the knowledge of something that she did not. It was infuriating. He was reading her expression and becoming progressively more amused by her frustration. She watched him watching her. The tension increased between them as the silence continued. It turned the air thick and heavy, laden with expectation. *I'm not going to blink*, she found herself thinking absurdly. *I'm not. He can bloody well speak first.*

*Oh, come on...*

Snape snorted. "There is another element of the situation that you perhaps should know." He shifted carefully on the couch and winced, his hand moving reflexively to his ribs, as the movement once again aggravated his rib injury. He looked at her again haughtily. "What does the famous Know-It-All of Gryffindor Tower know about the cult of Sabazios?"

"Sabazios? The Thracian deity?" Hermione asked. "Hang on, what do you mean? His cult is here? That's very interesting... I found evidence of some of the eastern mystery cults like Cybele during last year's excavation season..." Her voice died out in the face of his intense stare. His eyebrow was raised once more and Hermione felt a small quiver of fear thrill through her body.

"What I mean, Granger, is that the actual *deity* is here, *now*, in the city. Sabazios is the 'Master' that Marcus was referring to, just before he left." Snape's brow furled into a scowl as he spoke. "Not powerful enough yet, though; he has still not realised his full magical potential, but he is very dangerous. He is an extremely powerful magical force already."

"Where... where is he now?" Hermione stammered rather stupidly, almost looking around her.

Snape smiled grimly, his mood darkening. "Fiducius has him hidden in one of the empty water cisterns in the north section of the city. He is contained for now fed, contented and ... growing. When Sabazios appeared in the city with his supporters, Marcus quickly learned of it and saw Sabazios as a means to regain his prestige and become more powerful."

"What do you mean, 'more powerful'?" asked Hermione, although she probably already knew the answer.

"Marcus believes that he has been cheated out of his political inheritance," Snape said, his voice colourless. "His aunt rose to be the wife of an emperor. As a young man, Marcus met Nero himself when the emperor visited Pompeii, and the experience completely shaped his life." Snape darted a look at Hermione and watched her expression.

Hermione was processing the information he was throwing at her with her customary speed, quickly aligning all the pieces together with what she'd discovered at her dig in the modern world.

He picked up one of the goblets in front of him and drained it. She continued to watch him silently. She knew that he could practically hear the wheels turning in her mind. Replacing the goblet on the low table, he sat back again carefully, and apparently keeping his emotions under control, he continued his explanation. "Marcus plans to be Emperor of Rome, Hermione."

He paused and she nodded in understanding, silently urging him to continue. "He is from a high-born family. He is very intelligent and does not lack imagination. He understands that Vespasian only gained the throne after Nero's death because he was able to mobilise the support of the army and took decisive action against his rivals. With Sabazios and his followers behind him, Marcus could control an army that will be easily strong enough for him to overthrow Vespasian's son and take control over the Empire. As you know, the first few months of a new reign is always a delicate time. His son, Titus, is not quite secure. Other families, like the Fiducii, were out of favour in Vespasian's regime. If Marcus acts quickly, he may well succeed in establishing himself as a new emperor with Sabazios' help. History is made by those who take their moment." His face twisted into a sardonic smile. "*Carpe Diem*, 'seize the day', Miss Granger the Romans practically invented the sentiment."

"Why can't Sabazios simply take power for himself, if he's so dangerous?" Hermione asked.

Snape almost laughed. "Does a god want to restrict himself to a mere human empire? I suspect that his ambitions are even greater. For now, I sense that he will be happy to rule through Marcus. The power behind the throne, so to speak."

"Where do you fit in to this picture?" she asked quietly when he paused again.

"I went along to an initiation ceremony to humour Marcus," Snape replied, and there was an air of embarrassment emanating from him now. "I think he wanted to show me off to his new *friend*. There has been any number of new religious cults in Pompeii in the past few years since the earthquake of 52 AD, one charlatan after another *Mithras*, The Great Mother, *Isis*, people coming together and using religion as a means to achieve group relief and shared fulfilment. Imagine my... surprise... when I attended the meeting and realised that Sabazios was actually magical, and more than that, I knew he had malignant intent."

Hermione realised that he was flushing at the memory of his misjudgement.

"So, Marcus took me to meet Sabazios, and we recognised each other's magical signatures immediately. It was like being *flayed*. It reminded me of the first time I met The Dark Lord. I could tell that Sabazios was weak but I could sense that he was gaining strength. His Legilimency was excoriating; I was not expecting it, and he ripped me bare. In a moment he saw everything that I was that I could command and accomplish and because I was unprepared, I was undefended." Snape's head had dropped and his hair once more had fallen forward to cover his face. There was another period of silence, but Hermione knew that there was more.

"What did Sabazios ask you to do?" she asked.

"The Metamorphagus Potion," Snape said bluntly. "You have seen its effects. Sabazios wishes to enhance his own powers, and he also wishes to gift magical abilities to his followers."

"But," Hermione objected, feeling like she was permanently catching up on this conversation from far behind, "magical abilities are innate. You are born with them, or they are passed down through generations. You can't *manufacture* a wizard, for Merlin's sake!"

"I theorised that magical abilities might be found in the genetic code a recessive gene, so to speak so I sought to create a masking potion to overlay the non-magical genetic code. I did not think it was possible to achieve a satisfactory result but was obliged to try."

"And you succeeded," Hermione said flatly.

"I did not think it would be possible, but yes, I succeeded in a limited way."

Hermione frowned. "The potion that Fiducius took...it gave him the ability to cast spells. How strong is it?"

Snape shifted, easing his side again. "Strong enough," he said eventually. "But it does not last beyond a few minutes and cannot be taken again for some hours."

"But you are making it stronger and more long lasting," she said.

"Yes. I have found a way to stabilise the bonding of the organic compounds."

"You are making it possible for Sabazios to have his army." She felt as if her heart had stopped. "Death Eaters. Oh God, that's what you're doing you're creating a new race of Death Eaters! *Why*, for fuck's sake?"

Snape turned to look at her directly, and she was revolted to see the quirk of amusement appear again on his features. The sight of it made her stomach clench. She tasted acid in her gullet and fought for control. *How could he do this? After everything we had fought for against Voldemort! After I had believed in him, had tried to save him, had mourned desperately for him, had never forgotten him....* She blinked back the sudden angry and frenzied tears that sprang to her eyes. Snape was still watching her with that damnable-fucking-sneering...

"*Because*, Miss Granger," Snape answered her, interrupting her thoughts as they raced through her mind and her hand tightened on her wand, "and again I find myself rather disappointed by your *dullness* because I know *where* we are and I know the *date*, Miss Granger. I know the *date*."

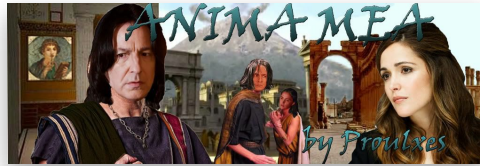
# Chapter 8

Chapter 9 of 32

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: All the characters you recognise are JKR's and not mine! Again, thanks and hugs to the incomparable beaweasley2 for all her help on this chapter. Clairvoyant has graciously lent me her beta skills (for which I am deeply grateful!). Thanks also to those of you who take the time to review I'm sorry that this one has taken so long to appear....



Thank you to beaweasley2 and Jay for the wonderful banner!

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## Chapter 8

"You know the date," Hermione repeated slowly. Her mind still seemed to be frozen, but she slowly felt her hand relax on the handle of her wand.

Snape said nothing and looked at her patiently as if waiting for her to work something out. It was irritatingly like being in his classroom. Her mind flicked to the lesson in her third year when he had tried to let every student in her class know that a werewolf was teaching them. He had behaved like an arse on that day, and he was being an arse now. She watched as his eyebrows rose and his lips quirked slightly.

Enlightenment dawned.

"You're going to use Vesuvius to stop Sabazios," she breathed. "Oh, that is *soclever*."

Snape inclined his head. "Why, *thank you*, Miss Granger." His voice was mocking, but he also appeared to be rather pleased by her response.

"Why don't you just run?"

"Run?"

"Run. Leave. Fly."

"I can't," Snape said shortly, but she was starting to find him easier to read. He did not want to leave, she was sure of that. He shifted uncomfortably, darting a look at her. "The wards," he stated by way of explanation. "Sabazios does not trust me to stay and brew for him, so he established the wards on the city gates. They prevent all those with magical abilities from passing through them."

"You could break them, I'm sure."

"I ... probably could try," he conceded with a slight shake of his head and a small wry smile.

She thought, *arse or no arse, he's quite attractive when he smiles like that*

"But you're not going to."

"No."

"But if you left, there would be no potion. You would not be risking your life. Sabazios would not get his army. Well, not straight away....," her voice died away. She looked at him and thought how easily her confidence in him could be re-established because she wanted to trust him so much. "You're going to try to stop them all before they can get out of Pompeii."

"If I leave, then Sabazios may realise that something is wrong and leave the city, and he will grow even more powerful." Snape's voice now seemed to swell with suppressed emotion. She thought that she heard pride mixed with dignity and underpinned by a sense of duty and obligation. "I was too young to stop the first Dark Lord that I knew from rising to power. It seems that I have the opportunity here and now to stop the *last* Dark Lord I will know from rising. I need to keep Sabazios here and keep him thinking that I am working to aid his ambitions until I can bury him under boiling rock."

His words rang out challengingly in the warm summer air.

Hermione watched as a mote of dust twirled and swam in the air in front of her. "That's very brave," she said neutrally.

Snape's expression turned guarded. "I will not shirk this responsibility," he said. "I am not a coward."

She looked at him again. He was sitting very still, but there was a slight hunch to his shoulders. A wary and defensive energy seemed to be radiating from him again. It was odd, but she fancied that she could feel a sympathetic ache in her own chest. He had been alone, dealing with a desperate situation. Hermione knew that he was a powerful and intelligent wizard; perhaps only Dumbledore and Voldemort had been stronger, but like everyone, he had weaknesses.

"You keep saying 'I' a lot," she replied. "What am I doing while the mountain explodes? Holding your coat and cheering you on?"

"What?" Snape seemed nonplussed.

"I assume that I can do more than watch. Fiducius certainly seemed to think so. I think, from what he was saying, that you will need my help to make more of the potion, and now that the *Aedile* has seen me, he will expect me to be actively supporting you and his 'Master' in their plans."

She was staring frankly at him. His eyes had a watchful quality, she noted, as if he was still weighing up something in his mind. She wondered how open he was prepared to be with her after all.

"How are we going to escape?" Hermione continued. "Presumably, the wards will shatter as soon as we defeat Sabazios and his acolytes? It seems like a rather tall order to walk out of the city in the middle of a volcanic eruption... even if we have just vanquished the new Dark Lord. How were you thinking of getting away?"

"I did not expect to get away, Miss Granger," Snape replied after a pause.

Hermione regarded him steadily. *Ahhh, so there it is*, she thought to herself. *Good*. Now she could contribute something. "But that was before I arrived," she pointed out, "and if it's alright with you, I would rather not be entombed with some sort of power-crazed Voldemort-Mark-Two and his bunch of magically-enhanced goons. I think we can do better than an act of supreme self-sacrifice in the pursuit of redemption."

"Miss Granger," Snape said with a sigh. "I will..."

"*Doctor* Granger," she corrected him absently, getting to her feet and standing over him.

"What?" he asked, confused.

"*Doctor* Granger, Severus," she repeated. "Or Hermione, if you prefer. *I* would prefer it actually. You keep slipping into 'Hogwarts mode'. Where is that portrait?" She looked around the *peristyle* expectantly. Snape looked up at her. He appeared to have expected his self-declared intention to sacrifice himself for the greater good to have had more impact.

"Portrait?" he asked.

"Yes, Severus, the portrait that I came through. Where is it? I need to study it. We need a way home."

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In her office, high in one of the castle's towers, Vector brushed her long fingers over the runic scripture once again. The pattern of the numerals was familiar, and yet there was something jarring about the manner in which they were arranged. It was as if someone was trying to create a hybrid runic structure between two very different systems of predictive signifiers. The effect was so jarring that it was almost *upsetting*. The magic in the runes was fighting itself.

Her initial instinct had been that the runes signified a lifeline, a predictable pattern of cause and effect that could determine a person's life choices and, therefore, predict their life's length. In many ways, the arrangement of the numerals was similar to a standard wizarding life span, but then again, it wasn't. Vector frowned. Too many gaps, like breaks in DNA sequencing. Complexity was one thing but this was plain confusing, and Septima Vector did not *do* confusing.

She sighed and took another drink from her glass of Gillywater. How Minerva had gotten her into drinking this stuff, she wasn't quite sure, but it was the nearest thing to a Midori cocktail that she had found locally, and her personal supply of Muggle gin had run out two weeks ago. She had developed a taste for Midori while on vacation back home some years ago. The sweet and fragrant taste of the drink danced across her tongue, and she savoured the tang of the Gillyweed. It was sour and sweet with an underlying warmth beneath it....

Vector looked again at the central repeated motif. She had definitely seen that mathematical juxtaposition before... *but where?* Something *early*... She screwed up her eyes in concentration and tried to allow her mind to float to a quiet place so that the memory would surface. She took another sip of the Gillywater, allowing the liquid to swirl gently around her mouth before slipping down her throat.

Her eyes narrowed... *Egypt!* She had taken an additional elective at Salem in the History of Magic, and her Professor had been obsessed by ancient Egyptian attitudes to the afterlife. She was sure she could remember something about the system of Arithmancy from that time... Sitting back in her chair, she picked up her wand and gestured towards her bookshelves on the other side of her chambers.

"*Accio* my notes on the *Book of Thoth*," she called, wondering if she had been able to pronounce the last few words clearly enough. She was relieved to see what she hoped was the relevant scroll of parchment levitating out of her overcrowded bookshelves and hurtling towards her outstretched hand in a cloud of dust and fragments. Coughing, and shaking the parchment to dislodge any further grime from its long storage, she made a mental note to talk firmly to her house-elf in the morning. Then she peeled the scroll open and scanned her notes. Slowly, her face broke into a smile of recognition as she saw the now familiar rune motif from Snape's portrait appearing before her in hieratic script with a Latin translation below.

She carefully copied the translation reference out and sent the parchment scroll flying back to the bookshelves. She needed to follow up the reference in the library tomorrow, but for now, she could afford to relax. Satisfied, she picked up her drink and drained its contents. The faint, bitter aftertaste of the drink caught in her throat this time, and she thought, with an inward sigh, that Gillywater was, despite Minerva's insistence, an inadequate substitute for Muggle liqueur.

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Snape led Hermione up a set of steps in the northern corner of the *peristyle* to the *triclinium* the summer dining room. It was a lovely room, open to the elements on one side from waist high, with a colonnade rather than windows on the southern wall, which gave a fine view of the *peristyle* garden below. The northern wall of the room was decorated with a series of frescos. One of them was a small portrait of a young woman.

Hermione approached it eagerly, trying to take in all the details of the picture as she did so. This had been her way into his world: from his portrait on the dusty mosaic floor back in 2009 to this fresco in his *triclinium* in 79 AD. The woman in the painting looked outwards with a confident and steady regard. She held a writing tablet and pen in her hand, the tip of the pen tipped against her lips. Her riotous, curly hair was confined in the current Roman fashion under a golden hairnet. Her face was open and kind, her eyes large, and her irises limpid and dark amber in colour. She looked as if she was about to ask a question. There was something strangely familiar and oddly compelling about her.

"It's lovely," Hermione said.

"Yes," he said and cleared his throat.

"And Fiducius thinks this is me?" She did not want to think who the woman in the image really was. He did not answer, so she didn't pursue it, although she was being drawn closer towards the painting to study the image.

Something about the picture was familiar, but she could not quite remember what. She remembered an old trick. *Don't get caught up in the details*, she told herself, remembering her first archaeology professor fondly. *What is your general impression of the site?* She half-closed her eyelids, deliberately allowing her vision to blur and become unfocused. It was then, as her vision danced and blurred, that she noticed the runes around the edge of the fresco. The numerals and determinate functions seemed to move slightly as she squinted at them. Her eyes widened in surprise as she recalled the runes surrounding Snape's mosaic image at her dig and the effect of twisting and spinning that she had experienced before she fell through that portrait in her time. She felt her heart rate increase and a surge of excitement.

She raised her hand to touch the portrait, her mind already seething with ideas. *Could it be some sort of porta?* She remembered Draco's use of the Vanishing Cabinets in her sixth year. *Could the portraits work like that? If so, how to avoid the temporal instability? What forms the connection? But hang on*, she berated herself crossly, *that isn't logical. How were they created in the first place and by whom? Those signifiers are located around one point, not forming a bridge between two points. This isn't forming a*

link; it's describing a linear relationship. Bugger, I wish I had my notes from the dig... and my reference books... and a calculator....

She became dimly aware that Snape had just asked her a question.

"Mmmm?" She turned to him and saw that he was watching her as if waiting for an answer. As she looked at him, his left eyebrow slowly raised.

"I said, *Miss...*," he paused, "*Hermione*, do you require any further assistance? I have new supplies to brew for my customers." Anticipating her response, he was already backing away from her towards the door. He seemed off balance, embarrassed even. Briefly, she wondered why, but the challenge of the portrait rapidly overwhelmed her again.

She flashed him a quick smile but shook her head. "I think I just need some time to study it and take some notes. Thanks, Severus. There's something very familiar about it somehow... What is it, now...?" She returned to her study of the portrait, utterly absorbed. She did not hear him as he left.

Absently, as was her habit, she fished out from underneath her dress the old glass pendant about her neck and rolled it between her fingers, bringing it up to her nose to smell the comforting rose and lavender scent as she did so. Her eyes closed inadvertently as she inhaled the smell from the old perfume bottle. As the lovely old scent filled her senses, her mind was suddenly diverted from the image before her and transported once again to that horrible time at the end of the fighting at the castle after she, Ron, Harry and Dumbledore's portrait had spoken quietly about the end of things in the Headmaster's study.

*She had suddenly felt a desperate compulsion to be clean again. Leaving the boys once more to join the grieving Weasley clan downstairs in the Hall, she had gone back to the girls' bathroom on the second floor. She knew, as depressing and ill-kempt as it was, that it had escaped virtually unscathed from Voldemort's attack. As she walked into the bathroom, she deliberately averted her eyes from the sink with the charmed faucet the secret entrance to the Chamber of Secrets that she and Ron had opened and turned to the left towards the showers at the far end of the bathroom.*

*Walking past the toilets, she reached the nearest shower cubicle and entered it. Once inside the smaller space, she shut the door behind her and turned on the shower taps, praying that the water supply was still working. It was. A thick jet of multi-coloured water gushed from the faucet. She breathed a desperate and shaking sigh of relief. While she waited for the correct temperature to be reached, she gingerly peeled off her sweat- and gore-stained clothing and let it fall to the floor at her feet. At least her body could be clean; she'd change her clothes later. As she took off her hooded jumper, several potion vials rolled out of her pocket and clattered on to the stone floor. A couple of the small potion vials smashed, but this one, the little perfume bottle, did not, and she was instantly attracted to its shape and delicate colour, even though it was smeared with his blood. She had found the potions containers in Severus' pockets in her desperate scrabble for something to save him.*

*She Vanished the smashed remnants of the other vials, and then, with trembling hands, she bent down towards and picked the delicate little container up. She spun it in her fingers, watching as its beautiful and intricate blown glass decoration and silver stopper flashed in the light. It just looked so... pretty... amid the carnage of her bloodstained clothing and filthy surroundings. Any lingering guilt about taking something that he had possessed vanished as she rolled it for the first time between her fingers and caught the first whiff of roses and lavender from it. A place in her chest seemed to constrict and be freed at the same time. She immediately wanted to keep it.*

*The stopper came open and hung loose on a delicate silver chain. It was slick with his blood and she carefully wiped it as clean as she could on the sleeve of her discarded T-shirt. She put it back in the top of the vial, noticing as she did so that a small amount of his blood had found its way inside the delicate little vial. Seeing his blood trapped within the bottle finally pushed her beyond her numb sense of shock at what she had witnessed earlier that day in the castle, and her fingers closed even more tightly around the precious little container as her first tears began to fall. She stepped into the shower and allowed the hot jets of water to wash her clean.*

*She knew it had been important to him because it had been given strong protection charms. She took to wearing it on a long silver chain between her breasts, its scent remaining as strong as it had been when she had first taken it in her hand, and despite near constant wear over eleven years it had never cracked, scuffed or, god forbid, shattered. She wondered whom it had belonged to and why he had possessed it. Was it Lily's, perhaps, or his mother's? On many occasions, she thought to ask someone that question, but she always pulled back at the last moment. The vial was precious and secret, her possession of it was important, and she would not give it up.*

She rolled it again now, but while the act was typically soothing still, she realised with a guilty start that she should actually offer to return it, as the pendant was not technically hers. The thought was painful. For a very long time, the little bottle had been a constant balm, and its soothing presence had protected her through many painful episodes: the death of Crookshanks... her breakup with Ron. She could not bear to part with it.

*But it really isn't yours*, she reminded herself sternly; it was *his*, and she knew that it had been important to him, and now he was with her, it must be returned. Reluctantly, she turned to do so but then realised that she was alone in the narrow room. He must have left when she had become absorbed in the painting. An absurd sense of relief flooded through her, chased immediately away by a guilty sense of obligation. Although it was a painful prospect, she would have to find him later to return it. For now, her attention turned to the painting again, and she became lost in her study of the runes.

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It was late afternoon by the time Harry and Gabrielle reached the *Albergo Maliardo*, a wizard hotel in one of the back streets of Naples. Once beyond the unobtrusive front entrance guarded by stone griffins on either side of the dark double doors, the interior opened up to impressive dimensions. The design of the foyer was modern, spacious, bright and not at all what Harry had been expecting, given the traditional exterior of the hotel. He looked about him, noting the fine, pale leather chairs and couches, the low oak coffee tables and the fine hangings on the walls. As he watched more closely, he could see trays of coffee, tea and other beverages gently levitating towards the magical folk who were sitting in the reception area.

The reception desk was 'manned' (Harry wondered with a guilty start if that was the correct word) by a dwarf who was wearing a decorative set of robes in pale blue and was sitting perched on a tall stool behind the counter. He had thick, wild red hair pulled backwards into an elaborate knot on top of his head and was bearded, as was the fashion with dwarves, although his bright red beard was neatly clipped close to his chin. The dwarf wore a set of magical glasses, which revolved like Mad-Eye Moody's eye had done. Harry stared at the little creature, wondering why he needed the revolving spectacles. The effect of the oscillating lenses was mildly nauseating.

On his first sight of Gabrielle, the dwarf, predictably, broke into an enormous and slightly glassy smile. Harry watched his friend's returning smile flicker slightly in disappointment at the creature's response, but she squared her shoulders subtly and walked forward gracefully to greet him. As the Italian ebbed and flowed between the two, Harry's attention was again drawn to the dwarf's glasses.

The exchange between dwarf and Veela paused for a moment, and Harry saw Gabrielle sigh and roll her eyes before shrugging and continuing the process of checking in. All seemed to be in order. Harry obediently surrendered his wand to Gabrielle to finalise the process. The dwarf barely paused as his quill wrote 'Sig. Harry Potter' underneath Gabrielle's name in the hotel register.

Smiling glassily once again at Gabrielle and Harry, the dwarf held his hand up to them, looked under his counter and spoke rapidly to something in Italian. Harry started in surprise as a torrent of high-pitched and aggressive language erupted from underneath the counter in response. After a pause, the dwarf clearly repeated his request and tapped his counter sharply. Harry thought he heard the word 'Potter' among the dwarf's last directions to the pixie. Another, only slightly less vituperative, stream of grumbling ensued, but then a small blue uniformed pixie emerged from underneath the counter. He stared at Harry, a cross expression on his face.

There was a further stropky exchange of words between the receptionist and the pixie as the little creature flew up to the rack of keys behind the counter, snagged two from their hooks and slammed them down on the counter in front of the dwarf, his expression sullen.

Harry looked at Gabrielle in confusion. "Problem?" he asked.

Gabrielle's eyes danced in amusement. "It appears that the pixie is our bell-hop. He was on his break and does not wish to help his *colleague* fetch our keys." Gabrielle's

smile indicated that hers was not exactly an accurate translation of their heated exchange.

With a final stroppy flick of his hand at the receptionist, the little blue creature flew around the end of the reception counter and bowed elaborately to Harry and Gabrielle, indicating that they should follow him to their rooms.

"The liaison officer won't be here until tomorrow morning," she explained ruefully as they began to climb the hotel's staircase towards their rooms. Harry could not keep the disappointment from his face, and Gabrielle laughed. "This is Italy, Harry!" Gabrielle's voice was rich with amusement. "It's later than we thought, and the dig will be closing up in a couple of hours anyway. Alberto will meet us here tomorrow morning. Don't worry; we can use our time to have some fun together. Do you fancy a *ride*?"

Harry groaned inwardly, fighting a blush as it stole across his features. She leaned towards him in an intimate and conspiratorial fashion, and as she did so, he felt his heart rate speed up. Guiltily, he remembered Ginny's dire warnings about close contact with the young Veela. He screwed up his resolve; he would have to let her down carefully. "Look, Gabrielle," he began cautiously.

"I have brooms, and we can Disillusion ourselves to take a look around the whole area?" she continued, blithely unaware of his inner torment.

Harry immediately relaxed and felt stupid at the same time. Oh, gods! Why did everything she said seem to be a double entendre? How was he going to survive this experience?

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*"If daisy roots are not shredded at a precise angle, and within a certain period of time, they will not release their liquor in the correct manner, and the potion will be spoiled."*

How many times had he said those words to third-year idiots in his classroom? He could not remember... *too many times*.... There was something soothing in the precision needed to prepare certain ingredients, and Severus was taking refuge in his meticulous preparations. While he focused on this task, he did not need to think about the wider undertaking ahead. He did not need to think about Sabazios, about Fiducius, about the troubling presence of Miss Granger, or about the horrors that he knew were to come in a few days' time.

The image of Miss Granger rose again in his mind, unbidden. She danced in front of him, vital, confident and determined. He thought of her utter belief that there was an escape route from the cataclysm to come for them both. It was a ridiculous hope, but sitting in his garden in the morning sunshine of another beautiful day, he had found himself swept up in her belief that she could find a solution. Her buoyancy had been infectious and strangely stirring; her determination and self-belief had strengthened him. As he had watched her standing in front of him, her back straight and her chin raised, he had felt a great wave of relief pulse through his body. It had been so wonderful, even for a moment, to be able to cede responsibility for this horrible situation to another, and he had always had a soft spot for bossy women.

Back in his lab, however, the reality of their situation had rapidly reasserted itself, and once more, he had been plunged into an irritated misery. The Metamorphagus Potion, protected by its stasis charm, was a deadly reminder of the peril they faced. He darted a quick look at the liquid silver contents of the cauldron as he carefully organised the daisy roots for shredding. The stasis charm prevented the fumes from the potion escaping and slowed the chemical reactions, but he could see the liquid in the cauldron writhing and coiling in on itself as the ingredients fought each other. The stabilisation would only last a day or so longer, and then he would have to brew a new batch... and that meant revisiting the source of the principle ingredient. He flexed his left arm experimentally and winced as his newly mending ribs protested still. He wondered, with grim amusement, how he might survive the next encounter in order to extract what he needed. *Perhaps Doctor Granger... Hermione...* he thought with another grimace, *will have an answer to that little problem also*

He thought again, with hot embarrassment, about his pitiable behaviour towards her portrait a few days before she had suddenly and inexplicably emerged into his arms. To have weakened like that was unforgivable, regardless of the situation he had found himself in. Thank Merlin she had not sought to push him further on how her portrait had come to be in his house. He did not think he could bear the embarrassment of such an explanation far better for his own sanity that she should think it was some sort of coincidence, or a lie that he had told Fiducius.... He felt his face flame hot at the thought of her seeing him so pathetically needy and cleared his throat, shaking his head abruptly to try to dispel the image of him yearning for her like that.

He needed to re-establish his Occlumency shields by clearing his mind.

Taking a deep and deliberate breath, he closed his eyes and then reopened them, purposefully clearing his mind of emotion and focusing his attention on the task at hand. His chopping board was clean and well oiled. The roots had been washed carefully and arranged into an ordered bunch in his left hand. All was prepared. Snape carefully gripped his knife, took another deep and steadying breath and began to slice.

His sharp silver blade slid through the fibrous stems in an easy rhythm, the plant's sap beginning to seep out onto the blade as he sliced. All his attention was focused on this activity. He accepted the discipline of this task. He would not allow any other thoughts to intrude. *Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six*, he counted in his head steadily, his knife rising and falling in a satisfying and predictable cadence, *twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one...*

"*Severus!*" Hermione's excited shout, accompanied by the clatter of her descending footsteps on the steps to his laboratory, caused him to slip in his delicate shredding. He cursed once, loudly, and sucked the new cut on his forefinger as he turned to scowl at her when she skidded into his lab.

Her eyes were bright, her chest rising and falling with eagerness as she approached him. In a moment, he was frozen, staring at her flushed countenance and open grin. Something twisted hard inside him, and he felt that odd jolt of connection, that peculiar feeling of distress and attraction that he felt between them whenever she was close to him. He felt his face grow warm again, and feeling at once helpless and foolish, he took refuge in disdain. He drew himself up to his full height and mustered a sneer.

"*Severus!*" she repeated, oblivious to his attempt at haughtiness, "look at this! This is *fascinating*." She was waving something at him a palm-sized black device which was emitting its own light in the dimness of the laboratory entrance. His confusion and scowl deepened as she thrust this modern Muggle item under his nose.

He found himself looking at a photograph of the portrait upstairs. *The device is some sort of a camera, then.*

"*Fascinating...*?" he echoed, lacing every syllable with condescension.

She emitted a snort and began to flick her fingers across the face of the little device, and he saw the pictures move and change before him. She flicked through a series of images before the picture stabilised on a new bright image of a large mosaic portrait of a man. Snape's expression cleared in surprise, and he gave a startled grunt.

"I know, I know," she said hurriedly, dismissing his first reaction to his own likeness in the picture. "But do you *see*?" Her eyes flashed to his as he stared in bafflement at the surly image on the thing in her hand. In exasperation, she flicked the images again quickly, back to the fresco picture upstairs and then back again to the ancient, dirty mosaic.

"I didn't see it for a while, but I knew there was something going on here. Can you see it yet? The chains of iteration are not quite the same, but the sequence of functions *is*, and so is the differential variable. Do you *see*?" She was still waving the bloody pictures in front of his nose. It was becoming easier to be genuinely annoyed by her behaviour.

"Keep it *still* for a moment, woman, will you?" He knew that he was being churlish, but she was standing so close to him now, her breasts heaving with each excited breath under her *stola*. Even the scent of her perfume was intoxicating both familiar and distracting. He levelled a glare at her, hoping to quench some of her exuberance and to get her to calm down a bit so he could re-establish his equilibrium once more. "What is that?" he asked, indicating the device and trying to buy more time so he could remember his NEWT Arithmancy curriculum.

"Oh, this? It's an iPhone," as if he should know what she was gabbling about, "erm... it's a mobile phone. It's got a camera in it, and I'd almost forgotten that I had it with

me, but I suddenly remembered that it was in the pocket of my jeans, and I knew that I had some old photos on it from my dig, and thank heavens, they survived the journey here. So, I have a comparative point of reference, and when I looked through the photos and compared them, I saw the similarity...and *haven't you got it yet?*"

She was practically bobbing up and down in her enthusiasm in front of him. It really was *intensely* annoying. He used the old scowl he'd used countless of times to subdue overly excited teenage girls.

"*Miss Granger*," he said icily, "this 'working together' business is not going to end well between us if you insist on speaking in irritating riddles all the time. Now, perhaps you can tell me what is so bloody significant about the two portraits you are waving in my face rather than have me play guessing games all afternoon. My daisy roots are spoiling."

Immediately, her face coloured. "Oh, I'm sorry!" she said. "I was just so excited about what I found and couldn't wait to show you... to get your opinion... It's not the central image, but the decoration around the edges. Have you not noticed the runes around the edges of the image? I imagine that they were not there when the painting was first created. Look, they describe a journey that must be me when I came through and... and, erm, landed on you."

That image, of her lying atop him, was enough to stir any latent feelings into lingering thoughts....

She pulled a quick embarrassed face at his changed expression. "Sorry about that, again, but then the painting also describes the same pathway that you can see around the edges of the mosaic." She flicked the images backwards to his sullen portrait. "*See?* There must be a connection between the two the portraits do not link, but they do share the same Arithmantic root. If I can just figure out what the convergence ratio and the activating factors are, then I might be able to work out how to get us home... *home*, Severus." The yearning in her voice was affecting.

There was a brief, charged pause between them, and Snape felt his irritation dissipating in the face of her earnest reasoning. However, at the same time, Severus could feel a headache coming on, and daisy roots were not always easy to acquire.

"So, we have linked portraits that are not linked and the promise of some escape once you have worked out, firstly, how the portraits are connected which they are not, by your own admission and secondly, how to activate the connection between them that doesn't exist," he reiterated, his face twisting into a gently sardonic smirk. "*Brilliant*, Miss Granger. I don't know how I survived without you. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to prepare the last batch of Shrinking Solution here and finish decanting two further"...Snape seemed to hesitate fractionally..."*preparations* for this evening."

"This evening?" Hermione raised her own eyebrow, mimicking his, and stood her ground. He could tell that she had been rather deflated by his scornful response to her findings, but he was quite impressed that she was not discouraged by his mockery. Her belief that there was something in those runes that could help them to get back home was a small flame of hope in a heretofore otherwise bleak and dangerous future.

Snape turned back to his daisy roots and resumed carefully shredding them. His previous engagement...*The evening will be dull, a long, drawn-out dinner and inane conversation*...

"Tonight, I am attending a gathering at the Vettii brothers' house," he said, his tone clipped and careful. "It is a party of sorts." He shredded the last of the roots and transferred them into the bubbling cauldron to his side, stirring with a silver rod as he did so.

He cleared his throat and, still not looking at her, added, "I suppose that you would be welcomed as my guest, if you wished to accompany me."

## Chapter 9

*Chapter 10 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: All the characters you recognise are JKR's and not mine! Again, thanks and hugs to the incomparable beaweasley2 and clairvoyant for all their help on this chapter. Thanks also to those of you who take the time to review. It is much appreciated! This one has a particularly evil cliffie at the end of it. Ooops.



Thank you to beaweasley2 and Jay for the lovely banner!

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### Chapter 9

Severus busied himself shredding the remaining roots, pleased to see that his hand was still rising and falling evenly despite the distraction of having Miss Granger watching him. He scooped the chopped roots into the cauldron on his right and stirred the mixture methodically. She had still not answered his rather mangled invitation to the Vettii dinner that evening, and as the silence continued (only broken by the rhythmical crunch of his knife through the roots), he found himself waiting tensely for her response. Should he have asked her less grudgingly? Was she going to say *anything*?

Dammit, he was *not* going to turn around.

He had nearly finished shredding the last handful of roots. To his humiliation, he began to feel his ears starting to burn as he turned his body slightly towards her to push

the last of the roots carefully into the cauldron of Strengthening Solution.

He felt a puff of breath on his upper arm, and he realised with some surprise that Hermione was looking *around* his shoulder. Her attention was on the cauldron's contents, her eyebrows raised and an expression of intense interest evident on her face. Forcing himself to focus again on what he was doing, he continued to stir.

Gradually, the liquid began to thicken.

The silence continued to lengthen.

*What is so fascinating to her?* It was only a simple potion, one he had prepared thousands of times before in his life. He continued to count his stirs in time to the small transfigured metronome that was ticking quietly on the counter beside the potion ingredients. He was becoming distracted by her silence, and he risked a quick glance at her from behind the curtain of his hair. She was not moving, seemingly entranced by the swirling motion of his hand stirring the potion.

Her continued silence was maddening.

"Miss Granger, *what?*" he asked eventually with a certain degree of asperity.

"*Hermione*, Severus. Seriously, please call me Hermione. Particularly if we are going to go out to a party together." Her lips were curved into a gentle smile that was almost teasing, and he noticed again the beautiful deep amber colour of her eyes. There were flecks of dark gold in the irises. Her eyes locked with his for a beat, two beats, while his hand mechanically continued to stir the potion.

Eventually, he nodded. "Hermione, then," he said, and at her expression, he felt his face break into the smallest of smiles. Something seemed to ease between them, and he saw her smile broaden with increased confidence before he turned his attention back towards the contents of the cauldron in front of him.

"I've never seen you brew before," she said, glancing up at him rather shyly.

He had no idea how to reply to the comment, so he turned his attention back to the bubbling Strengthening Solution before him. He could still feel her attention on what he was doing like a hot prickle on his skin. Although she was still peering at the Strengthening Solution, at least the woman knew better than to lean over an active brew before it was completed. He had to stir for precisely thirteen strokes more until it was time to add the salamander blood. His left hand closed on the small terracotta pot containing the blood. He had only been able to acquire the precious ingredient in its dried form, and so the solution would be somewhat diluted. He would need to compensate for that weakness, as far as was possible, by stirring more vigorously than he would have done under normal circumstances and by giving each seventh turn a gentle counter-stir as he did so.

He watched carefully as the liquid in the cauldron began to develop a deep vermilion red colour, as the other active ingredients absorbed the salamander blood. Severus experienced the familiar, almost childish sense of satisfaction and completion that he always felt on finishing a potion. A small and equally satisfied huff of breath from Hermione brought him back to himself, and he doused the flame under the cauldron with a quick non-verbal command.

"What are the other preparations that you are going to complete?" she asked, still standing uncomfortably close beside him.

"Mmmm?" His response was carefully noncommittal. He moved away from her and busied himself fussing with tidying up around the cooling cauldron. He was really hoping that she would not pursue that line of questioning. It was a perfectly legitimate branch of potion making, but even so, he did feel a slight sense of discomfiture at the thought of admitting what he was brewing for the Vettii brothers.

"A minute ago, you said that you had two other 'preparations' to make...?" She was like a Niffler after a Knut! Feeling his face burn yet again (when was he going to regain control over his treacherous body?), he nodded reluctantly towards two richly decorated Samian ware jars that were sitting on the side bench underneath his ingredient shelves.

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She walked over to them, and raising her eyebrows to ask permission, she ended the stasis charms over each one. Immediately, two lovely scents began to filter into the atmosphere. Hermione closed her eyes and drew in a breath. She could distinguish the fragrances of sandalwood and myrrh from one of the pretty ceramic containers. The other jar held a lighter and more delicate floral aroma. The smells confused her because they were so unfamiliar. It had been a long time since she had brewed any potions, but she still took care to maintain her academic interests fairly broadly, and she read *Potions Monthly* and other journals regularly.

"What...?" she began to ask him and heard him sigh in some irritation as he replaced the lid on the pot of dried salamander blood and walked over to where she was standing in order to put it back onto the shelf above her.

"They are... perfumes." He seemed uncomfortable, although she had no idea why. "The Vettii brothers are exporters of many items, and perfumes are a lucrative part of their business. These, though, are intended as gifts for the hosts of tonight's gathering, Aulus Vettius Conviva and his wife Marcella. They have been very good to me." He was looking warily at her, as if she might laugh at him whether for brewing something as petty as a perfume, or for caring for some of those around him, she was not sure.

She rushed to reassure him. "Oh, but perfumes lie at the heart of certain branches of potion making, Severus! Take Amortentia, for example the smell is a significant part of the effect. Without that element of the potion, it doesn't have the same potency at all! Professor Houbigant recently published an academic study on Amortentia in the *Journal of Advanced Potion Making* which clearly showed that without a sense of smell, a witch or wizard will only be mildly drawn to the object of their affection..."

Abruptly, she closed her mouth with a snap.

"I'm prattling again, aren't I?" she asked, abashed.

"I *am* aware of the qualities of Amortentia, Hermione," Snape said evenly, the faintest suspicion of a smile curving the outside of his lips. "I'm glad you approve of the perfumes." He looked down at the perfume jars, frowning slightly.

Hermione's attention was drawn again to the two substances, and she watched tiny writhing spirals within both perfumes mix and curl as she breathed in their lovely scents. Even though they were different, they seemed to complement each other perfectly. She found herself closing her eyes again to better concentrate on the delicious aromas.

"Actually..." His voice caused her to open her eyes, and she smiled a little bashfully at her response to the perfumes. "...I have combined some of the properties of Amortentia with the brew. It enhances the attractiveness of the wearer more... comprehensively."

"Ah," she said, not knowing what else to say. He was standing near to her, and once more, she felt that indefinable sense of *missing something* lodged in her chest. She saw that a flake of salamander blood had settled on his cheek by the jaw line, and that the little, bright gold chain that she had noticed him wearing on her first morning in Pompeii rolled slightly on his neck as he breathed. He was looking at her quite intently now, and her academic interest in his potion brewing began to slide sideways into another arena *altogether*. Before she could move or even say anything further, however, his eyes seemed to shutter, and he stepped backwards and towards the doorway, calling loudly for Pertus to attend them. With a flick of his wand, he re-established the stasis charms on the little jars.

"Now," he continued in a rather brusque manner, avoiding eye contact with her, "if you are going to accompany me to the Vettii brothers' house this evening, you might wish to I believe women usually prefer to bathe and... such like... I will send Pertus out for another *stola* for you to wear. Do you have a preference for colour?"

She stared at him. Was he really asking her what colours she preferred to wear? Did he think she needed a bath? What did he mean when he had stared like *that* at her



before, near the little perfume containers? Why did she...? Fortunately, at that point, the more rational element of Hermione's brain kicked itself into action.

"Red," she blurted out, remembering the fleck of blood on his face.

Snape snorted and indicated that she follow him out of the laboratory and towards the bath suite. She did not miss his muttered, "*Gryffindor!*" as they left the room.

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Harry woke up slowly in an unfamiliar bed, the thrum of the hotel room's air conditioning unit loud in his ears. He rolled over to find his glasses, blearily pushing them onto his face and squinting at the wizard alarm clock on the bedside table. The arms of the clock were facing the word 'levántate!'. He had no idea what that meant, but a quick glance at his wristwatch confirmed that he should be getting ready to meet Gabrielle down in the lobby for breakfast.

He swung his legs off the bed and pushed himself upright, walking stiff legged towards the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, washed and shaved, Harry walked down the spiral staircase to the reception desk, where, as yesterday, the red-haired dwarf in pale blue robes was sitting behind the desk.

"Harry!" Gabrielle's voice from the bar at the far end of the reception area was slightly shrill with relief. She was waving, gesticulating for him to come over.

As he smiled his good morning welcome, Harry noticed that there was a slim and dapper young wizard sitting on the bar stool next to her. His hair was swept back away from his face and tied in a silver band. His face was smooth and tanned with the hint of a Glamour, and his hands were carefully manicured. He was wearing a garish pink and green striped suit with a purple shirt, a pair of pointed green dragon hide boots on his feet. A scarlet cape had been thrown rakishly over the whole alarming ensemble. Gabrielle was looking at Harry with a mixture of helplessness and desperation. He fought to keep his face straight as he reached his friend.

"Harry, good morning," Gabrielle said, her voice slightly strained. "This is Alberto Arzillo. He likes to stand out in a crowd and is interested in Muggle 'football', fine art, and meeting beautiful women. Alberto apologises, but he doesn't speak any English," she added dryly.

Harry boggled at the brightly coloured wizard, who nodded his head in greeting and offered his hand.

Harry shook it firmly and smiled in return, saying, "*Are you alright?*" to Gabrielle out of the side of his mouth.

"Now that you are here, *yes!*" She chuffed out an exasperated breath. "I've been fighting him off for twenty minutes he's like an octopus!"

Alberto glanced at Gabrielle and then waggled his eyebrows suggestively at Harry, who dropped the Italian wizard's hand swiftly and stuck both fists into his pockets. Gabrielle stood up, pulling her handbag over her shoulder and seeming to brace herself. Harry was sorry to see her stiffen, and fighting his own physical reaction to the young Veela, he moved to stand closer to her.

"Shall we get on then?" he asked.

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The gargoyle at the base of the stairs ground open and admitted Septima Vector to the stairway of the Headmaster's office. Following a morning of thorough research in the Arithmancy section of the library, as well as an enjoyable diversion into Ancient Runes and the History of Magic areas of Madam Pince's domain that appeared to be rarely visited by the student body she was certain that she had located the information that she needed in order to decode the mystery of the unmoving portrait. As she stepped into the beautiful office, with its soaring ceilings and Gothic arches, she wondered again at the changes that Filius had made to the space in front of her.

Under Dumbledore, her first employer, the area in front of the desk had held tall tables displaying spindly and interesting-looking magical objects that spun and shimmied and silently whistled steam. She had often wondered what all of them did. Some she had recognised as dark detectors, but others seemed to have no sensible purpose at all.

Curiosity prompted her to ask him about one particularly fascinating object. It was about six inches tall and appeared to have rings like a Time Turner, although these rings spanned constantly around a central piece of quartz crystal. The intriguing device was anchored to its little table by one thin metal spike. "Ahhh," Dumbledore said, leaning closer as if about to impart all the wisdom of the world. "*This device...* allows me to brew my tea for just the right amount of time. Sherbet lemon, Septima?"

When Dumbledore died and Fawkes left, Severus didn't change anything in the room apart from the removal of Dumbledore's strange little devices. The old black leather chair remained behind the same ancient oak desk that was tarnished with age and inlaid with leather and decorated with fine wooden tracery. The portraits were silent or asleep, saving the shrill and exultant tones of Phineas Black. The books also endured Snape's tenure, although Septima was sure that they were restless, and the old Sorting Hat sat, squat and still, on top of one of the bookcases, ready for the Sorting Ceremony next year.

But for all the physical similarity with the office under Dumbledore, the quirky happiness that imbued the place under the older wizard simply seemed to leach away.

Vector knew little of Severus Snape's trials as Headmaster. He let no one in to his confidence during that time. Always a taciturn and sour person, he resisted her attempts at cordiality at every turn. She had witnessed him punishing students and being part of the Dark Magic regime that had dominated and subdued her school, and she had despised him for it.

At the war crimes' tribunal that had been held after Riddle's death, however, she had heard testimony from Harry Potter and those others who had witnessed the dead Headmaster's memories, as well as the testimony from Dumbledore's portrait itself. This evidence had been sufficient to allow his acquittal, a posthumous Order of Merlin (First Class), and a burial tomb that was placed near to Dumbledore's own by the lake at Hogwarts.

Vector squared her shoulders. If all she could do was to help him have a proper and functioning portrait, then it was the least she could do.

Walking more fully into the office, the heels of her boots clicking slightly on the stone floor of the office, Vector could see that the ebullient joy of the place had returned. Filius was an excellent choice to replace Snape. While many people thought that Minerva should have the prestige of the office for her sterling work as Deputy Headmistress under Dumbledore, it was clear to all the staff at school that the diminutive Charms Master had the organisational ability, the cheerful personality, and the sheer *energy* to ensure that the school would be rebuilt and renewed. In a rare moment of lucidity, the school's newly appointed governors agreed with the staff's wishes, and so Filius had been given the job.

The object of her reverie emerged suddenly from the side door to his office on the upper level. Filius was wearing his duelling jacket, and he bustled forwards and down the steps towards her with his familiar enthusiasm and an offer of tea.

"You have something for us, Septima?" he asked almost breathlessly as he reached the bottom of the stairs and approached her. He Summoned a pot of tea, a plate of biscuits, cups, saucers, a magical kettle, and an old-fashioned tea caddy as he reached floor level. The tea items hovered neatly behind him.

"Do take a seat, please!" He indicated that she should join him on the curved sofa, which now occupied the right hand side of his desk. It had an incongruous floral pattern and was curved to match the rounded walls and bookshelves behind it. A low coffee table was set before it. Flitwick carefully levitated the tea items onto it and settled down to fuss over the magical kettle. She sat beside him, drawing her papers in front of her as she did so.

"Ordinary tea, or something more *exotic* for you today, Septima?"

*How does he manage to always sound so cheerful?* she thought.

"Do you have any chrysanthemum tea?" she asked, lifting her eyebrows as she set her challenge. His eyes danced in return as he turned his attention to the tea caddy.

"Now... let me *see*," he said in the exaggerated manner of a Muggle stage magician. "Chrysanthemum tea originates from China. It is made by steeping the flower heads of the Huángshān Gòngjú, Hángbáijú, Chújú, or Bójú varieties of the plant in hot water... usually at ninety to ninety-five degrees Celsius," Flitwick tapped his wand twice on the side of the kettle, which promptly began to stir and squirm as the water heated up within it. "It is often sweetened with rock sugar, honey, or wolfberries," he continued and lifted the lid of the tea caddy. The arrangement of small compartments within the ancient box began to move and interact with each other, rather like the bricks at the entrance to Diagon Alley in London.

After a short time, one small compartment rose gingerly upwards above its fellows. It contained small yellow dried flowers and was wobbling ever so slightly, almost as if with the effort of lifting itself upwards. Flitwick smiled, picking up the little wooden compartment and flourishing the contents at Septima. She laughed and nodded her head, conceding defeat in their regular tea game. The kettle began to hiss and splutter, and Filius caught it up just before it boiled. Deftly, he poured a measure of water onto some of the flowers in Septima's cup before attending to his own cup of ordinary British tea.

"Well, Septima, what have you discovered?" he asked finally, shuffling backwards onto the seat to be more comfortable before levitating his tea into his hands.

Vector took a slow sip of her tea and revelled in the delicate, floral taste before turning her attention to the Headmaster once again. "Okay, Headmaster," she began, "I think the answer to our little problem might be linked to a theory about the afterlife from the Ptolemaic Dynasty...."

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Hermione was in heaven. The deep square bath was filled with hot water, and as she massaged the astringent, pine-scented concoction that Snape had gruffly referred to as "hair soap" into her scalp, she delighted in the feeling of being truly clean for the first time in days. She wiggled her body in sheer enjoyment at the sensation of the suds and bubbles from the soap on her skin, lathering her arms, neck, and body with slow enjoyment. There was no sound in the room other than the noise she was making in the bath, so she could hear Snape. *Severus*, she corrected herself working in the lab across the hallway. She pictured him carefully decanting the two perfumes, as well as checking the condition of the cooling Strengthening Solution, tapping the side of the cauldron in order to check the consistency of the liquid. The muffled clanks and knocks that she heard from next door were the noises he was making as he cleaned up his utensils and other equipment.

Eventually, the sounds from the laboratory ceased, and Hermione realised reluctantly that she had better get out of the bathroom in case he wanted to wash himself. Grudgingly, she stood up, wringing out her hair before climbing out of the bath. She wrapped a large linen sheet around her body, still luxuriating in the emollients that he had provided as the rough material swept over her skin. She twisted another smaller one around her head in a makeshift turban. She wondered if he was still downstairs, although there was no sound coming from next door.

"Severus?" she called experimentally, "Are you still down here?"

He was still downstairs, for he shortly appeared through the doorway to the bathroom wiping his hands on a small rag. When he saw her, standing in the room in front of him wrapped in her linen sheet, he made an odd sound in the back of his throat, and he turned his head quickly, averting his eyes. Belatedly, she realised what she must look like to him, her skin flushed and pink from the hot water, her nipples clearly evident through the material wound around her. Hastily, she wrapped her arms around her chest and fought the accompanying surge of crippling self-consciousness as she did so.

"The bathroom's free," she said, hearing her own voice sound unnecessarily loud in the modest vaulted room. Snape snorted in response, but he seemed to relax a little, a more familiar expression of exasperated superiority returning to his face.

"Why *do* you have your own bathroom suite?" she continued curiously, her eyes drawn once again to the mosaic skeleton with its gaping mouth on the floor. "Don't you like going to the city baths?"

"I would have thought it was obvious," he replied smoothly. At her blank expression, he explained, "I have no desire to sit in a seething mass of bacteria, particularly given the injuries I often sustain."

"Oh. Right, yes." She blushed furiously, angry with herself. Of course, *no plugs* Roman baths might have been filled by aqueduct and pipe, but they were all emptied by hand and bucket. No public baths would be emptied more than once a day, and there was some evidence that it was even less frequent than that. She felt like an idiot again and did not want him to know it. She looked across at him again and flashed another embarrassed smile.

"And you always were a very private person," she added.

"And that also." He inclined his head in a mocking bow, smiling slightly. Straightening, he drew his wand and pointed it at the bath.

"*Evanesco*," he commanded and then added, "*Aguamenti*."

The bath began to fill magically from the base upwards once again.

"Well," she said, "um, I'd better get dressed.... Has Pertus found *astola* for me to wear?"

"It is hanging up next door in the antechamber," he answered. "I have placed some other... feminine products... in your room for you to use, if you wish to do so. Will you require anything else?" he asked, and she saw his eyes flicking with brief longing to the hot water ready for him in the bath and then back to her. As she walked past him into the changing room, he moved out of her way but not before her elbow brushed against him. She felt him pull away slightly at the contact and felt oddly, and briefly, bereft.

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Driving in Naples was quite simply the most terrifying experience of Harry Potter's life. He was sitting perched on the back of Alberto Arzillo's magically-enhanced Vespa motor scooter, desperately clinging to the underside of the seat, and hanging on for dear life. The three of them were riding the mad spluttering machine through the streets of the huge Muggle city at a frightening speed, skipping between pavement, tramway, road and, for a few heart stopping seconds, *railway track* with such abandon that Harry, who had passed his Muggle driving licence in the UK, was entirely unable to understand what driving rules actually applied in the city.

As they hit a section of cobblestones, Harry became acutely aware that he was squashing Gabrielle up against Arzillo's back, but he was in no position to give her more room. Gritting his teeth, he tried to concentrate on the road ahead. The tiny machine bucked and weaved as Alberto navigated through a bewildering variety of winding alleyways. He dodged cars, potted plants, restaurant signs and, on one occasion, a furious elderly woman. Taking one corner particularly fast, Harry thought that they would surely crash into an oncoming car, but with a sickening squeeze, they passed it by. It seemed that the little Vespa was under a similar charm to that of the Knight Bus in England.

This was not particularly reassuring.

Fighting nausea, he shut his eyes and began to recite the names of Ron's current team-mates and their positions on the Quidditch pitch. Another rough jolt and accompanying swerve caused him to let out a squeak of fear. *Remember you're a wizard, remember you're a wizard*, he chanted desperately over and over to himself in his head, casting a silent Shield Charm over the scooter and trying frantically to remember what other spell might help them to survive the journey with their internal organs in the same order and place that they should be. This was even worse than when Quirrell had tried to kill him in 1991....

The stomach-churning journey continued for almost half an hour until eventually the scooter emerged from the maze of the city's streets and onto the smoother and wider roads that took them out of Naples and towards Pompeii.

"Can't you tell him to *slow down*?" Harry bellowed in Gabrielle's ear as the wind whipped around them and the scooter picked up speed in the traffic. His hands were cramped with the effort of keeping his seat. Gabrielle leaned forward to speak into the ear of the driver, who shouted something unintelligible in reply, nodded vigorously, and eased up on the throttle. Harry looked up on the gantry above them he saw that they were passing a blue road sign directing them off the motorway towards Pompeii. With a screech of brakes, Alberto banked the little machine steeply and took the turn. Harry's yell of surprise and fear was lost in the noise of the mad yammering of the scooter's engine.

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Hermione's hands closed reverently on the beautiful new *stola* that she had found draped over one of the changing room benches. Trying not to put images to the sounds of Snape's bathing routin, which she could hear through the archway to her right, she picked up the new dress and turned to allow the light from one of the magical skylights in the room's ceiling to illuminate the fine golden threads that were woven through the russet-coloured material. The *stola* was of the same shape as her midnight blue dress, a simple piece of sleeveless cloth, to be gathered at the waist with a belt and worn with a shawl. The material of this dress was finer, however, and it flowed through her fingers as she weighed it in her hands. On the shoulders, twin brooches of a fine filigree design in gold pinned the garment together. With one final look towards the bathroom, she daringly dropped the linen sheet and, unable to resist, slipped the new *stola* over her head. She smoothed the beautiful fabric down and caught up the fine twisted skein of dark brown wool from the bench to tie as a belt.

She was conscious of how luxurious the fabric of the dress felt against her bare, sensitised skin. The dress reached down to the floor and was modest, but also pleasingly soft and yielding on her body. She took a few steps, experimentally swirling her hips as she did so, and was pleased by the way the material whirled around her legs. One problem remained, however. *No underwear*, she thought, looking down at her chest, *and I need some!* Looking down at the bench again she saw two pieces of narrow linen cloth lengths which she belatedly recognised as simple Roman undergarments, a *strophium*, or breast cloth, and the material with which she should be able to fashion a *subligaculæ*, a simple loincloth as worn by Roman women. Hermione raised her eyebrows at the challenge ahead, but decided that she would remove herself and all her clothing to her room in order to attempt to create the undergarments she needed. And if she got stuck, well, magic would always be able to assist her.

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"Harry? Are you okay now?" Gabrielle's voice was rich with amusement as she patted his back soothingly. Harry retched again, fruitlessly, then straightened up, pushing his glasses back up his nose into place. They had parked the scooter in a dusty car park across the road from one of the entrances to the archaeological site. As soon as the wretched machine had halted, Harry had practically thrown himself off it, onto legs that felt like they had been hit by a Jelly-Legs Jinx.

He had then been sick. Twice.

Alberto and Gabrielle had found this rather amusing.

"Come on, Harry." Gabrielle laughed at his offended pout. "I will buy you a bottle of water so you can clean your palate." Harry opened his mouth to protest that he could simply cast an Aguamenti Charm when he realised how surrounded they were by people. The car park was full of tourist buses, and large groups of Muggles were milling around them, talking to each other in a variety of different languages. He nodded mutely, shooting a look of dislike at Alberto, who simply laughed again at him, tossing his ridiculous cape over his shoulder and gesturing for them to follow him towards the entrance to the site.

"I still don't see why we couldn't have Apparated here," muttered Harry mutinously as he stumbled after the diminutive Italian. Gabrielle laughed again. "This is Italy, Harry! You really have to have the full experience while we are here. And besides," she added, "there are so many people around here that we would have been seen."

They crossed the road and walked past a series of market stalls that were all selling the same guidebooks, mini-plaster statues, and other tourist tat. Gabrielle bought a small plastic bottle of water and gave it to Harry. Gratefully, he took a swig and then offered it to her.

"Have *you* got one of those things back in Rome?" Harry asked.

"A Vespa? Oh, yes, of course!" Gabrielle smiled. "It's the only efficient way of getting around Italian cities." She laughed again at his rueful expression.

Arzillo began to talk excitedly to Gabrielle as they drew closer to the ticket office. She nodded and fired back a few short words of acknowledgement, then turned to her friend. "He's going to get us in and find out exactly where Hermione was working on the site. This may take some time." Gabrielle rolled her eyes with amused experience. She prodded Harry in the ribs, directing him to a series of granite benches to the side of the entrance piazza.

The Italian wizard drew a handful of parchment from beneath his cape and marched, cocksure and confident, towards the nearest ticket booth.

Twenty minutes later, Harry was wondering why they did not just Confund the ticket sellers and walk through the bloody doors. The conversation between Alberto and the ticket sellers had now progressed to swapping amusing remarks as they shared tiny cups of bitter Italian espresso coffee.

He huffed in annoyance again, his leg twitching with impatience. He looked away from the entrance booths and towards the market stalls once more. A welcome breeze drifted through, bringing some relief from the scorching heat of the afternoon, and Harry watched as it caused the Italian flags that were hanging off the sides of the nearest market stall to shuffle and flutter.

"Harry...." Gabrielle had been watching the escalating conversation at the ticket booth. Harry turned his attention back to her and saw her expression move from confusion to a frown. He followed her gaze to where she was watching Alberto. Harry watched as the small wizard gestured theatrically towards them and leaned in towards the ticket seller, clearly asking for more information.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Something's wrong," Gabrielle said, standing up. Harry followed her to where Alberto was. As she approached him, the diminutive wizard broke away from the woman in the ticket office and spoke rapidly to Gabrielle in urgent Italian. Frustrated, Harry watched Gabrielle query something and Alberto repeat himself.

"*What*, Gabrielle? Is it Hermione?" Harry fought to keep his voice from rising with concern. He put his hand on her arm to get her attention.

"*Si, si, aspettate*, Alberto," Gabrielle held her hand up to forestall Alberto's next comment and looked at her friend. He face was sombre and her eyes were bright.

"Hermione is not missing, Harry. Alberto has found her." There was a beat of time in which Harry's heart seemed to freeze in his chest at her expression.

"I'm so sorry," she breathed.

## Chapter 10

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: These characters are not mine; they are all J.K.R.'s. As always, much appreciation and grateful hugs to the wonderful beaweasley2 and clairvoyant for their support, suggestions, and corrections. Thanks also to those of you who let me know what you think of the story I really enjoy reading your reviews and answering them.



Thank you to beaweasley2 and Jay for the wonderful banner!

I hope you like this chapter. We are edging towards something here....

## Chapter 10

It was dusk in the city as Hermione and Severus emerged from the front door of his house. Pertus opened the door for them, and they stepped out onto the street and into a bustling throng of people. Snape had insisted on carrying all of the potion bottles, charming them to fit into a wooden crate so that they could be carried more easily under one arm. She stole a look at him sideways as the shadows lengthened, and she watched as the low rays of the setting sun lit his face. He had changed into a *tunica* of a deep sea-blue, finely detailed and embroidered. Over his shoulders, he had cast a light woollen cloak of a golden colour. The *tunica*, although it was a simple tunic, was long and fitted him well, clinging somewhat to his chest and arms, draping his body in a manner that she had never seen on him at school.

As she watched him, the luxurious fabric slid over his chest with each movement. It was so unlike the black frock coat and britches she remembered him wearing at Hogwarts when she was his student. While his teaching robes had seemed to constrict him and he had always appeared to be so full of rage and bitterness, this *tunica* accentuated his fluent and graceful movements, enabling him to look more relaxed, even *sensual*, in comparison to how she had known him in his previous life. She blushed slightly as she realised that she was staring at him. She forced herself to look forwards at the pavement in front of her and think instead about the evening ahead.

It was not too far from Snape's house to the House of the Vettii, one of the best preserved of the Roman *insulae* in modern day Pompeii, and Hermione's heart was beating fast in anticipation for what she was to see there. The house was famous not only for its fine frescos and other decoration but also for the fact that so much was known about its occupants before the eruption buried it under ten feet of pumice stone and ash.

Aulus Vettius Conviva and Aulus Vettius Restitutus were brothers who had once been slaves. Like many other slaves in the Roman Empire, they had been able to gain their freedom. There was no surviving evidence for how the brothers had been able to achieve their liberty; perhaps a grateful master on his deathbed had granted them manumission, perhaps they had paid for their own freedom by their own efforts in petty trade, or perhaps they had won or gained their freedom by other means. However, they had become freedmen, and one thing was certain: they had become exceptionally wealthy by exploiting a variety of business opportunities within and outside the city. The Vettii had interests in the importation of various goods, they supplied services, and they had engaged in various manufacturing pursuits from olive oil production to leather manufacture. They were the ultimate examples of poor men made good in the cut-throat world of capitalist Roman society. Historians knew about these men not just from the archaeological evidence that was found in their house but also because both of them were members of a local priesthood, the *Augustales*.

The *Augustales* was something like a mediaeval guild, or a gentleman's club, or one of the various lodges or associations which later civilisations adopted. The members of the *Augustales* looked out for each other as 'brothers' socially, politically, and in trade and business. Conviva and Restitutus were important local businessmen, and their home reflected their sense of power and authority but what had always drawn Hermione to them was their apparently outrageous sense of wit and humour. The historical evidence suggested that the Vettii were complex men who were cognizant of their current place in Roman society but equally aware of their good fortune in getting there and evidently quite happy to rub their more aristocratic neighbours' noses in it.

Her mind shifted to the puzzle of the portrait that had consumed so much of her thoughts during the day. She was sure that there was a recognisable pattern to the equations that surrounded the portrait. It was a linear function runs that pointed to an action or progression. It was very like those functions that described the lifespan of a person often described as the 'Polybian Cycle' from birth to death. Despite the circular nature of the Arithmantec equation around the painting, something was interrupting the progression from birth to death... If she could just figure out what... *oops!*

Hermione almost tripped on the uneven flagstones of the pavement, just catching herself in time, and she looked up to see Snape smirking at her, breaking her train of thought. Tentatively, she put her hand on his arm to steady herself and was pleased when he did not recoil away. Wrapping her arm more confidently through his, she enjoyed the increasingly familiar thrum of their odd physical connection as they progressed slowly through the jostling crowd of people along the street.

"So, how did you come to live in your house?" she asked, partly to divert attention away from her inelegant stumble.

He smirked again but allowed her to keep holding his arm and played along with her interest. "The house was damaged quite badly in the earthquake of 62 AD," he said. "Most of the external walls were still intact, but the roofs had fallen in, and the internal walls were very unstable. When I came to look around the house, I felt immediately drawn to the place. Of course, as soon as I found the underground chambers and saw the possibilities that they offered, I changed the underground shrine that the owner had built into my bath suite, and the store on the opposite side of the hallway I modified into my laboratory. The rest the gardens and the other rooms I repaired as quickly as I could as my magic and funds would allow."

"It's a lovely house," she said, and Snape grunted.

"Actually, there is more to it than that, Hermione," he said. "A rather infamous local character owned it before I did." He paused, helping her to negotiate a basket of clothes on the street, and Hermione's interest was immediately piqued.

"Oh, yes?" She squeezed his arm, urging him to continue.

"He was a successful merchant, but in his old age, he became obsessed by the idea of cheating death. He spent thousands of *denarii* on hack cures and pseudo-magical potions and spells, convinced that he could become immortal. He tried Greek, Persian, and even *Egyptian* enchantments, giving houseroom to any charlatan or fakir that presented himself at his door. His neighbours made fun of him to start with, but then they began to get frightened of his behaviour. When he disappeared in the earthquake in 62, everyone took it as a sign from the Gods that he had been meddling in things beyond his station, and not even his son came to mourn him."

"So, you bought it," she supplied helpfully.

He stopped, and his lips quirked again at her. "*Ob-viously*," he replied self-mockingly. She grinned and elbowed him gently in the ribs, causing him to wince theatrically and then smile tentatively in return.

They were passing a series of shops on their right. The brass and copper wares of a lamp seller were suspended from the entrance to the shop. She was drawn towards them, laughing self-consciously as the proprietor offered her an elaborately shaped wind chime in the shape of a winged phallus with bells hanging from the glans and wing tips. Hooting with laughter at Snape's expression, Hermione politely declined the opportunity to purchase it, and they moved on. Hermione did not let go of Snape's arm, even though the pavements were less uneven now. He appeared not to notice.

They walked on through the throng, periodically stopping to allow people to move in front of them, hopping onto the tall stepping-stones that crossed the street every so often when they had to make a turn. It was a lovely, warm evening, and as she became more confident about dodging people, belongings, and traffic with Snape's firm arm steadying her and his warm skin sending delightful tremors shivering through her left side, Hermione began to enjoy herself. She prevented him from stepping inadvertently into the path of a cart, and he rocked back into her, glowering. She giggled at his expression and was rewarded when it softened into a self-deprecating half smile that she found she liked very much.

"Busy traffic," he muttered and swept on with her on his arm.

They made their final turn, entering a wider and more opulent street. Snape's house was in a poorer district of the city. This street had slightly wider pavements, and the houses were fewer and larger. They were now in the northwest section of the city, not too far from the Vesuvius Gate. Her anticipation rose even further as they slowly wandered past the bustling entrance to a house she recognised from her dig as being the House of the Golden Cupids. Across the street was a rowdy bar, the patrons spilling out onto the street drinking local wine and laughing with good-natured bawdiness. She could hear music and more laughter from the house in front of them. They were nearly there. Her grip tightened on his arm, and he slowed down even further, turning to her with a raised eyebrow.

"It's just that," she began as they stopped in the street and faced each other, "I know that I'm supposed to be terrified and everything about the volcano, the ~~Aedile~~, Sabazios and his new Death Eaters, but... I mean... for goodness sake, we are about to go to a *party* in the *House of the Vettii*..." It was so hard to explain, but her eyes danced, and she felt a soaring feeling in her torso that sent her stomach into flip-flops. Adrenaline was thundering through her chest, and her head was suddenly full of bursting champagne bubbles. With no further thought, she reached up to him on tiptoes and kissed him firmly on the mouth.

She had meant it as a quick expression of excitement and anticipation, but had not counted on Snape's reaction. With something like a growl, he grabbed her roughly and leaned down into her kiss, deepening it and taking control.

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He had felt a moment's hesitation of shock and surprise as she kissed him, but Severus had recovered quickly. Grabbing her around the waist with his free arm and cursing the bloody potions crate tucked under the other, he kissed her back with a ferocity and enthusiasm that he had long thought he was incapable of feeling.

He felt Hermione tense for a second or so as he took control, but then she returned his deepened kiss as fervently as he had offered it. She tangled her fingers in his hair and opened her lips as his questing tongue dragged across her mouth. She moaned quietly as his hand reached lower to cup her buttocks and to pull her even closer against his lower body. Blood thundered through his head, and as she ground herself against him, he hardened with such speed that he suddenly felt light-headed.

He shifted position slightly to move the potions crate further out of the way so that he could press her breasts more closely against his body and thought that he would never be able to breathe properly again. He wanted to absorb her into his skin. Some fierce sort of animal was roaring in his chest. The sounds of the city the mock cheers and coarse encouragement from the patrons of the bar, the grumbles and complaints of the people trying to get past them on the street receded, and they were two people lost in each other.

*Oh, Merlin*, he had wanted to do this ever since she had arrived. She was so beautiful and fierce and clever she burned with a sort of flame that seemed to ignite something unbelievably powerful in him. Earlier that evening, seeing her wearing the new dress with her hair twisted up into a rough knot at the back of her head, her eyes shining, and her lips parted into that shy smile as she twirled in front of him for his approval... He had called upon every ounce of self-control not to grab her then.

But now *she* had kissed *him*, and immediately, he was snogging her like a randy and desperate teenager in the middle of the street outside his friends' house, feeling like he could almost come there and then with the pleasure of it.

A small rational part of his brain questioned his actions. They were standing in the street, in full view of all passing by. He had trapped her here with him, and he did not know how to get her away and save her. Neither of them was likely to survive the next few days' events.

No-one had ever wanted him. Even here.

Greasy bat.

Slimy old man.

Old enough to be her...*Don't care, don't care, shut up!* the hopelessly aroused part of his mind screamed in response. He was not particularly experienced in such matters. *What happens if I...?*

Hermione moaned again as he moved a leg between hers and rubbed his hand on her arse. Her tongue danced across his, and her fingers were now pulling at his hair with a strength that was almost painful.

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*Oh God, oh God, oh God oh God oh God!* Hermione was not currently capable of rational thought. Her entire body was aware of nothing but itself and of *him*. She had never been so turned-on in her life. All she could do was keep kissing him and kissing him, even though she was finding it hard to snatch breaths and her calves were beginning to ache from standing on tip-toes as she was pressed into his body. She was trembling from the exertion and the passion of the moment. Her hands grabbed bunches of his fine hair, and she could feel his chin rasping against hers as he plundered her mouth; he was clearly as aroused as she was. When he moved his leg to rub between hers, she thought she would collapse from the pleasure of it.

A sudden jostle from a passer by on the busy street knocked Hermione backwards and brought both of them to their senses. As they broke apart, both breathing heavily, Hermione felt an almost painful catch in her stomach, as if something inside her had been stretched too far and snapped back. It was an echo of that sense of loss that she had grown so used to over the past few years at home. She fought for composure and recovery, keeping her eyes low on his chest, noticing that it was rising and falling erratically as he, too, attempted to calm down.

"Well," she said, and her voice was unsteady, so she forced a little laugh. "That was rather unexpected. Are you okay?" She chanced a quick glance up at him and was not surprised at all to see him staring at her with a look full of flushed and defensive intensity. She smiled at him and was pleased to see that his expression shifted and relaxed slightly. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. His lips her own mouth still tingled from the connection to those lips! quirked once more, and then a true smile seemed to ghost across his face for a moment before he stepped back, adjusted his clothing at the front, and ran his free hand through his hair.

"I am not entirely sure, to be honest," he said, and she was relieved once again to hear an unsteady note of humour in his voice. "Bloody hell, woman. I don't know where *that* came from... You have..." He took another rather shaky breath, and that almost-smile flashed again. Then he coughed and shook his head a little, as if trying to clear his thoughts. Hermione could not think of anything sensible to say. She was still trying to sort out her own reaction to the sudden passion of their kiss.

"Much as I might prefer to continue... *this*... further, Hermione, we have just made a spectacle of ourselves on the street. And we have a delivery to make and a party to attend." He proffered his arm to her with a characteristic inclination of his head. "Shall we go?" he offered.

He was right. They both needed to refocus. Time was pressing, and they both had important tasks to undertake. Now was the moment to remember that she was an intelligent and educated person and not just a seething mass of raging hormones. She placed her hand once more on his proffered arm and nodded her assent as he led her once more towards the entrance to the House of the Vettii.

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Hermione's eyes opened in unabashed wonder as she crossed the threshold of the house and offered *hepalla* to the slave waiting in the entrance hall. Snape unclasped and shrugged out of his cloak, following her inside with the little potion vials rattling slightly in their crate. The entrance hall of the house was much as Hermione remembered from her dig, and she was delighted to notice the famous wall painting of Priapus, the Roman god for fertility, wealth, and gardens. He was depicted in a relaxed pose, leaning against a wall beside an overflowing basket of fruits, the Phrygian felt cap of a freedman perched merrily on his head while he weighed overflowing money bags against his hugely outsized penis (a Roman symbol of luck and good fortune) on a set of scales he dangled from his right hand. It was an outrageous image, a talisman for prosperity and a refutation of the evil eye. The humour as well as the message of the image was clear a pun on the Latin words *penis* and *pendere* (to weigh) and a statement that said 'our good fortune has given us wealth beyond measure'. Hermione had always loved the earthy positivity of the image, and she smiled, both in recognition and amusement, at the outrageous nature of the portrait.

"Seen something you like?" Snape's murmur in her ear was laced equally with humour and disdain.

She turned around to face him, her smile still evident, and she raised her eyebrows, deliberately raking him with a thoughtful glance. "What? *Jealous*, Severus?"

He snorted and pushed past her, moving towards the centre of the house, carrying his newly enlarged crate of potions before him.

The house seemed to be full of noise and life. Hermione could hear laughing and chatting coming from the direction of the central *peristyle* garden on the opposite side of the entrance *atrium*. As she moved through into the main chamber in front of her, Hermione could hear the high-pitched tone of Roman flutes, a bright and dancing melody that was supported by the gentle percussion of small cymbals and a tambourine. She followed Snape towards a small group of people by the entrance to the *peristyle* in the centre of the house. There were three men and one woman, each holding a wine goblet and chatting animatedly to each other. As he reached them, the foursome parted, and Severus was welcomed with enthusiasm by the two men closest to him, one of whom called a slave over to relieve him of his burden before slapping Severus on the shoulder in welcome and calling for wine.

Hermione and her fellow excavators at the dig had often speculated about the appearance of the Vettii brothers. More was known about them than many other inhabitants of the buried city, but still, there were no archaeological clues as to what they had looked like, how tall they were, and whether they were local to the area around Naples or came from further afield. Both men were tall, thin, and attractive looking, with open and welcoming expressions, equal shocks of auburn hair and freckled faces. Their demeanor was teasing and intelligent. Their dress was flamboyant and gaudy. Gold jewelry glittered from their necks and fingers.

"Severus, old man!" greeted one brother. "You're late."

"But you brought a *friend*," added the other, eyebrows raised in a comical fashion, looking at Hermione as she approached to group to stand beside Severus.

"Conviva," Snape nodded in greeting to each brother, "Restitutus." He frowned at the two men who grinned back in cheerful unabashed fashion. "As you have frequently urged me to bring a companion to such affairs, I am pleased to introduce to you all Hermione. My... niece."

"Ahhh, the famous *niece*!" Restitutus laughed, extending his hand to Hermione and clasping hers in a warm and friendly greeting. "Lovely to meet you, Hermione. I am Aulus Vettius Restitutus, and this is..."

"His more handsome brother, Aulus Vettius Conviva." Conviva was smiling also and turned to introduce the woman standing beside him. "This is my wife, Marcella."

The woman Conviva introduced Hermione to was very beautiful. Long dark hair tumbled around her shoulders. Her face was heart shaped, and her skin was pale with widely spaced large eyes that glinted with a hint of her husband's quick intelligence. Marcella smiled at the younger woman and also extended her hand, then looked across at Severus, who was standing rather awkwardly looking at the two of them.

"Good evening, Severus," Marcella's voice was sure and rich. She leaned forward and kissed the austere man on the cheek, moving with the obvious ease of close acquaintance. Hermione felt an irrational stab of something at her gentle caress, but she kept her features carefully polite as the older woman turned to face her.

"Lovely to meet you, my dear," Marcella said graciously. "Welcome to our home. Would you like some *falernian*?" As she spoke, a young male slave appeared at her elbow, bearing a tray with goblets of wine standing on it. Hermione smiled her thanks to the young man and took a sip of the sweet liquid before turning her attention to the fourth member of the group. With a sudden and startling shock, she realised that she recognised him.

"Of course, you have already met our esteemed guest, *Aedile* Fiducius," Marcella continued politely. The *Aedile* bowed low to Hermione, flashing his wide smile and looking between Severus and Hermione.

"Ah, the lovely *Hermione*, what a pleasure again," he drawled, his eyes raking her from top to bottom in appraisal. "You look even more beautiful tonight than you did earlier this morning."

"*Aedile*." Hermione took his hand briefly, attempting to keep her voice low and steady and her smile plastered firmly in place. She noticed a sheen of sweat on the *Aedile*'s face that seemed to have nothing to do with the heat of the evening or the wine, and his hand trembled slightly in hers.

"Come on, all of you, enough chatter; were late for dinner," Conviva insisted, taking hold of Hermione's arm above the elbow and steering her away from Fiducius and towards the garden.

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Harry barely remembered the journey back to Naples. He knew that he, Alberto, and Gabrielle had raced for the scooter and that Alberto had caused the little machine to achieve speeds that he had not thought possible in their race towards the Ospedale Antonio Cardarelli in central Naples.

Worry and fear filled Harry's chest. He had not seriously considered the possibility that Hermione would be injured. His conversation in the Three Broomsticks with Ron had confirmed his own assumption that she was travelling again, that her nonsensical inability to settle down had prompted her to run away and disappear once more, just like she had done on many occasions in the past. She had been hurt before Dolohov's hex from the Department of Mysteries had taken some time to heal, and she still bore the slightly raised scar from Bellatrix's blade on the side of her neck. Harry knew that Hermione had been deeply affected by her experience in the final battle against Tom Riddle. She had grown distant, emotionally speaking, from her friends, becoming hard to reach, colder, and more sarcastic. Even restoring her parents' memories had not returned their relationship to where it had been before she had sent them away. Harry closed his eyes and wished with all he had that she would be able to recover from whatever had put her in the hospital to begin with.

It was late afternoon, and the traffic had increased to unimaginable levels. The Vespa swerved off the E45 Autostrada to cut across the city centre to reach the hospital. Alberto negotiated the little scooter expertly between stationary cars, buses, vans, and trams, but eventually, as they reached the central district of the city, they faced a huge traffic jam that had gridlocked all the roads in front of them. As the Vespa slowed down, Alberto leaned back to Gabrielle and shouted something in her ear before giving Harry a significant look. Gabrielle twisted around and shouted, "Hang on, Harry!"

"What? *Why?*" Harry's fingers convulsed on the seat under his thighs again, but he could see that there was no way through the massed vehicles before them, no matter how skilled Alberto was in driving the magical machine.

He was shortly proved entirely wrong, however, as with a sickening wrench, Alberto launched the little bike at the rear of a Fiat 500, pulling the scooter's handlebar sharply towards him and twisting the accelerator handgrip and shouting, "*Evanescere!*" The scooter simultaneously disappeared from sight *and* shot up the back of the little wedge-shaped car, using it like a makeshift ramp to launch the scooter into the air.

Harry looked down and saw that they were not terribly high, perhaps thirty feet above the traffic below. His respect for the little, theatrical Italian's driving skills redoubled as he realised that Alberto was now negotiating the winding streets of central Naples *as well* as dodging a bewildering array of wires, clothes lines, and flags that the Muggle residents had strung between the high buildings on either side of the roads and passageways that they were threading their way through.

Very shortly, they were able to land again outside the imposing entrance to the hospital. Alberto parked the bike under one of the large Cyprus trees near the entrance steps, leaving the machine Disillusioned. Harry's heart was still thumping in his chest. There had been no time to get the full picture from Alberto in the rush to travel back to Naples.

Gabrielle had said something quickly about Hermione's body being found lying in her excavation pit by her students. Her students had been unable to rouse her, and so, they had called an ambulance immediately. Because she had been unconscious, Harry realised, explaining why Minerva's Patronus had not been able to contact her.

Harry just hoped that the Muggle doctors had not done anything... well...*Muggle*... to her he just wanted to see her safe to St. Mungo's so she could receive proper care.

Without waiting for the others, Harry bounded up the steps to the hospital entrance, holding his wand flat on the palm of his hand as he pushed through the entrance doors.

"*Invenio* Hermione Granger," he ordered the wand, scowling furiously at it as it gently revolved and searched for Hermione. Ignoring Gabrielle and Alberto, who had both rushed over to the hospital reception area and were speaking urgently to the woman behind the desk, Harry spotted a set of stairs to his right, and he began to take them two at a time as he watched his wand twitch in his hand and show him the way. He became aware that Gabrielle and Alberto were following him some twenty feet behind.

He climbed two sets of stairs, then took a right turn, then a left down another corridor. His wand was pulsing in his hand, urging him onwards. Soon, he found himself standing in front of a set of white metal-and-glass double doors which opened on to a small ward with six beds in it. The beds were empty, save for one in the far corner of the room next to the window. A small group of people was gathered around the bed. Beside them were machines that made subdued noises and were connected to the patient by wires and thicker tubes.

One of the people clustered around the occupied bed, wearing the long white coat of a Muggle physician, stepped to one side, and Harry suddenly could see the identity of the prone figure lying under the bed covers.

*Hermione.* Harry's heart clenched hard in his chest.

He put his hand on the door. Then he squared his shoulders and paused for a moment, collecting himself. Gabrielle and Alberto arrived, panting and out of breath behind him. Gabrielle looked over his shoulder to the bed at the end of the room and her breath caught. Instinctively, she put her hand on Harry's shoulder. Together, they pushed the heavy doors open and walked towards Hermione's body.

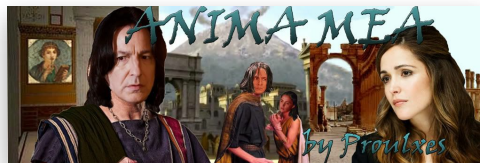
## Chapter 11

*Chapter 12 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: These characters are not mine (well, most of them anyway). All grateful thanks go to JKR for allowing their use. This story would not be published here without the help, support, and advice of beaweasley2, and also without the grammatical skills and keen ideas of clairvoyant. Thank you both! The earth moves at the end of this chapter....



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### Chapter 11

Hermione barely had time to take in the extraordinary display of competing fountains and *objets d'art* that filled the *peristyle* garden of the House of the Vettii as Conviva walked her through to the *triclinium* off the right side of the central garden. The sounds of music and laughter were getting louder.

When they entered the large dining room, Hermione saw more guests at the party. Some were reclining on the low benches that were arranged in a crescent shape around the edge of the room, and others were standing in front of the benches, talking to each other. In the far corner of the room, a small group of musicians were playing. A reedy double flute produced a plaintive melody that was accompanied by subtle percussion. The room itself was a riot of colour, the walls richly decorated with a series of mythologically inspired frescos painted onto deep red panels. Beneath the main pictures of gods, goddesses, and heroes, Hermione was delighted to see the undamaged, famous long frieze of cupids at work. In the corners of the room, numerous oil lanterns lit the space around them. She longed to study the pictures in more detail, but realised guiltily that social convention precluded such a study. With reluctance, she dragged her attention to the other people waiting for them in the room. Conviva pulled her forwards and raised his voice to draw everyone's attention.

"Everyone, this is Hermione, Severus' *niece*." There was a mildly sarcastic cheer from the assembled party, and Hermione heard Snape growl something darkly behind her. Putting his hand up to forestall any further ribald comment, Conviva laughingly introduced the others.

A short, balding man was presented as Publius Artorius Corvinus, a local famer and producer of wine and cut flowers, and his wife, Antonia Tertia, was a small, neat woman with fine, curled hair. The second couple, both taller than the first and more overweight as well, was Gnaeus Stephanus, a local fuller, and his wife Julia Clodia. Stephanus looked like he was enjoying the effects of the fine wine he was consuming. As he lurched forward into his bow of greeting, his wife rolled her eyes in mock horror at his condition. The third couple, Tullius Salvius Rufrius and his wife Licinia Crassa Maia, were olive oil millers, owning and running a series of mills in the industrial northeast of the city.

Restitutus picked up a small hand bell from a side table and rang it. Shortly afterwards, four slaves appeared in the room, bearing bowls of steaming water and linen towels draped over their shoulder. The other guests seemed to realise what was going on and immediately sat down on the couches, facing outwards. The slaves went from guest to guest, loosening footwear and washing the partygoers' feet, patting them dry with care. Hermione felt intensely embarrassed by this attention, even though she knew that this was the established practice before formal dinners in the Roman world. She noticed that the slave who washed her feet was the same young man who had offered her wine. He looked very thin, and his hair was sparse. She wondered if the Vettii having been enslaved themselves thought it strange to own their own group of slaves. She looked quickly over to where Conviva was carrying on a spirited conversation with Stephanus. Both men were obviously sharing a dirty joke and completely ignoring the woman who was washing their feet. As she finished, Conviva scowled down at her briefly as she struggled to her feet and withdrew. *I suppose not*, Hermione thought sadly.

Once the slaves had finished washing the guests' feet, everyone turned to face the centre of the room and reclined more fully on the couches. Hermione found herself next to Snape, who, in turn, had Marcella on his right. Next to Hermione on the left-hand side were Rufrius and Licinia. Across the room, Corvinus and Antonia Tertia lay next to Stephanus and his wife with Fiducius next to Restitutus and his brother.

Another gentle ring of the small hand bell, and the slaves re-entered the room, laden with food for the low table between the benches. Hermione watched with fascination as the first course was laid out before them. Tiny twisted bodies of dormice, cooked in honey and sprinkled with sesame seeds (*might give those a miss*, she thought to herself), lay on one plate. Elsewhere, small hot sausages, damsons, olives, and pomegranate seeds filled other bowls. Without delay, the other guests began to pick at the food using their fingers.

Following their lead, Hermione selected a plump olive and popped it in her mouth. She was conscious that her right leg was brushing up against Snape's, and as he reached forward for another morsel to eat, she had a suspicion that he deliberately rubbed against her thigh. The action sent a delicious shiver through her body, which she knew he felt too.

"Dormouse, Hermione?" His voice was laced with humour as he offered her the plate of sweetened rodents, smiling wickedly as she glowered at him and reached instead for a damson plump.

"So, Hermione," Rufrius began, "where does your family come from? Hermione is a Greek name, isn't it?"

"Erm... My family are from Picenum beyond the Sybilline Mountains," she invented quickly, thinking fast and hoping that no one in the room had any familiarity with that area of Italy.

To forestall any further questions, she took the initiative.

"How much oil do you mill in a season?" she asked and then listened attentively as Rufrius, with corrections from his wife, enthusiastically outlined the extent of their milling activity. Hermione learned that the price of decent olives seemed to be rising far too quickly and the cost of maintaining the expensive wooden presses, which Conviva and Restitutus insisted on sourcing their pressed oil from, were frequently breaking down and in need of constant attention and care. Rufrius was midway through a detailed description of how he carefully passed the first pressing through muslin cloth when Corvinus interrupted him from the opposite side of the room and took issue with the miller's insistence that the olive oil millers were being cheated by the growers.

Hermione's attention became diverted by another discussion that was happening at the other end of the room.

Conviva was speaking to Fiducius, his tone playful but firm. Hermione could see Fiducius was beginning to grow restless on his couch.

"I do not see why we should be asked *yet again* to foot the bill for repairs to the city when the cost should be met through our normal taxation system." The elder Vettii picked up a dormouse and bit down upon it, making a rather unpleasant crunching noise.

"My dear Conviva," the *Aedile* spoke with thinly veiled emotion, "you know as well as I that as more families abandon the city *for opportunities* elsewhere, there are fewer of us remaining to carry the burden of the restoration projects..."

"Restoration projects'?" Hermione asked Severus, *sotto voce*.

"Following the earthquake eleven years ago," he hissed back in explanation, but Conviva was also speaking.

"The fact that there are fewer of us here," the older brother argued, suppressing a belch as he reached for another olive, "only means that there are more opportunities for those prepared to remain to repair the city and to exploit the continuing financial opportunities that are on offer here." He wagged his eyebrows with mirth and challenge at his guests. "*That is why we* will not be leaving, *Aedile*, no matter what state the water supply gets into. Pompeii has made us rich, and with the gods' aid, it will continue to do so."

"Still," and now Conviva's voice was deliberately teasing in its tone, "I would have thought that the *Aedile's* office would have finished the restoration of the water supply by *now*, Marcus...."

Hermione could see an angry flush work its way up Fiducius' neck and onto his face.

The *Aedile* snapped. "If we had had support from the Imperial coffers, we would have been able to fully repair the city by now, but it appears that *Vespasian*," the word was spat out, "was not interested in helping Pompeii recover from such a disaster, and neither is his whelp."

"Now, now, Marcus," Resitutus intervened mildly, "you can't blame the Emperor for not getting involved in local politics here. Pompeii should look after its own. Besides," and now it was his turn to smile mockingly at the local official, "even *Nero* made no investment around here, despite his... familial connections...."

Hermione felt the room go still as the other guests began to listen in to the developing conversation.

"What do you mean, Resitutus?" asked Julia Clodia loudly into the ensuing silence, but Fiducius answered her instead.

"He means, my dear woman, to remind us all of my family's connection to Poppea, Nero's second wife," the *Aedile* explained. "She was my maternal aunt, you know." He smiled his vulpine smile and picked up an olive in his thin fingers.

"Nero *did* invest in this area, for your information, Vettius. He owned a number of farms in the locality and may well have supplied you with your precious bloody olives in doing so."

"I hope *not!*" Corvinus huffed loudly and comically from the end of the couches opposite Hermione. "We'd never have got the prices we needed if the Emperor had been



involved!" He belched loudly, as if to give his words emphasis, and the tension in the room dissipated. Corvinus took another swig from his wine goblet and then began to engage once again in a spirited argument with Restitutus about the price of olives.

But Fiducius' jaw was still set, and the dull flush on his cheeks remained. Hermione saw him stare defiantly across at Snape, his look full of meaning, and she felt Severus sigh a little in response.

As the slaves came in to clear the table and replace the appetisers with the *prima cena*, Hermione drifted into overhearing snatches of conversations. Mostly, the dinner party guests were talking about business matters. Corvinus, his wife, and Stephanus were discussing the cost of importation taxes while Restitutus and Conviva were flattering Fiducius out of his poor mood with compliments on his preparations for the upcoming Festival of Vulcan – clearly a highlight of the Pompeian calendar. Rufrius and his wife were talking quietly about their eldest son, who was evidently a tearaway. Licinia thought an honest day's work would take the boy's mind off prostitutes and drinking. She wanted Rufrius to secure their son a position with one of his business associates.

Meanwhile, Hermione could hear the low rumble of Severus' voice as he talked with Marcella about the current state of the theatrical productions in Pompeii. She helped herself to more food as she listened to the different extracts of conversations.

The *prima cena* consisted of a variety of different meats, a fat chicken served with cooked eggs spilling out of its innards, and a small roasted boar that had been displayed on its side with marzipan piglets arranged next to it, as if they were feeding. Besides the meat dishes, there were quinces stuck with prickles to look like sea urchins. Gingerly, Hermione picked up one of the quinces and took an experimental bite. The sweet flesh of the fruit parted, and she realised that it was stuffed with some sort of spiced mincemeat. It was delicious.

Fiducius' raised voice brought her back to his conversation.

"Titus is a *boy*." The *Aedile's* voice was laced with disdain, but behind it was the characteristic whine of his jealousy.

"Hardly, Marcus," Marcella's voice cut in. "He's forty years old and an experienced military commander. A boy he is not."

The *Aedile* waved his hand, as if dismissing her argument. "I mean, he lacks experience," he countered swiftly. "Vespasian hardly kept him close, after all. He spent all his time with those barbarians in Judaea. Titus may struggle to assert his authority among the Senate. He is not secure in his palace yet."

"I don't agree," Conviva stated loudly and baldly. "Titus is strong and experienced. He'll ensure a peaceful succession; you just watch him! 'Sides, it's in nobody's best interests to have another war." He reached over to the table and pulled at the flesh of the boar, ripping off a chunk and stuffing it into his mouth, slurping up the roasting juices that had dribbled onto his chin.

Fiducius was not to be diverted this time. "He is a *brute*, Conviva – did you hear that he has people executed on the spot? What he did to Ailenus only a few months ago? Not everyone in the Senate wants to see that... *degenerate*... takeover." Fiducius' voice was shrill, rising with passion. "He has no moral standards. What Rome needs now is a return to proper moral authority."

Conviva snorted and guffawed. "What bloody rubbish – what does 'proper moral authority' even mean here and now in the modern Empire? So Titus lived with that Eastern witch for a few months... So what? He sent her away when she made him the subject of gossip in the theatre, didn't he? He's got good sense. More than *your relative* ever had, anyway!"

Fiducius smiled nastily, but he had recovered his self-control. "I'm not here to defend Nero, Conviva, and you will *not* embarrass me further over that issue. Believe me, my family is well aware of the lengths that that... creature... went to, to satisfy his desires for pleasure. Remember that I was present in the villa when he *kicked* my pregnant aunt to death, after all." Julia Clodia and Licinia both cried out and recoiled in revulsion at his words and the image that they conjured, but the *Aedile* continued, regardless of the offence he had caused. "All I am saying is that Titus should not be too comfortable on his throne.... There are others who have a legitimate claim to his authority, and now is the time to act upon his weakness in the first twelve months of his reign."

"That is treason, and I won't stand for it in my home," Restitutus said sharply, and suddenly there was no humour in his manner at all. He glanced for confirmation at his brother, who was sitting similarly still watching Fiducius warily.

"Oh, *relax*, Restitutus – we are among friends here," said Rufrius quietly and thoughtfully, taking another drink of wine. "What do you mean, Marcus – are you suggesting that there could be an alternative? What would the benefit of another round of Imperial infighting be for us here?"

The *Aedile* hunched forward, and Hermione felt Severus tense beside her. His hand was moving slowly down his body by his side. She knew that he was reaching slowly for his wand, which he had slipped into a side pocket of his *tunica*.

"What I meant was that you cannot guarantee the old traditions will remain forever. What I *did* learn from my unfortunate association with the fallen Nero was that you cannot count on being able to survive for long without *power* and that those who support that power will benefit from that association."

"What on earth are you getting at?" Stephanus was perplexed. "What power?"

Fiducius turned from him and looked pointedly across to Snape once again. "Severus knows all about it, don't you, *myfriend*? What is your opinion? You are so quiet this evening."

Snape paused before answering. When he did, he spoke slowly and with care. "I would not presume to take part in this conversation – as a humble foreigner, not a Roman citizen, I have no say in the politics of the day or the future, for that matter." He paused again, but then continued, placing a firm emphasis on his words, "All I will say is that holding an absolute *power* does not mean that you would wield it for the good of all – such ambitions are rarely realised." He held Fiducius' stare with his own until the *Aedile* smiled with abashed charm at his hosts and, in doing so, broke the connection with Snape.

"I'm sorry, but what are we talking about?" Julia Clodia's face was as full of bewilderment as her husband's.

A wave of laughter from the other guests rolled around the room at the fuller and his wife's confusion as the subject matter changed back to safer matters, such as the price of olives. Hermione felt Snape relax, as he gradually withdrew his hand from the handle of his wand and reached for his wine goblet instead.

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An hour or so later, dinner was eaten, and the guests were free once more to move about the house. Politics had not been mentioned again around the table, and the *Aedile* had quietened down as the talk had become centred once again on his preparations for the much anticipated Festival of Vulcan.

Fiducius promised something extraordinary, a show that the people of Pompeii would remember for generations to come. He refused to be drawn on the details of the entertainment that his department had planned for the evening of the Festival, despite the close questioning of the dinner guests. Marcus clearly enjoyed having information that others did not possess, and Hermione did not like the supercilious sneer that played across his features as he deflected their questions.

Seeing the other guests engrossed in their conversations, Hermione excused herself from the dining room and walked outside into the *peristyle*. The night had closed in, and although the garden was lit with dancing flames from various candles, there were many dark shadows to slip into. She desperately wished to explore the house further, and she was determined not to miss the opportunity to do so.

The *peristyle* garden was much as she remembered from modern times, a riot of tasteless statues and an effusion of spitting fountains crammed into a space that was far too small for all of them. The main rooms off the *peristyle* were lit, and Hermione wandered around the second *atrium*, drawn towards the huge and elaborate shrine that dominated the space.

In the painting at the rear of the shrine, the image of two *Lares* (human-shaped guardians of the family and the hearth) flanked a representative of the Vettii family who was depicted making a sacrifice. Beneath the image of the three figures, a giant snake coiled and writhed. Even though Hermione knew that the snake was representing an *agathodemon* a beneficent spirit she still found the likeness of the giant snake unsettling. Small candles and oil lamps burned beneath the image, causing it to shift and flicker in the darkness.

On impulse, Hermione picked up one of the little terracotta oil lamps and moved towards what she remembered as the kitchen. The slaves had retired to their rooms, and the confined space was empty. The fires underneath the cooking pots had been doused. Hermione was not looking for the kitchen, however, but the room that she knew lay beyond it. True enough, as she turned the corner into the small box room that the kitchen led to, she found the room she was looking for.

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Snape had also walked out into the garden after dinner, but he had another purpose in mind. The meal had been as entertaining, challenging, and provoking as he had thought it would be. There had been little time to contemplate the extraordinary reaction he had had to Hermione's kiss before the dinner had begun, and he was still not free to think about it yet. Instead, his mind was filled with anticipation for the days ahead. He had seen further evidence of Fiducius' ambition and his desperation, and he knew that the warm friendship and camaraderie of his friends would push him to do anything to prevent his friends from perishing in the upcoming cataclysm. He took Marcella's hand in his, and he drew her into one of the shadows around the outside of the *peristyle*.

"Marcella, thank you for inviting me here tonight," he began, trying to think of the most effective way to proceed. He always felt awkward when discussing such matters. He took a deep breath and tried to fix her with his most sincere and compelling look.

"You know that I owe you and Conviva everything," he said. "When I arrived after the earthquake, you looked after me, and you helped me to recover from my injuries. I... think of you more closely than my birth family." He reached into his pocket and withdrew the two small vials of perfume that he had brewed for this occasion, pressing them into her hands. She accepted the gifts with her customary grace, sniffing the little vials with evident appreciation and enjoyment.

"You need to get out of the city, Marcella," Snape said softly and urgently. "You need to leave now and stay away for more than a few days."

Marcella smiled and shook her head. "You know that he won't go, Severus," she replied equally quietly. "Conviva does not believe in signs and portents. The *Lares* look after us the gods are on our side. Even if he did, he would not leave his businesses; he worked too hard to let them fall into someone else's hands."

"But the volcano... It's becoming dangerous you must believe me." There was a desperate, pleading quality to Severus' voice. He put out a hand and touched the woman on her cheek, thinking of the time when she held him through the fever of Nagini's bite. He owed her and her family for his life. Why wouldn't she *listen* to him?

"Take the children then," he urged, moving closer to her. "You can visit your estate on the far side of the bay. Just for a few days." He smiled as winningly as he could. "Promise me that you will ask him?"

"And you, Severus?" Marcella smiled again at him fondly. "Will you be leaving the city? I thought that you would be one of those to pursue other *opportunities* elsewhere... perhaps with your *niece*...?" She wagged her eyebrows at him, obviously delighted by his scowling, embarrassed response.

She relented at his darkening expression.

"Severus, you are the brother I have never had. I love you, but you cannot control me. My husband decides where we go and what we do, and if he says that we stay in the city, we stay. I am sorry." She smiled a genuine smile at him, and once more, he felt the frustration and fear nearly overwhelm him as another loved one took a path he could not prevent or follow. She stepped back. "Thank you for the perfume it is lovely. But now I fear it is growing late, and you need to escort your... Hermione... home."

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The room that Hermione was standing in was about five feet by ten feet. It was empty but for a low trestle bed and a life-sized statue of the god Priapus. Around the room were various erotic pictures depicting a wide variety of sexual acts, from bestiality to orgies, imaginative and suggestive, humorous and intoxicating. There was disagreement among modern day historians and archaeologists about the use of the room. Some maintained it was evidence that the Vettii hired this room out to prostitutes for their use. Others disagreed, citing its position in the heart of the house and right next to the working kitchen. Having met Marcella in particular, Hermione found it hard to see her allowing such a business to operate in her own home. Perhaps it was simply a bedroom with suggestive decoration. She turned to leave, but then realised that there was somebody else behind her. Thinking irrationally that it was Severus, she turned around, ready to defend her presence in a room full of erotic pictures.

It wasn't Severus.

Lit by the little flame of the oil lamp in her hand, the face of Marcus Fiducius moved out of the darkness towards her. She could hear his breathing, which was heavy and thick. She could smell sweat and fear and desperation on him as he took hold of her arm and held it in a tightening grip.

"I know that you are *special*, Hermione," he said, and she could smell the sweet wine on his breath. To her distaste, she could see a thin dribble of spittle on his chin. "Your blood... Your blood holds the secret of magic. I need the potion to gain the power I deserve, and Severus can provide this but what if I take your blood anyway? What if I drink from the source *directly*?" He moved even closer to her face. Fear caused Hermione to freeze for a moment, forgetting her capabilities. For a second, she was a frightened young woman, pinned to a wall in a deserted area of a house. Fiducius leaned closer, opened his mouth, and slowly licked his tongue from the base of her neck to behind her ear. Gorge rose in her throat, and she began to struggle, her hand fighting to reach her wand in its concealed pocket.

The little lamp she had been holding fell to the floor and smashed, but the light in the room intensified as the entire contents of the little light caught fire and burned away by their feet. Fiducius snickered and pushed his right leg through hers, catching her wrists in his fingers and bringing them away from her body up above her head so he could clasp them both in one hand. He bit at her neck above her collarbone, nipping her skin between his teeth. Hermione began to thrash in earnest, and he moved his free hand to cover her mouth when she made to scream for help.

"Don't struggle so, little one," he whispered, forcing her to comply using the weight of his body. "Just a little taste... in the name of the city...."

Hermione began to focus her energies. She had never been particularly skilled in the use of wandless magic, but for now, all she needed was a pulse of energy to stun him so she could get away. She closed her eyes and concentrated.

"Now, now," Fiducius admonished, still nibbling and licking her throat, "that's why there's a bed h..."

Abruptly, his weight was no longer on her as, with a shout, she felt him ripped away and slammed into the wall beside her. She opened her eyes to see Snape's right hand curled around Fiducius' throat, his wand driven hard into the *Aedile's* cheek.

"Hello, Marcus," Snape said tersely. "Having *fun*?"

Fiducius squirmed, but magic was helping Snape, and even though the men were of equal size, Severus held the other man easily in place. Hermione realised that she was holding her breath and let it out with a deep shudder, putting her hand lightly on Severus' arm.

"Put the wand down, Severus," she said quietly. "I'm fine... really."

Fiducius rolled his eyes. "Severus, I barely touched her," the *Aedile* said, his voice slightly roughened by Snape's hand on his throat. Snape snarled silently, pushing his wand further into the man's cheek. Fiducius' head jerked backwards, hitting the wall hard.

"This is us *finished*, Marcus," Snape growled, "No more potion, no more interventions. No more. I will deal with Sabazios directly from now on." He looked deeply into his erstwhile friend's eyes, and Hermione could see that Severus was trembling.

"You disgust me," Snape hissed. "Now leave, and if I ever see you again..." He released the other man's throat with a violent action that practically threw Fiducius away from him and towards the doorway.

The *Aedile* paused in the doorframe, his hands reflexively clutching at his throat, and shot them both a look of utter hatred, loss, and revulsion before stumbling away. With an almost-sob of relief, Hermione threw herself into Snape's arms. He held her close and tightly, and her body rejoiced once again at their connection. Hermione realised that she was still trembling and that Snape was also.

He did not try to kiss her again; he just squeezed her strongly to him, breathing in time with her gasps and stroking her back firmly. It was a few seconds until she understood that there was something wrong, and she began to understand that they were actually trembling because *the room* was shaking around them rather than from their own exertions. A low rumbling noise could now be heard, accompanied by frightened shouts and screams from the people in the house and, more distantly, the sounds of screams from the street and the smashing of masonry. Hermione looked up at Snape, and her wide eyes met his in the darkness.

"Earthquake," he gasped unnecessarily. Then, as the ground gave a particularly noticeable shudder, he grabbed her arms and shook her.

"Hermione, your wand! Quickly!" He flourished his wand quickly over them both. "*Protego!* We have to get the people out *run!*" She took his hand and fled towards the entrance hall.

"Severus? Hermione!" Marcella's voice was high and frightened. They found her in the entrance atrium with Conviva, a female nursery slave, and their children, two frightened-looking boys about seven years old. The other guests were rushing past them, hastily taking their leave before diving out into the street.

"Marcella," Conviva was shouting, "I'll check the rooms! Take the children with you and head for the Gate!"

Hermione and Severus emerged from the shaking kitchen, turning frightened eyes towards the ceiling. Loose tiles were already beginning to slip from the roof and crash into the water of the *impluvium* in the centre of the *atrium*. Hermione cast a silent *Protego* Charm over the frightened family and grabbed Marcella and the female slave by the arm, dragging them to the entrance of the house and out into the street.

The ground gave another upheaval, and there was a rolling and grinding sound. Hermione stumbled, but kept running alongside the other women and the children towards the Vesuvius Gate.

As they drew closer to the city walls, Hermione began to feel the nauseating rush of the city's wards close in on her, and she knew that she needed to stop. With a shout and a shove, she pushed the female slave forward and told her to run for safety. The slave needed no encouragement, and the woman stumbled onwards towards safety among the crowd of fleeing citizens. Marcella was too focused on the children to notice that Hermione was no longer with them.

Trying to keep her balance as the ground dipped and swelled, Hermione turned again for the House of the Vettii and pounded back to find Snape.

She found him inside the entrance *atrium*, standing over the prone body of Conviva. *Oh my gods!*

"What the hell are you *doing?*" Hermione shouted at Snape.

He held his hands out in placation and shouted back above the roar of the earthquake and the sound of frightened people and falling masonry. "Conviva wouldn't leave the strong boxes in the *atrium!*" he bellowed. "I had to stun him and cast a temporary Shield Charm. He'll be fine! When he wakes up, he'll think he got hit by a stray piece of masonry and it knocked him out. Are you *ready?*"

"We can't get out of the city the wards!" she yelled, flinching as a roof tile hit her shield and crashed to the floor. The building was making ominous creaking noises around them.

Snape rolled his eyes, "I know about the wards, you stupid woman," he yelled back. "I helped to *create* them, remember? We need to get back to my house and check on the potions lab."

Hermione's eyes opened further, and she stared at him as the implications of what he was saying sank in. *The potions lab! The Metamorphmagus potion could be destroyed.... Shit!*

They turned and ran towards the District of the Faun as the streets shook, the people screamed and ran in panic around them, and the ground continued to shift and roll beneath their feet.

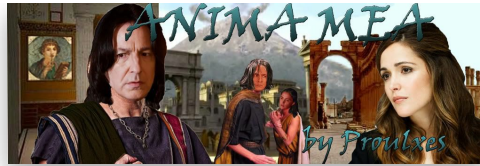
## Chapter 12

*Chapter 13 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: Most of these characters are not mine. Thank you, Ms Rowling, for allowing us to borrow them for these stories. Hugs and thanks to the incomparable beaweasley2 and clairvoyant for their help and support in the writing of this tale.



Right the rating has gone up for good reason.... I hope you patient readers enjoy this chapter!

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## Chapter 12

It was a few seconds after they had left Conviva before Hermione recognised that the ground had stopped shaking.

She knew that there would be more aftershocks during the next three days and that the quakes would become more severe as the magma chamber below the volcano prepared to erupt. This tremor had actually not been too severe, despite the panic and confusion she had felt, and it had only lasted a few short minutes. Nonetheless, she was frightened. It was the first physical evidence she had experienced of what was to come. For a blinding moment, she felt sick with fear in her chest, but then she looked to her right and saw Snape striding confidently onwards by her side, his body radiating authority and power. Chastened by his courage, she pushed her fear away from her and reached mentally for a calm resolve. She had known fear before and had survived.

She and Snape hurried home through streets that were strangely quiet. Those people that they did encounter were busy inspecting the damage to their shops and homes by lantern light or standing in the road among the debris of fallen tiles and shattered stonework, sharing their experiences with their neighbours, laughing with shaky relief that the quake had not been too severe, but still clearly reluctant to go back inside.

Hermione could hear the wailing of infants and the distant sounds of dogs barking. Gone was the carnival atmosphere of a night out in town.

Hermione was very tired it had been a long day, and she was emotionally drained, but she matched Snape's long strides as he led her unerringly back to the district of the Faun.

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When they reached his street, Snape could hear muted voices from within the fullers' shop, but there was no one outside on the road. All was quiet. He was pleased to see that his house appeared to be almost undamaged from the outside. A few tiles had worked loose and were smashed in the street outside the entrance, but the walls were sound, and he could not see any cracks in the plasterwork or the bricks. When he had repaired the house after he had taken possession of it, he had worked various spells into the bricks and mortar of the walls to strengthen them against further earthquake damage. Clearly, they had worked. He felt a momentary flash of smug pride in his magical abilities. Before he could make any sort of comment to Hermione beside him, he noticed that the house's front door was ajar, and Pertus was nowhere to be seen. He frowned; this was highly unusual. An open door at night was an invitation to thieves and looters. He listened but could hear no sounds from within the house and none from the street.

Cautiously, Snape pushed the door fully open and drew Hermione inside the dark house after him.

"*Lumos*." Blinking furiously to adjust his eyes and holding his lit wand above him to illuminate the way, Snape moved into the entrance corridor that led through to his *atrium* and shut the door behind them.

"Pertus?" Hermione's voice was loud in the darkness and made him jump. He grabbed her hand and squeezed warningly. Something felt wrong in the house.... He scowled, distracted. *Where is Pertus?* It was not like his servant to abandon his responsibilities.

"What's wrong?" Hermione's voice wavered slightly, and Severus realised how tired she must be. It had been a long evening, and she had been badly frightened by Marcus. He squeezed her hand again and smiled encouragingly.

"Nothing, probably," he said with a confidence that he did not entirely feel. "Pertus must have made a run for it to open ground. He'll probably be back in a few minutes with his tail between his legs.... Let's get to the lab to check on the potions."

He led her through the *atrium* and the *peristyle* towards his laboratory to check his potions.

Snape's anxiety returned as they reached the edge of the *peristyle* garden. As was the customary arrangement, the oil lamps had been lit around the couch at the side of the garden, illuminating the garden and pathway. But... there was something wrong here. He could *feel* it....

"Oh, God!" Hermione cried out and dashed ahead of him towards the little figure that Snape could now see half-emerged on the pavement at the top of the staircase to the lab.

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The light was poor in the garden, but Hermione could see the sheen of sticky black blood pooled around the head of the little man. By the side of his head, there was a lump of heavy roof tile. Snape arrived a second later, and she snatched his illuminated wand out of his hand, holding it up so Snape could turn the man over and inspect his injuries.

There were scratch marks on his forearms, bruises and grazes, and his fingers were discoloured. His *tunica* was soiled, as if he had been dragged along the ground. The most shocking injury, however, was on Pertus' head. His face was devoid of colour, his black curly hair plastered against his forehead on the left where a horrible wound exposed bone and greyish white matter at his temple. It was seeping fluid. His eyes were half-closed, and although he seemed to be breathing, it was a thin and shallow noise that could barely be heard.

"Get him onto the couch," Hermione suggested, moving backwards, and Severus carefully lifted the unconscious figure in his arms. With her other hand, she drew her own wand, casting a quick diagnostic spell over Pertus as she did so. The figures that hovered in the air above the slave's chest told their own story. She looked around in anguish.

"I'll get my things," Snape said, moving swiftly to the stairs.

"Wait!" Hermione called. "Be careful!" Snape rolled his eyes and made to descend the stairs.

"Not the stairs, you idiot!" she hissed, looking again at the little man's injuries. "How do you think he got injured?"

Snape stared at her blankly. "The roof tile fell..."

"*Look up*," Hermione urged, still speaking in the same urgent, low tone. "Where did the roof tile fall from? The roof is fine."

Snape shot a look at the roof above the staircase entrance. Sure enough, the roof tiles all appeared to be undamaged. He looked back at her again. She was staring at him

now with wild and frightened eyes. "I think Fiducius came back for the rest of the potion," she breathed.

Snape looked at Pertus. The slaves' face was deathly white. A trickle of blood was beginning to stain the corner of his mouth.

"Give me my wand," he whispered.

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"*Ennervate*, Hermione," Harry whispered, holding his best friend's hand. "Come on *Ennervate!*"

Harry sat, clasping Hermione's cold fingers in his own, trying to massage life back into them. It was two thirty in the morning, and Harry was spending the night, keeping his best friend company while waiting for Hermione's parents to arrive. They were already on their way from Australia and were due to touch down in Rome in four hours' time. Gabrielle and Alberto had already left to meet them at the airport to transport them directly to the hospital by Side-Along Apparition. After that, Harry would do all he could to get them to agree for their daughter to be taken to St Mungo's for treatment.

For the time being, though (and thanks to a quick Obliviate and a Disillusionment Charm), Harry was keeping watch over his friend's body.

Hermione was barely breathing. Her cheek was bruised and scratched, her head was bandaged, and there were needles in her arm with a straw-coloured liquid dripping into her veins. Before he Obliviated them, her Muggle doctors had confirmed that she was in a near-vegetative state with hardly any brain function being registered on their machines. They were very sorry, but they could not explain her symptoms, as the blow that she had endured to her forehead had not been severe enough to cause such damage to her mind.

Harry had immediately dispatched his Patronus to let Filius and Ginny know that he had found her and in what condition. He had also asked that they arrange for a private Portkey to St Mungo's once Hermione's parents had arrived. Then he had sat by her side and prepared to wait.

Some minutes later, he had been surprised to see a group of silvery creatures emerge into the room beside him. As he watched, the silvery translucent shapes of Minerva's cat, Arthur's weasel, Ron's terrier, Luna's hare, Ginny's horse, Filius' hummingbird, Molly's lioness, Neville's turtle, and Septima's raccoon now sat in eerie silence, filling the hospital ward with their comforting silver glow. The horse had gently laid its chin on Harry's shoulder, and he was unspeakably grateful for the quiet support that this gave him as he waited. After a few moments, the silent Patronuses faded away, leaving Harry with the comfort and the memory of their magical presence.

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Snape moved silently down the staircase. He needed to fetch some potions if he was to have a hope of restoring Pertus' health, but he did not want to blunder in to face a Fiducius who was out of his mind on the Metamorphmagus Potion.

As he reached the bottom steps, he became aware of a toxic smell emanating from the entrance to his lab. He took a breath and held it, advancing to the entrance to the room. The room was in darkness, and he could not see much at all the magical sconces were not lit.

*Homenum revelio*, he thought furiously, waiting for any sign that Marcus was still in the rooms downstairs.

Nothing.

Stealthily, he walked across the floor into the bath suite and repeated his search. These rooms were similarly in darkness, but again, there was no sign of any human hiding there. Snape let out his breath in quick relief. If there had been an intruder, he had clearly fled.

Swiftly, he moved back to the lab, flicking his wand and activating the magical sconces. The poisonous smell brought him up short again at the entrance to the lab, and Snape stopped in horror at the devastation that met his eyes when he looked into the room.

It was wrecked. Ruined.

As far as he could tell at a glance, every single pot and container was broken or smashed. Potions ingredients were strewn over the benches and floor, some combining with each other and reacting together violently. Toxic fumes were boiling up from the stone floor.

Snape moved into the room, slashing his wand left and right, neutralising some reactions, Vanishing the most dangerous compounds. As he moved, his eyes were searching for preparations that he could use to help Pertus.

Holding his wand between his teeth, he swept up a cauldron, half-full of the Strengthening Solution he had brewed earlier that day~~no~~, *yesterday*, he corrected himself. A further search yielded a broken vial of Blood-Replenishing Potion, which he held carefully in his hand to preserve as much of the dark red liquid as possible. That would do for a start.

As he hurried to the stairs, he cast his eyes about the room for the Metamorphmagus Potion's cauldron and was surprised to see it on the floor, tipped upside down, some of its silvery contents splayed out over the floor. Severus frowned no time now; he'd have to look at it again when he returned. He had to get back upstairs quickly to heal Pertus.

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Hermione cradled Pertus' head in her lap, pressing her hand gently against his shattered temple. The little man had not regained consciousness, and although she was no Healer, she could tell that his breaths were becoming shallow and thready. He was dying.

She thought she could try to heal his skull using the Episkey Charm, but she was frightened that it might cause more damage to his brain beneath. Desperately, she tried to remember the Muggle first aid training she had received at university before going on her first expedition, but she could remember little else aside from some resuscitation techniques. Certainly, she had no recollection of what to do for compound skull fractures. Frustrated tears streaked her face. Oh Lord, she was so tired!

She took a kind of comfort that she had heard nothing since Snape had disappeared out of sight down the stairs some minutes ago unless he was fighting the most silent duel in history, it seemed that he had not encountered anyone down there. *Hurry up!* she thought to herself, feeling Pertus' pulse from his carotid become weaker with each passing second. *What the hell is keeping you, Severus?* Her attention turned once more to the little man in her arms. *What can I do? Oh, Pertus!* Her tears ran more freely down her cheeks.

She almost cried out when Snape emerged from the staircase. Without a word, he knelt at the side of the couch and poured a shot of potion from a cracked vial into Pertus' mouth. "Massage his throat," he said tersely. "You need to encourage the swallow reflex."

He frowned when he saw the dark potion dribble out of the side of the slave's mouth. Snape gave the vial to Hermione to hold and lifted up the cauldron of Strengthening Solution. Holding the man's jaw forward caused Pertus' tongue to come away from the back of his throat, and Snape carefully poured a measure of the Solution into Pertus' mouth. He put the cauldron down on the floor by his knee and rubbed his slave's throat himself, murmuring an incantation, concern etching his face.

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*Why isn't this working? How can I make him swallow?* Severus coated his fingers with Strengthening Solution and pushed them into Pertus' mouth, wiping them on his slave's tongue and around his gums. He tried again, this time forcing his fingers to the back of the little man's mouth, trying to stimulate the gagging reflex. There was none.

With a furiously beating heart, Severus felt for the slave's pulse.

"*Ennervate*, Pertus!" he urged, searching in vain for a flutter under his fingertips. *Ennervate!*"

Hermione moved her hand from cupping the slave's temple, and Severus saw again the sluggish flow of black, clotted blood and matter that she was trying to keep in place.

She placed her hand over his. It was slippery and warm.

"Severus," she said, and her voice was soft and low. "He's gone. I'm so sorry."

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Harry woke with a start. He thought that he had *felt* something, a movement, or a change in the atmosphere. Had he been dreaming? His glasses had come askew on his face, and he straightened them, staring hard at Hermione's face.

There was no change.

He redoubled his grip on her fingers and settled down again to wait.

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"It wasn't your fault," she said softly.

"I should have sent him away with the others." Snape's voice was flat, unemotional. "I freed my other servants. Sent them out of the city. Pertus would not go. Insisted that he stay to keep up appearances, to help me.... *Shit*." His closed his eyes, his head bowed.

"We should lay him out," she said. "Prepare him."

"Yes."

"It wasn't your fault," she repeated.

Snape stood up slowly on shaking legs. He wiped his filthy hands on his fine *tunica* and stared down at his servant's body. His face was masked again, inscrutable, cold. "I'll fetch some money and oil," he said and turned to leave.

Hermione watched him go, still cradling the little man's head in her arms.

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When he returned, he found that she had cleaned the blood from Pertus' face and straightened his clothing. She had closed his eyes and mouth and levitated him off her knees and onto the couch, crossing his hands quietly on his chest.

Without speaking, he leaned over Pertus and gently opened the slave's mouth, carefully placing a gold*daureus* coin under his tongue.

"*Vale*, Pertus," Snape said softly. With slow fingers, he twisted the cork out from a small bottle and tipped a tiny bead of myrrh-infused oil onto his fingertip. Gently, he ran his finger across Pertus' forehead.

"Travel well, my good friend." Severus tried to keep his voice formal and calm as he said the tradition invocation for the dead. He had little time for religions of any nature, but he knew that his slave had frequently made offerings to the household gods and observed the usual feasts and holy days.

He took more myrrh and anointed Pertus' eyelids, calling upon him to see clearly.

He rubbed more oil on his feet, encouraging him to walk quickly to the ferryman.

When he had finished, he felt more tired than he had ever been in his life. Hermione stood quietly beside him, her head bowed.

"We'll move him into the *atrium* tomorrow morning," he said. "There is nothing more to be done tonight." With a last motion of his wand, he placed a combined stasis and shield charm over his servant's body and turned to look at her. Her eyes were wide and shining in her narrow face, her curls had mostly escaped from the confines of the hair band she had been wearing, and there was an ugly smudge of blood and dirt across her left cheek and nose. As he looked at her dully, he felt her small hand once again sliding down his arm past his Mark, past his wrist, to take his fingers in her own.

She said, "Come with me."

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For a moment, they both stood in the doorway to the laboratory, taking in the scale of the wreckage and destruction of his carefully prepared and precious ingredients. Neither spoke, but it seemed to Hermione that Pertus' death had shaken Snape to his core. Watching him tend to the body of the slave, she had been reminded of the way Harry had cared for Dobby at Shell Cottage. Just as Harry had for Dobby, Severus clearly wished to honour his fallen servant. Both appeared to feel tremendous guilt at their servants' sacrifice. However, while Harry had been filled with resolution as he buried the little creature, Snape's courage and confidence had appeared to founder. She had to find a way to help him but was not sure what to do.

A sudden moment of inspiration struck her, and she led him next door to the bath suite.

Thankfully, the room was undamaged by the earthquake, and her eyes lingered once again on the mosaic tiled floor and the representation of grinning Death with his wand. She wondered if Snape had ordered this made when he had converted the room from its original purpose. *It was a shrine before, wasn't it?* she thought.

Without speaking, she pointed her wand at the huge square bath and ordered it to fill. Within moments, water was flooding the marble basin. Snape stood immobile beside her, and she turned to face him. He seemed to be almost swaying with exhaustion. She looked into his black eyes and found them flat and emotionless, but there was a blankness about them that did not seem... natural.

She realised that he was using Occlumency to subdue his emotional response to Pertus' death, and she knew that too much use of that technique could be damaging. "Take down your shields," she said. "It's not healthy for you to keep this bottled up."

He snorted. "I'm not a very healthy person." But shortly afterwards, she saw a change in his face as he allowed his shields to drop, and his hands began to tremble.

His face was so lined with guilt and defeat it was painful for her to look at him. She put her hand on his chest again and immediately felt that intense pulse of connection between them. "You cannot stop people from making their own decisions, Severus. You can't stop people from dying."

"I can bloody well try," he said flatly.

"Yes, we can try. But we can only do our best, nothing more."

"The potion is ruined," he said. "Whoever did... this," he waved his hand upwards and about him, indicating the murdered Pertus and the destruction in his home, "wrecked the lab and destroyed my ingredients."

"I saw as we passed the doorway," she replied steadily.

"Marcus is gone."

She was not sure whether he was glad or angry. "I hope so, yes."

"I will need to make more Metamorphmagus Potion to take to Sabazios as a gift. To prevent him from leaving."

"Yes," she said.

"I don't know what I'm doing." This last from him was a whisper, and his gaze slid away from hers. Gently, she moved her hand from his chest to his face, pushing a lock of his grimy hair over his ear.

"Then we'll just have to get on with it and do what we can. Get in," she said, giving him a slight push. "You need a good soak."

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Shucking off his boots, but without taking off his *tunica*, Snape climbed into the bath and sank into the water. He sat still, facing away from her and towards the wall. She saw his hair straggling limply to his shoulders, the hunch of his body, and the tension in his frame.

She watched him for a heartbeat, then made a decision. Swiftly, so she couldn't change her mind, she removed her sandals and undid her belt, then pulled her bloodied *stola* up and over her head, allowing it to pool on the floor at her feet. She paused for a moment, and then she removed her pendant also, letting it fall carefully onto the *stola*. Clad now only in her underwear, she slipped into the bath and knelt behind him.

The water was so hot it made her gasp. Snape startled at the noise, twisting around to look at her, his eyebrows raised at her boldness. She looked at him with as much strength as she could and slowly plucked the ebony wand from his right hand. It felt strange in her hands but not unfriendly. She wondered, *Will it allow me to...?* Experimentally, she flicked it and cast a silent charm to remove his *tunica*. Snape twitched as his clothes Vanished, and then he flushed and scowled as she waved his own wand at him gently in explanation.

"Turn around and lean forward," she ordered gently. "I'll wash your back."

Obediently, he slumped forward. Hermione poured some olive oil from one of the containers at the side of the bath onto her palm onto her hands and then began to rub slow circles on his back and shoulders, moving up to his neck and pinching the muscles there. She used her knuckles to dig into the stiff flesh, rolling the muscles, feeling the fibrous tissue begin to give under her fingertips. Snape let out a low groan, and she found herself responding to his sensual enjoyment of the massage. She moved closer, parting her legs so that she could wrap them around him. Her hands were now moving down his shoulders and upper arms, squeezing and kneading the muscles, always maintaining a certain pressure.

She tightened her knees on either side of his hips and was absurdly pleased to feel his hands clench on her thighs in response. His fingers began to rub little circles on her legs.

"Wait! I'm not finished yet," she said and was pleased when he chuckled quietly in response.

She picked up the shampoo she had used before and massaged an amount into his scalp. He practically purred in pleasure as she lathered his hair, and Hermione began to feel the steady and increasing thrum of her own arousal as she gradually sought to bring her professor back from his despair. Using tight, controlled circles, she massaged his scalp from his temples to the base of his skull, pulling his head back onto her chest as she made sure that she covered every inch with her fingers. Then she gently nudged his head forwards again and continued her actions, moving her soapy fingers down his neck and onto his shoulders.

"You could do with a shower in here," she joked, looking around for a jar or bowl that she might use to rinse his hair, then realised with an embarrassed jolt that she could use her wand. Summoning it and thinking, 'warm water' as clearly as she could, she cast a carefully controlled Aguamenti Charm and was pleased when a gentle stream of heated water gushed from its tip. It made short work of rinsing the soap from his hair.

"Your turn," he said, twisting around in the bath, causing water to slop onto the floor. "You're filthy."

"*Charming*." Her tone was deliberately arch, but had no heat behind it. She was pleased to hear the sarcasm return to his voice. It was evidence that he was regaining his equanimity. His eyebrows arched, and she saw for the first time the little golden pendant nestling in his sparse black chest hair. Before she could study it more closely, he had nudged and pushed her, turning her around, so their positions were reversed. She was now facing away from him, and he was behind her, his legs straddling her on either side of her hips. Giving herself up to the warmth of the bath water and the heat of the atmosphere, Hermione closed her eyes in anticipation.

Hesitantly at first, but with increasing surety, Snape began to touch her.

His fingers pulled and kneaded as he worked and pressed her muscles. Beginning at the base of her neck, he worked outwards to her shoulders and then inwards again, methodically massaging the tension in her upper body away. As he worked, she thought that she could hear him murmuring something, but frankly, she was becoming too far lost in the pleasurable sensations radiating through her now to care.

When he began to wash her hair, she was unable to prevent her body from arching into his. She was actually quite fond of her hair. Yes, it had been frizzy and uncontrollable when she was a child, but years of decent hair care products and a mature acceptance of the fact that she would never be able to say it was 'sleek' or 'glossy' had encouraged her to have a more positive attitude towards it. He worked carefully, avoiding tangles and taking care not to catch his fingers in her curls.

Soon, she was breathless with arousal. She shifted backwards slightly as he used the same trick to rinse her hair free of soap as she had and realised, as she did so, that he, too, had become as excited as she was. He let out a quiet sound, and his hands returned to her body again, this time curving around her waist, squeezing and moulding, rubbing circles with his fingers across her sides. She allowed her head to fall to one side and dug her nails into his thigh muscles as his hands moved slowly around to slowly unwrap her breasts from the *strophium* breast band she was wearing.

She heard his breath catch as her breasts fell from their bindings and into his hands. An intense sensation spiked through her as his hands cradled a breast each and his fingers rubbed across her nipples.

"Hermione," he said, his voice rasping quietly in her ear as he caressed her breasts, her stomach, then reaching lower, "I want..."

Unable to contain her response any longer and shaking with nerves as well as desire, Hermione twisted around in his arms, pressing herself against him, and kissed him.

Snape was trembling too, she realised. But just as he had done in the street hours ago, he quickly took advantage of the situation. *Gods, he's such a good kisser!* Hermione melted into a pool of desire as Snape cautiously explored her mouth with his tongue, running it along the inside of her lips before biting gently down on her lower lip and welcoming her tongue into his mouth in return. The crazy, desperate sensation in her belly roared into life again, and she was suffused with an explosion of desire so intense that she could barely think straight.

One strong hand cupped the back of her head as he continued to kiss her, while the other moved sensuously down her back and into her knickers to feel her arse. She felt his lips quirk at encountering her modern-style knickers and knew that he was amused by her decision to Transfigure the Roman underwear Pertus had sourced for her into modern panties. She squirmed against him, feeling the length of his hardened cock stab into her belly. He growled in response and twanged the knicker elastic underwater. This only prompted her to grind against him again, drive her hands into his hair, and pull him across and atop of her; this caused both of them to lose their balance and tip sideways under the water.

For a few moments, both were disorientated, unable to disentangle themselves from each other. In a panic, unable to sit up to breathe, Hermione lashed out with her feet and connected with something soft and yielding. Snape's weight abruptly moved off her.

Thrashing wildly, Hermione pushed herself off the bottom of the bath and emerged, half-spluttering and half-laughing, from the hot water.

Snape was, predictably, less amused. "Out. Now," he said, pushing her away from him and struggling to his feet. She stopped laughing immediately and stared at him, her face a combination of disappointment and confusion as he got out of the bath.

"We're stopping?" she asked in disbelief.

"Fuck no!" he growled, reaching over to her and half-yanking and half-lifting her into his arms. "I just don't fancy drowning before I can shag you senseless. Now... where were we?"

Abruptly, he turned and the world went black.

## Chapter 13

*Chapter 14 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: I am running out of superlatives to describe the talents of beawesley2 and clairvoyant. I couldn't do it without them! I do not own the Potterverse, but I thoroughly enjoy playing in it. Thank you to everyone who reads this story and particularly to those who take the time to review it. Caution: here be lemons....

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### Chapter 13

Hermione cried out when Snape Apparated them both to his room. When the unpleasantly familiar constriction of Apparition left her, she shivered violently in his arms and then thumped him on his chest with her free hand. "Bastard... You could have warned me..."

She felt, as well as heard, his deep chuckle before he crushed her against his body and kissed her once more.

Merlin, those kisses were... were.... Words were insufficient to describe the tumbling sense of falling and grasping that she felt in his embrace. Their bodies were still slick with the water from the baths, and as a light breeze swept through the open door to his bedchamber, Hermione felt goose bumps rise on her body, which added to the physical sensations of being with him.

She felt him lower her to his bed, and her mind dimly recognised the softness of his mattress beneath her naked back and the comfort of the cushions piled up behind her head and shoulders before he lowered himself onto the narrow pallet beside her.

He ran his hands along her flank from her shoulder to her hips, and she shifted a little onto her side so she could return the favour. She discovered that Severus was very warm to the touch as she swept her fingers along the length of his lean body. She loved the sensation of his skin, smooth and warm, beneath her hands, and she revelled in the feeling of how his muscles shifted and flexed under his skin. As she experimentally traced her fingers around one of his nipples, she heard him sigh and felt him shudder. She slid her hand downward over his taut abdomen, smiling as his muscles tightened with almost a shiver as she did so. Feeling emboldened, she curled her other hand around his erection, and she was rewarded when he sucked in his breath sharply, groaned, and shifted his hips towards her. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, and she moaned, squeezing him rhythmically. He made a growling noise in his throat, and his right hand traced the scar Bellatrix's knife had left on her neck, gently following it on to her collarbone, then further down to her breasts, where the evidence of Dolohov's hex could still be felt running between them and looping around her ribcage. His lips followed his fingers, slowly, gently, surely, licking and nibbling and sucking.

As he moved down her body, she buried her hands in his hair, cradling the back of his head and writhing beneath him as her pleasure levels rose to previously unknown heights.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to be rational. Hermione squirmed in his arms once more as he inched lower and lower. He kissed her belly, in the delicate spot on the inside of her hip, and hooked his fingers into the tops of her Transfigured knickers, tugging them gently, but firmly, downwards. She lifted her hips and squirmed to help him to get rid of them, and then her eyes rolled backwards in her head as she felt him kiss her *there*. Without thinking, she parted her legs and felt him settle between her thighs.

*Who is this man?* A few days ago, he had been a memory, a connection to the most horrific time in her life. Watching him die as she knelt over him had been a defining moment in her existence; discovering the reality of the contribution he had made to the Order's victory, the depth of his sacrifice, the misery of his earlier life, the abuse that he had suffered (and the fact that it had not broken his resolve) had only deepened her regard for him.

But here and now in this moment, she realised that there had been more. He had become an obsession; she wanted to remember him, and she needed others to understand him. She had wanted to rescue his reputation, his legacy, and as she tied this desire to her own life, to her own career, she could now see what others tried to point out to her. When she had started sending copies of her articles and papers to Minerva, her friend had asked her about the dedication note, and Hermione had not been able to answer her. It had been inexplicable, but now she knew. She needed a tangible connection to him, and to see his initials in print, linked to her own name and her work, seemed to be a natural thing, a necessary thing. Her feelings for her little glass amulet, too, were part of that desire to have a connection, no matter how tenuous, with her dead professor.



Snape made a particularly thoughtful move with his tongue, and Hermione was abruptly transported back to reality. "Ohhhh, yesss," she moaned, moving her hips in rhythm with his actions. She reared up, reached down, and tangled her fingers in his hair, trying to draw him closer, harder. He began to hum or growl against her, and Hermione revelled in the additional sensations that it brought and fell back onto the cushions. She was going to climax soon; a burning and insatiable thrill was passing through her stomach, swelling her chest with the sensation. She felt a rush of blood to her neck and face, and she began to tremble uncontrollably as her orgasm exploded through her. She arched her body off the bed and dragged her hands through the bed covers as she moaned her release.

Through a haze, she felt him climb slowly and rather awkwardly up the bed to settle beside her, his cock still hard and his skin burning hot. She cupped his face in one hand, brushing a lock of his still-wet hair out of his eyes and behind his ear. She felt him smile and caressed his roughened cheek with her fingers.

"That was....," her voice cracked and became silent. She could still feel the aftershocks of her orgasm settling through her stomach and through the flush in her cheeks. She stroked his face again, and then she leaned forward to kiss him. He tasted sweet and musky, and she groaned once more when his clever fingers began to feel her tender nub as he kissed her. She caught his hand with hers. "Too soon, too much," she said breathlessly. "Let me...." She took him once again in her hand, stroking him firmly and rhythmically as he began to shift and move his hips in little circular movements under her hand.

Soon, his kisses became more frantic and demanding, and she felt him move over her body until he rested between her legs. She could not see much of him in the darkness, but she could feel his trembling body and hear the catch in his breathing as he fought for control.

"Hermione... are you ready?" he asked, and his voice sounded deep and scratched by emotion. She reached down and took him in her hand, swiping him through her slick folds to show him that she was more than prepared. She let a slight chuckle escape her.

"Oh, yes," she said, and he plunged home.

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"Harry, darling...." Helen Granger's voice betrayed a wealth of emotions as she crushed him in her arms. Beside her, her husband Robert was standing numbly at Hermione's hospital cot, staring down at his daughter's pale, lifeless visage.

Harry returned Helen's hug fiercely, trying to convey in his embrace all that he could. Helen released him and sank down into Harry's vacated bedside seat. She, too, searched Hermione's face with worried eyes and reached out and sought her husband's hand.

Gabrielle and Alberto stood quietly behind the chair. Both of them looked shattered, and Harry knew that they had expended a huge amount of magical energy in Apparating the Grangers to Naples in such a short period of time. Gabrielle was almost swaying with exhaustion. Harry noticed that Alberto was holding her arm underneath her elbow.

"How is she? Has there been any change?" Robert Granger's voice was rough from lack of sleep. Harry shook his head.

"What have the doctors said?" Helen Granger whispered, holding tightly to her daughter's hand.

Harry frowned. "Not much, I'm afraid. They do not know why she won't wake up, nor can they explain how she came to be so badly injured. A nurse came in a few minutes ago to check on her, but all she did was look at these print-outs and sign the form at the end of the bed." Harry left out the part about her horrified reaction to his presence, her panicked threat to call hospital security (he assumed they had been called, anyway, through her near hysterical body language), and his hurried Obliviate and Disillusionment before she withdrew.

"Could it be... you know... something to do with *your world*?" Helen's voice was very quiet.

Harry shrugged. "Possibly," he said. "I dunno, Mrs Granger. But I think it's important that we let the Healers take a look in St Mungo's, so I've arranged for a Portkey to take us there straight away. The Healers should be here in a few moments to do the transfer."

Robert Granger's face flushed. "She took herself out of your world," he said pugnaciously. "She wanted nothing more to do with it after the war and what she had to do. She was living a normal life. Why should we trust your hocus-pocus to heal her?"

"Robert...." Helen squeezed her husband's hand, but he shook it free.

"No, Helen! I want to talk to a doctor before we start vanishing off to some sort of wizard's voodoo hut."

"St Mungo's is a hospital..."

"I don't bloody care! I want to talk to a doctor, not a, a..."

"Look!" Gabrielle's alarm voice cut through Robert Granger's rising tones.

Their attention had been on each other, but with Gabrielle's shout, all eyes returned to Hermione. A warm, bluish glow was slowly rising from her chest. Her lips were still pale, but they seemed to move for a moment, and her fingers tightened perceptibly into the sheets on either side of her body as her body arched slightly off the bed. The machine measuring her pulse and other vital signs began to increase the frequency and pitch of its noise. After a few seconds, during which time the machine by her side emitted a screeching whine, the bluish light faded, the frequency and volume of the machine's beeping decreased, and her body slumped back into stillness.

"What was all that about?" asked Mr Granger in a shocked voice, his face slack with surprise.

"I don't know, Robert," Helen Granger said unsteadily, "but I am sure it was magical." She squeezed her husband's hand again. "Love, she needs to be in a place where they understand... what we've just seen so that they can help her."

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Slowly, Severus Snape came to consciousness. He knew it was nearly dawn. It was his habit to wake before the household to check on his potions, to take a bath, or to go out into the city to conduct his business. He felt deliciously *uncomfortable*. His body was warm, relaxed, and pleasantly thrumming with energy; his arm was wrapped possessively about a warm, comfortable form, his nose buried in a cloud of her hair....

*Merlin's tits!* He was suddenly wide awake in the darkness of his bedchamber, his heart thundering against his ribcage, his body tense. Not trusting himself to breathe, he carefully slid his right arm backwards from underneath her pillow and propped himself up on his elbow to look down on her face in the pre-dawn light. *Hermione*. Oh, gods. *What happened here?*

The witch in question made a soft, contented noise, and shifted backwards against him, nestling once again into the warmth of his chest. Severus froze, looking down at her, trying to see her face in the darkness. In the dim glow of the pre-dawn, he could see the flutter of her dark eyelashes, the smoothness of her skin on her cheek, her jutting shoulder, and as his eyes travelled lower to the swell of her breast, her upper ribs, her hip....

He shivered slightly. It was a little chilly on his back. Experimentally, he ran his fingertips lightly along her flank and felt gooseflesh rise under them. Frowning, he looked towards the base of the bed and saw his blanket kicked to the bottom of the mattress. With a slight wave of his hand, the edge of the blanket slid up their bodies and into his hand. Gently, he tugged it over her body and was rewarded as another sigh escaped her lips, and she snuggled down further. A strange wave of tenderness crept over him as he regarded the young woman in his bed. He wanted to protect and cherish her. She had seen him at his most vulnerable and had offered herself to him without hesitation. He remembered how delicious she had tasted, how responsive she had been to his touch, and how utterly breathtaking it had felt to be embraced by her along

his length as he had finally moved inside her. He felt a peculiar sensation in his belly at the memory of their lovemaking, a tightening and *reaching*, and realised that he was becoming hard again against her.

He was not sure how long he had lasted the previous night, but he knew that almost as soon as he had reached his completion he had fallen into a deep and restful sleep. A slight feeling of anxiety began to crush his earlier confidence. *Did she enjoy it?* He had no idea. He had not even waited to see that she had... *But she* did, *didn't she...? Before...?* He told himself to stop being such an insecure idiot. Memories flooded his mind of her arching under him, her grabbing his back with her strong hands, her moaning his name as he thrust into her, and he grinned a huge smile of satisfaction and pride. He was unaccustomed to such emotions, and they immediately triggered more memories of yesterday.

Pertus. *Oh, no, no.* The potion and his lab... the earthquake... Marcus... the volcano... Sabazios.

He sighed and looked down again at the lovely young woman in his bed. No time for self-indulgence. He had to assess the damage to his laboratory and determine their next course of action. Gently, he began to wiggle free so he could slip away from the bed. As he moved, he caught a whiff of their combined smell, a delicious, musky scent, and his cock bobbed hopefully in response. He flushed again and stood. First, he needed a quick wash and some clothes. Grabbing his old black tunic from a bench at the side of the room, he cast one final look at Hermione, still asleep and curled up under his blanket, before quietly moving into the courtyard and descending the steps to his bath suite.

The bath filled quickly, and the magical sconces illuminated the room with their customary dancing light. Snape bathed efficiently, scrubbing his underarms and belly with vigour. His ribs felt completely healed, and he had a strange, *extraordinary* soaring feeling in his chest. He felt confident and strong, ready to face the trials of the day. He turned to get out of the water, and his eyes fell on a glittering object lying on top of Hermione's discarded and filthy *stola* from last night.

He got out of the bath and picked up a towel, absently swiping it across his body to dry himself off, and approached the glittering thing. He could not quite make out what it was, as it was half-buried in the clothing. When he reached down to pick it up, however, he knew what it was instantly. He held the object up to the light. It was smaller than he remembered, and she had attached it to a chain he did not recognise, but it was certainly his mother's perfume vial.

It was his Horcrux.

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The Healers at St Mungo's were thoughtful, intelligent, caring, and completely bemused by the injury sustained by patient number 4AS3D246738, Granger, Hermione Jean. Robert Granger paced the corridor of the magical hospital, running his hand through his frizzy brown hair and trying to remain as calm as possible in front of his wife and his daughter's odd friends.

They were on the fourth floor of what appeared, from the outside, to be an abandoned red brick department store. Robert's stomach had still not settled from the Portkey experience, and he had refused the sandwich Helen had offered him a short while ago.

When the Healers had grabbed Robert's hand and had pushed it onto what looked suspiciously like a used bedpan, he had felt an uncomfortable twisting and spinning sensation, and he had found himself spiralling around Hermione's inert form. He clung for dear life to Helen's hand on the one side, his other hand caught in the grip of one of the Healers on the other. In front of him, Harry Potter appeared to be completely in control of the situation, cycling his legs carefully while remaining upright, his left hand gently lying atop Hermione's leg. As Robert fell, seemingly through thin air, he met Harry's eyes and saw the younger man read the concern in his face and grin reassuringly at him. They hit the pavement with a bone-jarring crunch.

Some time later, Robert found himself just as lost and powerless in the face of the magical medical profession as he had been in the hospital in Naples. The Healers were kindly people. Professor Spleen, a thin, patient elderly man, explained that they had placed Hermione under a number of spells designed to monitor her vital signs and keep her in a kind of suspended animation until they could diagnose what spell damage had caused her condition. His daughter was lying still and unmoving beneath the careful glow of what looked like a luminescent green web of magical energy that arched over her. The web pulsed like a heartbeat. There had been no repeat of the strange blue energy rush inside her since they had arrived at St Mungo's.

There was nothing to do but wait and pace. Robert darted a glance at his wife as he passed where she was sitting and could see the tension in her body, the way she was clasping her hands together and sitting ramrod straight. Beside her, talking quietly among themselves, were Harry and his wife. Adjacent to them, a strange-looking blonde girl who he remembered had an odd name. *Luna, wasn't it?* To her left sat a nervous young man, tall and brown haired, who held Luna's hand tightly in his own and who looked as uncomfortable as it was possible to be. Slumped next to them was Ron, his freckled face drawn with anxiety and concern.

Robert sighed with frustration. The Healers had no idea how long it would take the diagnostic spells to confirm the full nature of her injuries. There was nothing for him to do but to pace and wait.

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Severus held the pendant and recognised it for what it was. And he knew in that moment that what she felt for him and what he felt for her was nothing more than the pull of the Horcrux, the pieces of his soul that he had rendered and that now longed to be reunited.

Suddenly, everything became clear his ability to summon her, his attraction to her, Hermione's untamed affection for him, the strength of their mutual connection. The intense satisfaction that making love to her had brought. He was a fool... and a bastard. She had kept the perfume bottle safe, just as he had hoped. *No*, he corrected himself, full of self-loathing, *just as I had intended*. Horcruxes were made with Dark Magic, magic of need and want and selfishly dark desire. He had bound her to him with this little bottle, and in doing so, he had brought her to this place with him to die.

He wanted to smash it, but was unable to do so. He raged around the bathroom, his chest feeling as if a spike had been driven through it, his head swimming with the memories of the previous night mixed with the memories of his actions eleven years ago. She had had no control over her actions. The Horcrux had called to her and was trying to unite them both once again. Their emotions were not genuine and, therefore, not to be trusted.

He knew that if he destroyed the wretched thing it would weaken him, and he needed to be strong. He also realised, as he calmed down, that he did not have the *means* by which to destroy it. He had no Basilisk venom, no capacity to control Fiendfyre, no handy goblin-made magical sword impregnated with venom.... There was nothing further to do than control his treacherous feelings and focus on the task that lay ahead, for which he was certain he would need her help, if she would give it.

So, he left the thing where it had lain, ascended the steps to the *peristyle*, levitated Pertus' stiffened body to his new resting place in the atrium, made breakfast, and waited for the woman whom he had thought he was falling in love with to wake up.

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When Hermione stirred, she immediately knew that she was alone in the bed and it was light outside. Languorously, she stretched her naked body, feeling the bones in her spine crack into realignment and a delightful soreness, which spoke of last night's activities, spread through her groin. She ran her hand through her hair and found it to be hopelessly tangled, and she realised that someone Severus had pulled a blanket over her.

Severus.

The events of yesterday evening crashed in on her consciousness, and Hermione immediately sat up and looked about the room. She felt a sudden stab of loss, and her hand flew up between her breasts to discover that she was not wearing her pendant. A moment later, she remembered taking it off in the bathroom before.... Her face coloured with the memories that flooded in then, but she refused to feel ashamed. He had needed comfort, and she had certainly enjoyed the enthusiasm and ardour of his

affections.

She stretched out her hand and called for her wand. Some moments later, it was nestled in her hand. Then she called for her pendant and slipped it over her head, revelling in the familiar comfort of its weight around her neck and on her body. She really knew she must offer it back to him. *But not just yet*, she told herself, feeling that familiar hum of connection and security it had always brought to her.

There were noises outside in the *peristyle*. She got out of bed and wrapped the blanket around her body, ready to go in search of some clothing.

When she emerged into the sunlight, her first sight was Severus setting a table with bread, fruit and cheeses. He saw her as soon as she came out of his room, and he stood up stiffly, not quite meeting her eyes. She smiled at his apparent nervousness and felt a flood of affection for him ripple through her body.

"Good morning," she said, holding the blanket about her firmly. Snape seemed to suffer a moment of indecision, but he smiled faintly at her and returned the greeting.

She looked about her to the couch where they had laid Pertus out and found that it was no longer there. She looked at him but did not need to ask the question.

"I have moved him to the *atrium*," Severus explained softly. "He will rest there until we can cremate him later today."

"Cremate him...?" Hermione queried gently.

Snape scowled. "I don't want him dug up in two thousand years' time by some Muggle archaeology student and put out on display for tourists," he spat derisively.

Hermione flinched. *Ouch, that hurt*, she thought, and she drew herself together. "How are you feeling?" she asked and immediately regretted such an obvious question, as he shot her a defensive look of guilt mingled with regret.

"I am *feeling* like we have to get on with our plans, Miss Granger, if we are to prevent more unnecessary bloodshed in the future," he said. Then he straightened and looked more keenly at her, his face colouring.

"I... I apologise for my actions last night," he ground out eventually. "You must understand that I was somewhat... overwhelmed by circumstances. I took advantage of you, of this..." he gestured between them with his hand "...this, this *connection* between us."

Hermione took a deep breath and let it out in a controlled way. "It's alright, Severus, I understand," she said evenly. "I had a good time. I hope you enjoyed it, too." *Damn*, she thought, *damn, damn, damn...*

Snape harrumphed and coloured up again, ducking his head once more to avoid her speculative look. His body language eased a little, and she thought that it might have been with relief. Somehow, that had made her feel even worse. She needed to pull herself together. *Come on, Hermione, you knew what last night was; you're not a teenager anymore*, she chided herself.

She felt her hand clutching at the glass pendant for comfort through the folds of the blanket. She had only known him like this for a few days; how could she have thought that anything deeper was going on? She saw Snape's gaze rest on her hand as it grasped the pendant for a moment and saw his brow furl into a faint scowl.

"We have a very dangerous task to accomplish this morning. It is something I had hoped to avoid having to do again," he stated flatly, and she immediately felt a nervous cramp in her stomach. "But the attack on my potions laboratory wrecked the current batch of Metamorphmagus Potion, so it must be remade. The active ingredient is difficult to acquire, and I would... I would benefit from your help in the matter." His voice was so stiff and formal again.

Hermione longed for the more relaxed Snape from the walk through the city and the party afterwards. She longed even more for the considerate and passionate lover and the comfort she had felt in his arms. She cast an eye at him again as he turned his head slightly, and she saw, with a flash of pride that thrilled her, a purplish bruise on the soft skin of his neck where she had bitten him the night before. He appeared not to have seen it. *No mirrors*, she realised.

"Severus, what do we have to do?" She was pleased to be able to keep her tone light and businesslike.

"I have to gather the active ingredient for the Metamorphmagus Potion," he said. He frowned and stared at her uncertainly. "The active ingredient comes from the blood of a very powerful magical being. If you are willing... I need your help to bleed a Manticore."

Her eyebrows lifted in surprise, and her mind raced with a hundred questions. Manticores were considered to be so dangerous that they did not appear on the NEWT syllabus for Care of Magical Creatures. Even Hagrid was frightened of them although she remembered vaguely from her fourth-year studies that Hagrid had persuaded one of them to mate with a fire-crab (Merlin knew how) to produce Blast-Ended Skrewts.

Snape continued to speak, "The last time I had to do this, the creature proved to be... highly resistant."

She nodded, clutching the blanket around her body a little closer. "I remember your arm and ribs."

"Yes." Snape's smile twisted and he sighed once again. "It is worse than you think. We cannot use magic around the creature. For the potion to be effective, the blood must be untainted with our magic."

"Oh. Right." *Wonderful*, she thought, chewing her lower lip nervously.

"This will be dangerous, Hermione. If you are unable to help me, then I will understand."

Hermione felt a now familiar trickle of fear running through her at the tone of his voice. Her mind returned to the memory of his wounds and bruises and of Marcus' words in the garden less than twenty-four hours ago. But then she also remembered her resolve and her commitment to helping him and her much-ridiculed Gryffindor courage. Despite his coolness towards her now, the regret he clearly felt at their pairing last night, she had made a commitment to help him, and help him she would. Her back straightened, and she nodded.

"Don't be a prat, Severus. I'll just have a wash and put some clothes on, then, shall I?" she asked and left him staring after her as she returned to her bedroom to find some clothes.

## Chapter 14

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: I do not own the Potterverse. Thanks and hugs to the inspirational and brilliant beawesley2 and clairvoyant, without whom....

Severus is *still* leaping to all the wrong conclusions (rolls eyes)....

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## Chapter 14

Snape was sitting quietly by the side of the *peristyle* garden when she emerged from her rooms. She was wearing the original blue *stola* that he had transfigured from one of his old tunics and had given to Pertus to dress her in when she had first arrived in his world. She had shortened its length to just under the knee so she could move more easily. Her hair was drawn up into a messy chignon at the back of her head to keep it out of her eyes. Her wand was gripped firmly in her hand. When he raised his eyebrows at her appearance, she stuck her chin out, in what was becoming a familiar and strangely endearing gesture of defiance and challenge, before stuffing her wand into the little side pocket she had created in the skirts of the shortened dress. Everything about her radiated nervous resolution. Snape cleared his throat.

"You had better eat something before we leave," he said, his voice sounding peculiarly rough and harsh in his ears. Still not speaking, she nodded, picked up a peach, and bit into it, catching the excess juice that escaped on the back of her hand. He watched her throat flex as she swallowed, feeling an embarrassing heat beginning to blossom in his cheeks.

"What's that for?" she asked, her voice partially obscured by the fruit in her mouth. She gestured with her free hand at the hessian sack Snape was holding in his lap.

"I usually take some meat with me to distract the creature," he replied.

"Does it work?" Hermione had finished the peach quickly and ripped a piece of bread apart with her nimble fingers. Snape watched her nibble at it. He knew that it was slightly stale but palatable.

Snape shrugged. "To a degree. Eat some cheese. You need the protein."

"Such care for my welfare," she commented pointedly, raising a challenging eyebrow even as she followed his advice.

Snape scowled in response, embarrassed by both her directness and the way his body was continuing to respond to her. She bent down to pick up a fig from the basket on the table beside him, and he saw his mother's glass perfume vial swing forward around her neck as she did so, dully reflecting the early morning light in the garden.

Her throat flexed again as she swallowed another bite of fruit. Snape stared at the glass pendant as if he could make it burn away under his glare.

Gods, he regretted finding the bloody thing.

Last night had been wonderful, magnificent, and far, *far* too short-lived. He had fully intended to continue his explorations of their physical connection that morning and had lain in the bath that morning, fantasising about what he might be able to do with her and what she would perhaps want to do to *him* as well after she woke up.

He pictured her now as he had seen her last night, naked and willing in his arms, her beautiful amber eyes full of sin, her hair heavy around her shoulders and tangling in his fingers, her snatch tight, wet, and delicious.

He felt his groin begin to tense and shiver at the thoughts he was having, and his pulse began to thud heavily in his veins.

*Oh, get a bloody grip on yourself, you idiot* Because of the vial, his Horcrux, he knew that he couldn't *really* want her, nor she him; it was the dark thing he had made that she carried round her neck that was poisoning their interactions.

*Fuck.*

He breathed in deeply, steeling himself against his attraction to her, by pushing his emotions down and striving once again to build up his defensive walls. He could only imagine her horror and revulsion if she were to find out about what he had done.

"Are you okay, Severus?"

Snape was startled out of his reveries by Hermione's question. She was staring at him with a measured look that seemed to be part concern, part annoyance, and part frustration. She was clearly still angry with him for pulling away from her, but she was trying to hide it. He felt the tell-tale heat from his face that showed he was blushing again. Hermione sat down heavily beside him, and he felt the tiny hairs on his forearms rise.

"I am fine," he lied and felt a rush of anger at the situation. "Keep eating. We have to leave very soon."

He suppressed a shiver. A small, Slytherin voice in his mind asked him why on earth he was being so noble? Why didn't he ignore his precious moral code and see where this... thing... between them could lead?

He glowered. *Because it isn't real*, he told his inner Slytherin. He had spent *years* of his life yearning for someone who had not returned his affections, and he'd be damned to hell if he went there again.

*Bollocks. Fuck it.* He was ever wont to dwell on things. The sun had risen above the roof of his house and was shining directly into the garden. His hands clutched reflexively on the hessian sack in his lap. Shifting slightly in his seat, Snape withdrew a brown leather shoulder bag from beside him and ran his fingers over the smooth surface.

"What's in the bag?" She nodded her head towards the satchel, still munching on the piece of bread in her hand.

Glad of the diversion from his warring thoughts, he opened it and withdrew the modified syringe. The mechanism was made from brass, copper, and quartz crystal and measured about eight inches long and three inches wide. Inside, Snape knew, was a crystal vial, which he had laboriously crafted into a strong receptacle to hold the magical liquor from the animal.

"Once the blood is inside the syringe, it can be made safe, and we will be able to use magic around it," he explained to her. "I infused the metal around the container with sufficient strength to make it unbreakable and to protect the crystal vial inside." Unwittingly, his eyes flickered to the perfume bottle around her neck, and he felt a renewed wash of guilt overtake him.

Her eyes had grown wide, and she was staring at the thick needle jutting from the end of the syringe. It was the width of a large nail. The skin of the Manticore was thick and resisted magical and conventional attack. He had designed the instrument to be driven hard into resistant flesh. The thought of driving something into flesh, whether

resistant or not, pushed his thoughts back to her fabulous body and what he would much rather be doing at that moment *with*, and *to*, her....

He stood up abruptly, hoping to Hades that the hessian sack was sufficient to cover his overly eager body.

"Are you ready?" he snapped, slinging the leather satchel over his shoulder and feeling the heavy weight of the syringe settle on his hip. She nodded and frowned, her lips thinning. Clearly, she thought that he was being an arse.

He gestured for her to walk before him to the house's exit while he regained control over his lower anatomy.

They walked through the *atrium* and towards the front door. Passing through the entrance hall, Snape's stomach turned again as they moved past the silent body of his servant, lying on a simple trestle table. The shield he had placed over Pertus' body caused it to shimmer slightly in the morning light, which was shining through the *compluvium* in the ceiling. Snape's heart clenched once, painfully, and he realised in that moment that Hermione had also faltered in her steps. Her fingers brushed his arm in sympathy, and he felt the now desperately uncomfortable jolt of their connection. He pulled back from her as if stung and moved towards the door, opening it with his wand and gesturing for her to go through.

"*Obsere*," he muttered once they were through and standing on the street. He heard the reassuring scrape of the door bolts as they slid into place. Turning to Hermione, he saw how pale she looked under her bravado. He ground his teeth together but said nothing, setting off with determination in the direction of the amphitheatre. She fell into step beside him, seemingly now careful not to touch him as they walked.

After two junctions, he veered suddenly to his right and set off down a side street.

The city appeared to have returned to a sense of normality this morning, despite the tremor that had struck the previous night. Men with wooden shovels and small hand-drawn carts were clearing up masonry rubble. They walked past a number of builders who were advising homeowners on reconstruction and repairs. Despite himself, Snape smiled at the inventiveness and resilience of the people here. There was something impressive about the way that the citizens of this city responded to threats and challenges.

The road was narrow and shaded, with *insula* blocks packed closely together, and in typical Pompeian fashion, shops were integrated into residential dwellings along the street. There was some damage from the earthquake evident here, but it looked very much like business as usual in this area of the city. Snape steered her to a butcher's shop and bought enough lumps of meat to half-fill the sack. The meat had been well hung; there was little blood. With a small grunt of effort, he slung the sack over his shoulder.

She said nothing, but cocked her head and shot him an interrogative look.

"For the diversion," he explained curtly.

Perhaps if all went well this morning, he could call on Marcella and Conviva later that day to see if she had persuaded her husband to leave the city.

He shook his head, dismissing the thought immediately. He had to see Sabazios today with his potion offering and to assure him of his continued loyalty. He also had to check that the god was still comfortable in his *quarters*.

He knew that Sabazios would have been safe during the earthquake. Marcus had persuaded him to weave the same magical protection that he had imbued within his own house into the huge water cistern that the Thracian god was occupying.

In addition, he would have felt it if Sabazios had tried to breach the wards to leave the city. For now, the situation was as it had been.

*What of Marcus?* A deep anger coursed through his body at the thought of his one-time friend. He hoped that he would come across the treacherous, murdering bastard again, but he was sure that the *Aedile* was long gone. For a moment, he entertained the thought that Marcus had run to Sabazios to drip poisoned lies in the god's ears about Snape. It was possible of course. Snape's heart beat a little faster at the prospect. Then he clamped down on his fear, ruthlessly pushing it to one side. If Marcus had run to Sabazios, then so be it. *Deal with the dragon once it's out of the egg*, Snape reasoned grimly. For now, they had a Manticore to bleed.

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"Where is the creature?" Hermione asked after a while, a little out of breath. They were walking quickly, and she was struggling to keep up.

"They are kept with the other wild beasts for the amphitheatre show in the *vivarium* on the outskirts of the city." Snape spoke in a matter-of-fact way, and he slowed his pace marginally as he responded to her.

Hermione took a breath and nodded she had heard of these zoo-like holding areas, often underground, where exotic animals from all over the Empire were held until the wild beast shows that were so popular among the Romans could be held.

She looked again across at him as they walked along. He was studiously avoiding meeting her eye, and once again, she felt an acute stab of remorse and irritation at his changed attitude towards her.

She felt drawn to him, both physically and emotionally. He radiated a kind of physical confidence that seemed at odds with his sometimes-diffident attitude. He had a brilliant mind, and yet the sarcasm and wit, which he had used to such cruel effect when she was a child, seemed to have been mediated and mellowed. He looked at her with such intensity, and on the few occasions when he had smiled at her, she had been thrilled by the connection between them. It seemed to be she cast about for a way to describe it *private... intimate*.

She reflected with a pang of regret and a deep roiling frustration: quite apart from anything else, it was certainly the best sex she'd had in years, if *ever*. Ron had been generally enthusiastic and energetic, but sex with him had been vigorous and earnest and, at times, quite satisfying, but it had increasingly lacked that deeper sense of connection that she had yearned for. Since she had broken up with Ron, sexual opportunities had been few and mostly unsatisfactory.

Last night, she had found Snape surprisingly tender and gentle. She had been hugely surprised that he had been keen to pleasure her before himself (*not something that could ever have been said for Ron*, she thought dryly), and he had touched her with a trembling sense of hesitancy, which had been both maddening and thrilling in equal measures. There had been a constrained vulnerability in his actions, even as he reached his own release, which had made her virtually come apart with pleasure. The little contented sigh that he had let out before rolling gently to his side and snuggling against her had been even more remarkable.

She'd had a wonderful time, and she was convinced that he had also enjoyed it. She had relished his physical attention, and despite his seeming regret about what had happened, she sensed that their weird connection still existed. She let her breath escape in frustration. *So why did he pull away this morning?*

Well, for some reason he had, and she would be damned if she were going to throw herself at him, or worse, insist that they *talk* about it. *Stupid Slytherin*, she thought, *what are you playing at?* Determined not to descend into a needy and frustrated condition, she forced her mind to return to the challenge ahead as they stomped along the uneven streets.

"When I walked around the city, I went to the amphitheatre," she said, breaking the silence. "I didn't see *avivarium* when I was there."

Snape nodded. "I'm not surprised. The entrance is hidden at the rear of the structure, and the holding pens are underground," he said flatly.

"Right." She shrugged, accepting his explanation. There were extensive remains in Rome, beneath the Colosseum, of holding cages for wild animals for the beast hunts. It was widely known that dangerous animals were stored in *vivaria* close to the amphitheatres, even out here in the provinces and the Pompeian amphitheatre was so large it could have accommodated such a thing. To Hermione's knowledge, the Pompeian amphitheatre had not been extensively excavated, beyond freeing it from the debris of the volcanic eruption. It was fascinating to think that a similar subterranean set of tunnels and holding pens might be below the mighty structure. She made a mental note to research this thoroughly when she got back home.

*If I get back home.* She blinked at the sudden thought that she might never return to her modern world.

The day was blisteringly hot. Heat radiated from the stones of the street, and the smell of the sewage and other rubbish along the street was high and rank. Hermione could still see evidence of the recent quake as they walked past the *palaestra* (the training ground for gladiators to the west of the amphitheatre). Three of the tall fluted columns that partially supported the *loggia* on the southern side of the open space had collapsed. There was a small group of workmen erecting wooden scaffolding in order to support the gallery while stonemasons were busily repairing the columns and using a makeshift crane to lift the different sections of the column back into place.

When they reached the end of the *palaestra*, they swept around the corner, and once again, the Pompeian amphitheatre, huge and imposing, faced Hermione. As before, there were a number of people milling about in the square where the amphitheatre stood, some buying and selling goods and items, more just simply passing the time of day with each other. A few stalls were selling wine and food in the square.

Severus stalked past the stalls and people, walking around the western side of the building, past one of the external flights of stone steps that led into the upper stories of the seating for the amphitheatre. It was quieter here with hardly anyone in evidence.

He turned to her as they reached the southern end of the building. "Look there," he directed, indicating a pair of fir trees at the edge of the square close to the city walls. Between the two trees was a low, square brick structure measuring about five feet in width. In the centre of the side facing them was a dust-covered grating, partially obscured by a canvas sheet.

Hermione squinted at it. "What's that?"

"An entrance to the *vivarium*," he replied. "The animals are taken in through a different, larger entrance outside the walls so there's no risk of them escaping and running amok in the city. This way in is for the *magistri* the animal trainers and attendants." He frowned. "Or, of course, it's also a way out an escape route."

"Is anyone else going to be down there?" she asked.

"It's not in use during this time of year," Snape answered. "It's too hot for beast shows. They only put on about four or five *venatio* a year, usually during the winter or spring.

"The *Aedile*'s office controls access to these tunnels and holding pens," Snape said as he continued to walk stiffly around the walls of the amphitheatre.

"Where did the Manticore come from?"

"Greece. It was captured in Northern Thrace. It had been scheduled to be exhibited in the Colosseum, but Marcus diverted it here. Presumably those transporting them thought that it was some form of exotic lion. What do you know about Manticores?"

He had slipped into 'professor' mode again, but she found that she didn't care. Eagerly, she scanned her memory for the information. She had not continued to study Care of Magical Creatures at school beyond the third year, so most of her knowledge had been gleaned through the hours of additional reading she had undertaken both in Hogwarts' library and later at her university in Australia.

"They have the body of a lion, the tail of a scorpion, and the face of a human," she began, remembering a particularly useful book she'd bought for her lessons her third year, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. "They are notoriously difficult to train or to communicate with, although Hagrid managed to do so. Medieval writers thought that their voices were harsh, like trumpets, but later scholars think that there is evidence which points to some sort of telepathic abilities speaking directly into your mind. Their skin is resistant to spells and very, very tough. Manticores are classified as being sentient life forms, but their tendency towards extreme violence has meant that they are categorised as creatures rather than magical beings...." Her voice trailed away.

Snape's mouth had quirked into a small smile. "Impressive, *Miss Granger*," he allowed, nodding his head towards her with irony.

Unabashed, she stared back at him, daring him to call her a know-it-all, and then she flicked her glance towards the barely concealed entrance to the *vivarium*.

"How are we going to get in unnoticed?" she asked, unconsciously dropping her voice to a whisper. He flashed her a look of amused exasperation, then turned and drew her closer to the outside walls of the amphitheatre.

Around the outside of the building at regular intervals were tall arched alcoves, measuring almost twenty feet in height and about seven feet across. Hermione felt Snape steer her into one of them and press her into the shadow of the wall. He froze in place, holding her near to him and intently watching the passing of people and animals in the square before them.

In the enclosed space of the alcove, she was intensely aware of his body against hers, the sweet-sour smell from his skin, and the clamouring of her physical reaction to him. She knew that she was breathing more heavily and berated herself for her foolishness. *Concentrate, for goodness sakes! This is going to be dangerous. Stop dreaming like a lovesick mooncalf!* Trying to ease this uncomfortable proximity, she shifted her body away from his. He seemed to be waiting for something. He wasn't moving or looking at her. He simply held her by the upper arms and looked over her left shoulder out onto the square. *What is he doing?*

Seemingly oblivious to her pathetic squirming, Severus looked around again and then flicked his wand. Hermione felt the cool sensation of the Disillusionment Charm flow over her. As she stared at him, he quirked an eyebrow and gradually faded from view as well.

*You're a witch, Hermione,* she groaned inwardly. *For Merlin's sake, please start thinking like one!*

She felt his hand travel lightly to her collarbone, then slide down her shoulder and arm once more. Rather than have him proprietarily take her arm again, she raised her hand up to clasp his. She was pleased when she felt his fingers tighten, accepting her hold. A few more seconds passed in silence, and Hermione felt his breath fall on the skin of her neck and collarbone.

Just as she was about to reach closer, answering the call of her insistent longing for him, he made a slight sound in his throat and tightened his grip on her fingers, silently guiding her out from the alcove and over to the grate between the two trees.

The spell was well cast, but like all Disillusionment Charms, the results were not perfect. She could make out a faint shimmer, which indicated the outline of his body. With luck, the heat of the day, and the faint haze it was also creating, would serve to hide them further. His hand left her arm, and Hermione saw the piece of canvas that was draped partially over the grate lift slightly and slowly pull to the side. There was a further pause, and then she jumped slightly when she heard the lock of the grate snap open and the bolts securing it in place slide backwards.

"Hermione," his quiet voice was tense, "are you ready?"

She blushed as she remembered the last time he had used those exact words with her and was so grateful that he could not see her reaction.

Keeping her voice neutral and steady, she said, "Let's get on with it, Severus."

After one final pause, during which she was sure that both of them looked around the square to check that the area around the entrance to the *vivarium* was unobserved, Snape lifted the heavy entrance grate and ushered her inside, shutting it carefully behind them. Hermione shivered as the heavy bolts on the grate slid quietly back into place.

They were in.

The corridor they were walking through was dank and dark. Snape held his wand aloft in front of them, and its pale, bluish glow illuminated the brick-lined tunnel for about twenty feet ahead. The smell of damp and decay filled her nostrils, competing with a high and sharp fecal smell, as they progressed downwards at a gentle angle. The tunnel was narrow, about five feet across, and Hermione bumped against him as they walked silently along. She could hear nothing apart from the beating of blood in her ears and the harsh sound of their breathing. It grew colder the deeper they went, and Hermione could feel the hairs rising on her arms as she walked. Snape did not seem inclined to talk, and she grew ever more nervous as they made their way along the length of the entrance to the *vivarium*.

"Severus," she began and was shocked at how her voice seemed to echo loudly in the corridor; she held up her hand to forestall his angry shush. "Sorry," she hissed, modulating her voice to a whisper, "but... How are we going to do this?"

Snape put a hand on her arm. "Wait a moment, and I'll explain," he murmured back as they stepped into a large room at the end of the entrance corridor. The room was square with at least three exits leading off it. Hermione watched as Snape walked across the room to a torch that was set against the back wall. He picked it up and muttered, "*Facem Inflamare*," and watched as little blue flames danced along the torch's length and set the wadding of cloth at its end on fire. Illuminated by the light of the torch, Hermione saw Snape give her a provocative stare and raise his left eyebrow.

She grinned in response. "How did you know?" she asked quietly with a faint chuckle.

"I had no idea at the time," he replied. "I was just trying to stop that idiot Quirrell in his attempt to kill the saviour of the wizarding world before Vector pushed me over and shouted something about my clothes being on fire. It was only later in the staff room that the news of your... precocious talents... came to light."

She pulled a face. "It seems to be a little late to say sorry," she whispered.

He regarded her steadily and not without humour, but then his face clouded a little in the firelight. "It's alright," he muttered. "That was nothing compared to what bloody Longbottom did in your third year."

"Ahh," she said sympathetically, remembering the Boggart. "Yes... well.... You weren't exactly friendly towards him, were you? No wonder he was terrified of you."

Snape snorted quietly. She thought that he might have been blushing, but it was so hard to tell in the limited, dancing light.

"You didn't have to sit through Lupin's account of the event in the staff room later that evening," he said, and there was real awkwardness in his body language now. Hermione felt an increasingly familiar surge of empathy rush through her body, and she leaned forward to touch him, but he had walked over to another torch and touched the first one to it, lighting the second. Immediately, the level of light rose in the room. Setting the two torches into place in the walls, Snape beckoned her over to the centre of the room.

He squatted on his haunches and indicated that she do the same. Using the handle of his wand, he quickly sketched out a rectangle in the fine gravel on the floor with lines radiating outwards into a series of corridors and smaller chambers. Snape was all business now.

"The Manticore is held in a pen about a hundred yards north of here," he explained, drawing a cross in the centre of the rectangle. "This corridor *here*," he said, indicating the crude map on the floor, "leads down to the cage. Once we are ready, I want you to distract the creature from outside the cage while I enter the enclosure from *this* side entrance." Severus stabbed his wand at the diagram on the floor.

"If you can keep its attention for about a minute, I will be able to get everything I need. The animal's skin is not very sensitive, so if I am not seen, the process will be straightforward. Remember that we cannot use magic at any time until the blood is safely locked inside the syringe; otherwise, the blood will be tainted."

Snape sat back on his haunches and pulled the leather satchel that was slung over his shoulders around in front of him. Flipping up the front flap of the bag, Snape withdrew the metal-clad syringe from it and showed it to her. It was about eight inches long and three inches wide with a thick needle at one end and an elliptical handle at the opposite end. Surrounding the translucent phial of quartz at its centre was a brass sleeve in two layers like an interlocking net. Hermione rotated the syringe in her hand, marvelling at the fine workmanship of the mechanism.

Gently, Snape plucked it from her hands. "You push the needle into the vein and then pull on this handle." He demonstrated to her, pulling the plunger smoothly out. Then he took the syringe in both hands and twisted it sharply. There was an audible metallic click, the open areas of the brass sleeve moved in his hands and meshed together, and the quartz was entirely enclosed by the metal.

"Once the metal is closed around the crystal phial at the centre of the syringe, the blood is sealed and, therefore, protected, and magic may be used around the container."

"Just like that," Hermione said, a note of almost hysteria in her voice.

"Just like that," Severus confirmed, his eyes burning into hers. Everything he had not said was in that look. Hermione took a deep breath and nodded.

They both stood, and Severus handed her the bag of meat before walking over to the far side of the room and picking up one of the torches from its sconce on the wall. There, hanging from wooden pegs on the wall, were a series of leather straps and some leather cuirasses. Hermione recognized them as being the standard protective armour for the *bestiarii* the beast masters who fought animals in the arena. Efficiently, he shrugged into one of the cuirasses and wrapped leather straps around his wrists and forearms to form some sort of protection.

When Snape was ready, he turned and smiled at her again tightly before indicating that she should follow him through the doorway to his left. Taking the torch from her fingers, he led her into the darkness.

## Chapter 15

Chapter 16 of 32

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She

has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: Thank you, as always, to beawesley2 and clairvoyant for their superb alpha and beta skills. Thank you also to those of you who take the time to review this story I love hearing what you think! Any characters you recognise are not mine (all hail to JKR), and I make no money from this work. Right. Time for some action....

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## Chapter 15

"No change." Robert Granger sat down heavily next to his wife in the fourth-floor waiting area. Helen said nothing in response, and as he glanced over to look at her, he realised that she had finally fallen asleep. Her head was lolling back against the high back of the chair in which she was sitting. Robert felt a familiar rush of fondness for his lovely wife. Helen was thoughtful, pragmatic, and quietly resolute while he was emotional and less inclined to think things through. He watched her chest rise and fall gently, his eyes drawn to the little golden locket that she always wore around her neck. It had been a gift from his mother on their wedding day, and Robert knew that it contained a tiny skein of Hermione's hair, lovingly clipped from her head when she had been only a few hours old. He smiled at the memory.

Hermione had taken after him in so many ways physically, but emotionally she was her mother's daughter. Robert had not been surprised in the least that she had asked the Sorting Hat to place her in Gryffindor once his daughter had explained the essential qualities of each house. He knew that his brilliant and beautiful daughter epitomised bravery, compassion, emotional strength, and courage under duress.

He frowned, turning his head to look at the corridor to his right. His daughter was in the isolation room two doors down on the left, and he could still see the doorway to her chamber from where he was sitting. Professor Spleen was due to make his rounds in a few minutes, and Robert had been ushered out of his daughter's room by a nurse who was about to give Hermione a quick bed bath.

"I'm sure that she will come back to us soon, Robert." The dreamy voice of the strange Irish girl cut through his thoughts, and he found himself staring hard at the odd, pale features of Miss Lovegood. She stared right back at him, and he shifted uncomfortably under her regard, shrugging his shoulders and feeling utterly helpless.

"I just wish I knew what is wrong with her, why she is like this," he muttered quietly, trying to keep his voice down because of his sleeping wife beside him. There was no one else in the waiting area. Harry and Ginny had returned to their children, Ron was taking a break, and Neville had gone back to work in the Ministry.

Luna smiled calmly. "Some things are just meant to happen," she said in that weird singsong voice of hers. "It's probably just Wrackspurts again. They get inside your brain, you know, and send you a bit fuzzy."

Robert furrowed his brow in befuddled concern, but before he could ask what the hell 'Wrackspurts' were, his attention was caught by the approach of Professor Spleen and a small group of student Healers along the hallway.

Self-consciously, Robert stood up, ready to hear what the Healer had to say.

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Her feet were scuffing slightly on the harsh dust of the floor, and the hessian sack was heavy in her hands, as Hermione followed Snape slowly down the narrow brick corridor. After they had gone about eighty paces along the tunnel, Severus stopped, turned to her, and placed his finger on his lips. Silently, he handed her the torch and gestured that she should go on straight ahead while he was going to take a side tunnel to his right. Nodding in understanding, Hermione held the torch aloft and continued to follow the corridor in front of her. Soon, all she could hear were her own footfalls and breathing.

In front of her, the passageway abruptly turned to the left and opened into a much wider space. It was roughly square and about twenty feet across. Individual cells radiated out from the central room on three sides.

She was at the holding pens.

The torch in her hand sent flickering shadows against the red brick walls of the central holding chamber. The room was dank and cold, and she could not see which cell held the animal.

She stood, shivering and uncertain, in the centre of the room. The rough material of the bag burned her fingers as she allowed it to slide to the floor. Her mouth was dry. She could see nothing in the cage in front of her, but she slowly became aware of a quiet snuffling noise on her right that was turning into a humming sound. Turning towards that direction, she heard the purring sound again and was drawn towards the noise.

The light from the torch flickered across her sight and distorted her vision. Peering into the cage in front of her, she could see that the space was very large, so much so that the light of the torch did not seem to reach into the corners of the enclosure. There were brick pillars about ten feet apart splitting the holding cell in two, and these further impeded her view of the interior.



*Something* was occupying the cage in front of her. She could hear it moving about in the shadows at the back of the cell. Screwing up her eyes with the effort of staring into the gloom, she thought that she could see a narrow doorway midway down the right side of the brick walls of the room with a dark wooden door.

A further whining and dragging noise brought her attention back to the centre of the room. She remembered her purpose she had to distract the creature to enable Severus to enter the cell in the first place!

Chiding herself for her inaction, she dragged the bag in front of her and wondered exactly what kind of distraction she could provide that would enable Severus to approach the creature and jab a thick needle into its flesh without it realising he was there.

She noticed a sconce, crudely formed in the front of the cage door, and with shaking hands, she pushed the handle of the torch into it. The cage door rattled and creaked as she pushed the flame into its holder.

A high keening noise emerged from the shadows, and a terrible feeling of sadness and profound yearning suddenly overwhelmed Hermione. Her skin prickled with the approach of magic, and she knew that the occupant of the cell was aware of her presence.

Slowly, her eyes still fighting to see into the darkness in the cell, she began to make out the moving body of a large animal. It walked hesitantly forward into the illumination of the torchlight.

The Manticore's pelt was tawny red in colour. It padded towards her on paws as large as dinner plates, scratching the dust and grit of the floor as its front paws rotated slightly inwards, as lions' do. The great stinging tail of the Manticore rose up behind it, a darker colour than its body. The tip of the tail, just like that of a scorpion, glistened in the torchlight, and it bobbed gently as the animal walked. The tail held deadly poison and was the Manticore's preferred method for killing its prey.

Instinctively, Hermione took a step back, carefully measuring the gap between the bars of the cage doors could the tail get through and reach her? She wasn't sure. Hermione's breath caught involuntarily as her attention was drawn to the creature's face. She had seen wizarding photographs of the beasts, as well as mediaeval Muggle manuscripts' descriptions, but the reality was very disturbing.

The Manticore's face was humanoid, its features that of a bearded man with tangled eyebrows and matted facial hair. Its mouth was wider than a man's, however, and she watched in frozen panic as it opened its maw and slowly rolled a fat pink tongue across the edge of cruelly serrated teeth. She was trembling with fear and adrenaline as she cowered behind the safety of the metal cage doors. Hermione stared at the creature's face and then realised, as it drew ever closer to where it stood, that there was something unusual in the way in which it looked and behaved.

As it approached her more closely, she could see that the creature was shambling and tentative in the way that it moved. It walked slowly, swinging its heavy head and thick neck from side to side as if it was scanning the room before it. It was sniffing the air, making an unpleasantly thick, glutinous noise as it did so. Hermione's attention was drawn again to the frightful, bobbing sting cresting over the Manticore's back. The tail was black, scaled, and jointed. The tip was weeping a viscous liquid onto the animal's back, which, in turn, she now saw as it crept out of the shadows and towards the sack filled with high-smelling meat, was rubbed raw in places. Hermione frowned. There were scars and cuts on its cheeks as well, and the irises reflected a pale, milky pearlescence. It was blind.

She felt herself relax fractionally. That evened the odds somewhat. She chuffed out a quiet breath of annoyance *Why hadn't Severus mentioned anything about the creature's infirmity?*

The creature sniffed the air and appeared to smile before its expression twisted into pitiable sorrow and it keened again.

*"Issss food...?"* With a jolt, she realised that she could hear its thoughts.

The historical evidence for Manticore behaviour was slight *presumably because few people survived their encounters with them*, she thought grimly. Some chroniclers reported that the creatures could speak like humans, others that their voices were like harsh trumpets. Manticores were not technically classed as sentient beings because of the extreme violence of their behaviour, but Hermione could *feel* the creature's pain and uncertainty. *If they can speak*, she asked herself, *can they be reasoned with?*

Without thinking, she put her hand out towards the animal before feeling rather foolish and pulling it back again. Instead, she thrust her hand into the sack at her feet and withdrew a lump of meat. She tossed it into the cage, and it landed with a wet thud at the creature's feet.

Sniffing the offering delicately, the Manticore bent its neck and front legs and licked it. Its tongue made a rasping noise as it dragged across the meat. After a pause, apparently satisfied by its initial taste, the Manticore quickly lifted the joint and consumed it hungrily. Once it had swallowed, it stood very still as if waiting for her next move.

*"More food...?"* the creature wondered in her mind, looking at once pitiful and defenceless. It took a step towards the cage door, no doubt smelling the hessian sack in her numb fingers, but its actions were tentative and stumbling.

Hermione wondered if the wizarding world had simply misunderstood these creatures. There seemed little in this beast's behaviour to warrant the excessive warnings that were usually associated with them. *After all*, she reasoned in her mind, *Hagrid befriended one once, so why shouldn't I be able to do so?* She opened the bag at her feet again and pulled out the next lump of meat, throwing it carefully in front of the creature. She watched with satisfaction how it so delicately accepted her offering.

With a shock, she suddenly saw her professor ghosting into view out of the dancing shadows created behind the beast as it bent down to eat the next piece of meat. She had almost forgotten why they were there. Snape's face was tightly drawn with concentration. He was moving delicately and slowly, working his way with gradual stealth towards the creature's flank. She was struck by how fluid and graceful his movements were. In his right hand he held the syringe, which glittered brightly in the torchlight. He made no sound; she could not even hear him breathe.

The Manticore snuffled again, moving closer to her as she threw another lump of mutton on the ground in front of it. It was so close to her at the gate that she could feel the heat radiating from its skin. She was fascinated by the play of muscles under its pelt. Its tail seemed to be held so still now, curving gracefully up higher and higher over its back, its tip a glinting, obsidian black. Despite its age and infirmity, it was so beautiful and so very, very sad to see such a mighty animal trapped in such an awful place with no light, no heat, and no hope.

It finished the latest lump of meat and looked up at her. From this range, she could see the curse scars that criss-crossed its face and body, the places where its coat had been rubbed away by sleeping on the harsh grit of the floor, and the sunken cheeks and withered skin that denoted its age and poor condition.

She had always hated keeping things captive. Her pets and familiars had come and gone as they pleased. She couldn't abide Muggle zoos. Although her early adolescent campaigning zeal had been tempered by age, the sheer *wrongness* of holding animals captive for human amusement still upset her. Suddenly, she remembered the poor ancient dragon guarding the Lestranger's vault in Gringotts, its blindness and its vulnerability, and her heart swelled in response to the Manticore's plight. *Perhaps if we were to release it, it would offer us some of its blood as proper payment? Maybe it would not mind if we were to explain why we were in such desperate need of it? Manticores could speak and reason, couldn't they?*

Hermione's fingers drifted to the bars on the metal gate before her. Entranced by her emotional response to the pathetic creature, she exhaled again, pushing her hand once more outwards and towards it. It lifted its head and seemed to sense her hand hovering mere inches from its face.

And it snarled and leapt.

Hermione screamed and stumbled backwards as the seemingly quiescent tail whipped swiftly over the Manticore's head and slammed into the metal of the cage's doors. The Manticore smashed into the iron railings of the gate and set them shaking in their foundations. Savagely, it threw itself again and again against the old metal, screaming and trumpeting its frustration. The great tail flailed and stabbed through the bars, trying blindly to reach its living prey. Hermione cried out, and it answered her cry of fear with one of rage, hitting the gates once more with the full weight of its body. The torch wobbled in its sconce in the metalwork and then fell, dislodged from its position by the force of the Manticore's attack. It landed on the floor next to Hermione's feet, and she twisted her body to pick it up, scrabbling further away from the screaming creature as she did so, her breath coming fast and shallow, and terror coursing through her body.

*Where's Severus?* She suddenly realised that he was still inside the cage with the frantic animal, although it was so hard to see in the poor light and with the unpredictable and violent movements of the animal.

*Was he able to take the blood?* She didn't know, but as she peered frantically through the gloom, terrified beyond measure of the hysterical and screaming creature in front of her and the alarming way the iron gates were appearing to shift in their moorings, she saw him still beside the creature, close to its shoulder. His face was fierce in concentration still as he picked his spot in the creature's hide to jab the needlepoint.

The Manticore screamed once more and seemed to be gathering itself for another assault on the weakening metalwork of the gate. Hermione saw the bag of meat still between her and the maddened creature, and she made a grab for it, firstly pulling it towards her and then flinging it hard through the metal bars so that it hit the creature on its chest and lowered face. At the same time as she threw the bag, she saw Snape move quickly, swinging the syringe that he was holding in his right hand in a wide arc and slamming it into the side of the Manticore.

The beast was temporarily disorientated as the meat hit its chest and the needle drove home. Uttering a snarl, it snapped its head round towards Snape, who dodged out of its way and pulled the syringe's plunger back with a deft twist of his wrist. *Halfway there*, she thought breathlessly. Hermione could see dark liquid flooding the metal container, and she threw herself towards the animal and frantically waved the torch in front of her, hoping to distract the creature further by the whooshing sound of the torch and its heat, even though it couldn't see the light. It seemed to work for a moment as the Manticore's head swung around again. Hermione could see the ruined face of the creature and smell the foul stench of its breath as it screamed its frustration once more. It threw itself at the gates again with a mighty clanging crash, and the metal screeched and flexed under the weight and ferocity of the assault.

Snape reached forward, dodging the plunging body and, with one arm raised defensively against the stabbing tail, pulled at the syringe, seeking to dislodge it from the Manticore's tough pelt. The animal was ready for him, however, and with a flick of its front quarters, it sent the wizard sprawling in the filthy dust of the floor. Snape went down heavily with an "Oouff!", and the Manticore swung its body instantly and began to advance towards the sound he had made as his body had hit the floor.

Hermione screamed incoherently and hit the metal bars in front of her with the torch, desperately trying to attract the creature's attention back to her, but to no avail. It was stalking Snape now with single-minded determination.

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"Why is she moving like that?" Robert did his best to prevent his voice from betraying the panic that he was feeling. He was standing alongside Helen with the Healers in Hermione's room.

His daughter was twisting and writhing on the mattress of her hospital bed underneath the gauzy, translucent magical web.

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Severus shook his head, winded and trying to recover from landing flat on his back. Within moments, he had sucked enough air back into his lungs to be able to function, and he began to back-pedal in the dust of the floor, his feet scrabbling desperately for purchase as he sought to put as much distance between himself and the Manticore as fast as he could. His breathing was harsh and laboured, and he knew that the animal had fixed on him. He moved frantically, his heels digging into the harsh grit of the floor to propel himself away from the approaching creature.

His head was still ringing from his fall, and it was only after his senses cleared a little, thanks to the adrenaline that was coursing through his body, that he realised the gods-awful noise in the holding pen was not from inside his skull, but external to it. Hermione was shouting and bashing the iron gates to the cell with the torch to try to divert the creature's attention.

It was not working.

The Manticore was advancing towards him, saliva now dribbling from its jaws in long, glutinous streams. It could hear his movements, he realised, and so he forced himself to be still.

Lying motionless, his head throbbing, and grit from the floor working its way into the various grazes and cuts on his upper back and shoulders, he could see that the creature had temporarily lost its bearings and was, therefore, moving with greater caution in its search for him. Pushing his hair out from his eyes, Snape searched about the creature's flank for the syringe and saw that it was still hanging from the animal's side. Carefully, trying to make as little noise as possible while Hermione kept up her battering of the iron gates of the cell, Severus sat up and pulled his legs under himself so he could position himself into a low crouch. At that moment, the Manticore stopped moving towards him altogether and swung away from him and back towards the clamour Hermione was making.

He made ready to launch himself at the creature's flank to snatch the syringe and then roll out of the way. Just as he was about to leap, however, Hermione paused in her battering of the bars for no more than a second, and the sound of his feet scuffing the floor could be heard.

Immediately, the Manticore reared back on its haunches and blindly flailed a great clawed paw through the air, screaming triumphantly. Snape tried to duck out of the way, but the slashing paw connected with the left side of his head, and the wizard was picked up off his feet and thrown sideways again into one of the brick pillars in the centre of the holding pen. Pain exploded through his head and body, and everything stopped.

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Hermione saw Severus hit the brick pillar hard, fall to the floor, and lie still. Her heart froze it looked as if he had been knocked out.*Shit!* Without thinking, she yanked hard on the heavy bolt across the centre of the iron gates, and with a screeching, rending noise, she was able to pull one of the gates open. She dived into the room, heading straight for the Manticore and launching herself at the syringe that was hanging from the side of the animal. Grabbing it firmly in her hands, she yanked hard, and it came away from the Manticore's side.

It screamed in outraged fury and swung its body about to stab at her with its deadly tail.

She dodged sideways and backwards, retreating towards the iron gates and out of range. With shaking hands, she grasped the syringe and twisted it sharply, feeling the reassuring click-clunk as the brass sheath clicked into place. She sagged in relief.

*Done it!*

The precious blood was in her hands. Now all they had to do was get away.

The Manticore bellowed again and swung its head viciously towards her, slashing at her with its front paw. It missed, but the heavy front leg connected with the open gate that Hermione had dived through a minute before. The gate shifted under the weight of the animal and slammed shut, trapping her inside the room with Snape and the enraged beast. The stinger of its tail stabbed blindly at her again, but she avoided it, flinging herself to the side away from the gates and landing on her shoulder and hip, protecting the syringe close to her chest. Her skin grazed painfully on the harsh grit of the floor, and the sting of the injury spurred her further into action.

She grabbed her wand out of the sheath in her dress, fumbling a little as the handle slipped in her sweaty fingers. *STUPEFY!* she bellowed, casting at the advancing animal. The spell struck the creature in the face and caused it to stop in its tracks. She waited for it to collapse, but instead, it simply shook its head and sneezed, seemingly only slightly disorientated. She looked on, frozen in horror, as the page from *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* burned in front of her. "The Manticore is resistant to all known Charms," she remembered reading and fought down a rising surge of panic.

Pushing herself to her feet, she saw in horror that the creature was breathing heavily from its exertions and turning away from her and towards the motionless Snape. It could smell the blood that was coating the unconscious man's face. Its tail seemed to twitch in anticipation as it rounded slowly upon him.

Hermione forced herself to *think*.

Pointing her wand directly at Snape this time, she shouted, *"Levicorpus!"* and then, *"Accio, Snape!"*

Snape's body quickly lifted off the ground upside down and hurtled towards her, past the frustrated animal. She grabbed a handful of his *hugonica* with her wand hand the syringe was too big for her to be able to use her other hand and thereby leave her wand hand free and pulled him with her as she raced for the narrow, open door in the side wall of the holding pen.

The Manticore, sensing the loss of its prey, bellowed its frustration and lumbered swiftly after them. Hermione reached the door and dived through it, dragging the levitated body of the unconscious man after her. No time to shut the door; the creature was almost upon them! She turned and saw with horror that the Manticore was only a few feet behind. It was forcing itself through the narrow doorway, its face contorted with the effort of trying to squeeze through the aperture.

Letting go of Snape for a moment, she pointed her wand at the ceiling of the corridor behind him and shouted, *"Defodio! Lumos!"*

Immediately, there was a rumbling noise, and grabbing Snape again, she started to run. As she did so, behind them, the bricks of the barrel-vaulted ceiling began to tumble down, blocking the tunnel behind her, sealing the Manticore within its cell and plunging her into utter darkness. Behind the tonnes of brick, cement, earth, and rubble, she could hear its muffled screams as it realised that its meal had got away.

Breathing harshly as the billowing cloud of dust and debris washed over them, Hermione emerged into the wider corridor that led uphill to the exit into the amphitheatre square. Light from the antechamber that they had first come to when they had entered the *vivarium* illuminated the corridor, and she could see the way out. Awash with relief and shaking from adrenaline, Hermione sagged back against the wall of the narrow, dimly lit corridor, clutching her wand and the syringe to her chest.

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"Slumbremary... *what?*" Robert Granger's voice was strained with the effort he was expending to keep control over his temper. Beside him, his wife placed a gentle restraining hand on his arm.

"Slumbremary Stingers, Doctor Granger," Professor Spleen repeated, and the other Healers standing beside him in front of Hermione's parents all nodded earnestly in agreement.

"Slumbremary Stingers...", Robert echoed dangerously.

"Quite so, quite so," agreed the diminutive Healer solemnly. "Slumbremary Stingers are found in wild rosemary blooms. Much like a Billywig sting, the poison from these Stingers cause decreased metabolic activity, slowed breathing and heart rate, and the absence of dreaming. We believe that wild rosemary may be found in southern Italy in the Naples area, and so your daughter probably disturbed a wild rosemary plant and caused the Stingers to attack."

"Like Wrackspurts?" Robert asked, hoping to sound more confident than he felt. Three of Professor Spleen's accompanying Healers sniggered or coughed. Spleen's eyebrows were raised and he looked confused.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Wrackspurts... They get into your head and make you feel fuzzy." Robert was beginning to feel foolish, but that was what the strange Irish girl had told him, wasn't it?

"Oh, goodness me, no!" The Healer chuckled indulgently. "Wrackspurts are mythical insects goodness me, whoever would have thought such a thing?"

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Severus woke up slowly as he felt a cloth soaked in water pressed against his brow.

He tried to open his eyes and managed a squint out of his right eye. The room was darkened, but he could see Hermione's concerned face briefly swim into focus in front of him. He could hear her speaking, but it was as if he was trying to listen underwater.

He felt her cool hand on his bare chest, stroking him, then the press of cool lips on his forehead and cheek. He tried to move, to acknowledge the kiss, but found that his muscles would not react to instruction.

He passed out.

When he woke up again, he could hear the gentle clanking of metal on metal and the sound of someone moving around in the room. A tentative sniff confirmed that he was lying in his Potions laboratory. He seemed to be on some sort of trestle bed; his left arm was free, but the linen and woollen blankets were tightly bound around the rest of his body, keeping him in place on the bed. He felt a momentary surge of panic, tensing against the material, and felt his right shoulder and arm searing with agony.

*Broken, then*, he thought, catching his breath.

Experimentally he tried to open his eyes and found that, while the right one opened and focused without too much trouble, the left was sealed shut. In fact, as his awareness grew, he began to realise that the left side of his face felt peculiarly numb, almost as if it had been disconnected from his nervous system.

Another quiet noise from beside him drew his attention. Slowly and carefully, he rotated his head and looked towards the main bench in the centre of the room. Hermione was standing over a silver cauldron, carefully adjusting the level of flame underneath it, referring to a bundle of papyrus scrolls in her hand as she did so. Apparently satisfied, she stepped back, replacing the scrolls on the bench beside the cauldron, and checked the metronome timer beside the boiling cauldron. She took a quick bite of her sandwich.

"Three minutes," he heard her mutter to herself. *What the hell is she doing?* He tried to twist into a better position to see more clearly, but the movement caused another sharp jab of pain from his injured shoulder, and he grunted inadvertently.

Immediately, she spun around, her face lighting up with pleasure and then contracting into concern. With one more glance at the timing metronome, she scurried to his side.

"Hullo," she said softly, reaching up to stroke his hair out of his eyes gently. Her hand remained on his face, cupping his right cheek. "Feeling better?"

"Than *what?*" he replied with a customary touch of acerbity.

She chuckled quietly and withdrew her hand. "If you can be rude, you *are* feeling better," she commented, and unwillingly, he felt his own face soften in response to her concern.

"How is the pain? Do you need more Butterfly Weed Balm? I found some in a broken pot on your shelves. Or more of this bruise paste there is not a lot of that left, but it does seem to have made a difference to your facial injuries." She paused and gave him a sympathetic look. Snape automatically brought his left hand up to feel his face but she stopped him gently, "Don't...." she warned quietly, "You'll disturb the paste I've already put on it."

He frowned at her, ready to speak, but she placed a gentle finger to his lips and shook her head.

"I have not had time to set your arm properly, I'm afraid, and I'm not sure of the spell to heal your shoulder. I was hoping that you would wake up and help me so I could do that properly for you. I remembered Lockhart nearly killing Harry after that Quidditch match when he vanished the bones in his arm, and I was frightened that I'd do more harm than good if I tried anything invasive on your injuries." She was babbling with nerves and still looking at him with those beautiful amber-flecked eyes. He found himself wanting to reassure her for some reason. He clearly should thank her they had both made it out alive from the Manticore's cell, although Merlin knew how she had done it, and...

The metronome gave a subtle 'ping!' and she spun away from him, heading back to the boiling cauldron. She picked up the scroll again and began fussing with the flame. He watched, straining in the dull light to see properly, as she carefully picked up the brass syringe and positioned herself over the silver cauldron. Hermione picked up her wand and tapped the metronome in a slightly faster rhythm. The little machine obligingly altered its timing to match the new speed. She replaced her wand on the workbench and took a deep breath.

Severus realised with shock that she was attempting to brew the Metamorphmagus Potion.

"What are you doing?" he asked, still straining to see what she was up to.

She shot him a worried look over her shoulder. "Please," she said distractedly, "I've got to concentrate...."

Snape opened his mouth to respond but then thought better of it and shut his mouth. He could see that she had found his notes (thanks to a lifetime of keeping meticulous records) and must have understood that the blood had to be used within two hours from leaving the animal, or it became ineffective. *How long have I been unconscious?* he asked himself, frowning, as he watched her square her shoulders and prepare to continue.

The addition of the magical blood to the potion was the crucial phase in the creation of the potion. If she added it too quickly, the solution would curdle and break into its constituent parts. If she added it too slowly, the ingredients would not mix correctly. Either way, the precious blood would be wasted, and the potion would be ruined. Snape found himself holding his breath as he saw her squeeze the contents from the syringe into the cauldron and then stir the potion carefully in time to the rhythm of the metronome. Her shoulders were practically vibrating with tension.

Time passed aching slowly as she watched the contents of the cauldron. Gradually, however, her shoulders began to drop, and her anxiety seemed to ebb. He watched her snap out the flames underneath the cauldron, step back, and sigh in relief. Snape let out his breath in response. *She must have done it. Good girl!* When she turned to face him in triumph, he felt a fierce sense of pride suffuse his chest and knew that he was smirking like an idiot.

"Well, that's done, then," she said with a false casualness, the relief clearly evident on her features. "Now all I have to do is decant it in a few minutes and take it to Sabazios."

## Chapter 16

*Chapter 17 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: Still not mine (all hail JKR). This chapter is brought to you with the invaluable help, and brilliant alpha and beta reading skills of beawesley2 and clairvoyant (\*bows low\*). Thank you for your reviews - please keep them coming! I read them all and welcome all comments. This chapter was hard to write.

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### Chapter 16

"Well, that's done then," she said with a false casualness, the relief clearly evident on her features. "According to your notes, now all I have to do is wait a few hours until it cools, decant it, and then I can take it to Sabazios."

The smile froze on Snape's lips at her words. His mind was still feeling muddled from the concussion he had suffered, and the Butterfly Weed Balm that she had rubbed on his face and back was also clouding his thoughts. But still, he could have sworn she said that she was intending to take an untested potion, one that she had never brewed before, to Sabazios and his cult followers in his lair. *But that would be so... ridiculous... idiotic. Utterly reckless. Why on earth would she risk that?*

He was lying uncomfortably on the transfigured trestle bed with a light blanket across his body, his right arm bandaged and immobilised beneath the coverings, his right shoulder throbbing and stiff.

His chest hurt when he breathed, although the pain was mostly high up at the top of his chest this time, not in the same place as when he had fractured his ribs a few days ago. He could feel that he was no longer wearing his *tunica* or his underwear and wondered, with asperity, where she had vanished his clothing to this time... before the embarrassed realisation hit him that she must have seen his body naked again. Immediately, he felt a rush of guilty arousal sweep through him at the memory of his previous actions when they had both been naked the night before.

Entirely unaware of the emotions boiling through him, she walked back towards him from the bench and perched awkwardly on the edge of the bed by his hip. Taking a deep breath, she turned and looked at him steadily.

"Now, for you," she said, and he flushed in response and felt his traitorous cock begin to stir at the thoughts running through his mind. *Ohhhhhh, nononono. Don't you bloody dare.... Think of other things. How much it hurts... what you did to survive... why you always fuck things up in the end.* He couldn't see her very well in the dim light of the magical sconces, and he hoped that she hadn't noticed, although her features were hard to read. He opened his mouth to say something, but she forestalled him by pulling her wand out from her skirts and pointing it at his chest.

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"How is she?" Ginny asked quietly but anxiously, cradling a fractious Lily against her chest and rocking her from side to side. The baby was fretting and had woken up both of her parents in the middle of the night, just in time for Harry to hear a gentle tapping at their apartment window. He had not been surprised to see one of St Mungo's owls hovering outside the window and waiting to be admitted. Urgent notes were delivered directly, not through the morning post. Harry frowned as he scanned his friend's note.

"Umm," he began, "Luna says she still hasn't woken up. She has barely moved, and the Healers haven't detected any change in her aura since she was brought in." He paused, reading more of the note. "Professor Spleen thinks she might have been stung by something that lives in rosemary bushes on the site.... Luna thinks that this

seems very sensible."

Ginny raised her eyebrows but said nothing, and Harry smiled at her unspoken comment.

"She's been muttering things in her sleep, and her temperature has risen," he continued, "but the Healers are not too concerned. She'll let us know if there is any change in a few more hours. They are going to try to administer the Wiggensweld Potion to see if it will help her to break out of the coma." He rolled up the scroll and sighed.

"I wonder if Septima has found any answers about that portrait?" Ginny said quietly, shushing the infant in her arms. "I can't help thinking that there is a connection, don't you?"

Harry nodded and rubbed his fingers through his sleep-rumpled hair. He yawned. He would go and see Septima in the morning to let her know how Hermione was doing and ask if she had solved the riddle of Snape's portrait. For now, he followed his wife back to bed where he made room for little Lily to lie between them as Ginny continued to soothe their daughter.

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Snape found that there was nothing like ten and three-quarter inches of vinewood with dragon heartstring pointing straight at you to deflate a burgeoning erection.

She was brandishing her wand at his chest, but it soon became obvious that she was uncertain of how to continue. His mind, woozy from the drugs and concussion, struggled to clear, and he turned his attention from his pathetic emotional rambling to his injuries.

From what he could see and feel of his own body, the dark stain of bruises that were marring his pale skin and the pain he was experiencing, Severus was certain that he had some serious injuries on his upper chest, arm, and right shoulder. He looked at her steadily, and when she her eyes locked with his, he raised his eyebrow with deliberate slowness. His lip quirked at her flushed reaction to his arrogant challenge.

"I don't..." she began hesitantly, breaking eye contact to look helplessly at his chest and upper body.

Snape's regard softened slightly. He moved his left hand and caught the side of her dress by her hip, silently trying to steady her.

"You are going to have to help me," she said quietly, "I've fixed simple breaks before now, and I've done the odd healing spell, but these look..." Her voice trailed away, and he thought he could see panic growing again in her as she contemplated the extent of his injuries.

She needed direction if she was going to be able to repair the damage caused by his encounter with the Manticore, and he sensed that such direction needed to be forthright and clear enough to prevent her from panicking and messing the treatment up entirely. Botched healing spells could be worse than the original injury. *That* thought finally focused his mind.

He shifted uncomfortably on the bed, and through the fog of the medication and pain he was experiencing, he tried to summon the correct procedures to mind.

"The diagnostic spell is *Ostendere*." He began his instruction formally. "You need to turn the blankets down and unwrap the bandages to expose the... injuries... before you cast it." He took another breath and was helpless to prevent his face from twisting in discomfiture as he did so. "Point your wand at my upper body and say the incantation. You should be able to see the damage clearly through my skin." Again, he did his best to keep his voice even and dispassionate, but he could see that she was still nervous.

"*Relax*, Granger," he said and was pleased that he was able to keep his voice steady despite the pain it cost him. "You are not going to kill me. Not yet anyway." She smiled at that, and he saw the tension in her shoulders dissipate a little.

As she moved the blanket, she jarred his arm through necessity, and he hissed inadvertently as the pain, in particular from his shoulder, spiked through him. Slowly and carefully, she unwrapped the bandage from around his lower arm, peeling away the last layer of material from the sweaty skin beneath.

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Hermione finished peeling the blanket down his body, leaving it across his hips. She noticed once again the golden chain around his neck and noted with surprise what seemed to be an old and battered golden Time-Turner hanging on the end of it, nestled in his sparse chest hair. She frowned in fascination, temporarily distracted from her task, as she looked at the odd little device.

"Oh..." she said, reaching out to touch the tiny, twisted glass vial with its pale glittering contents nestling within the twin circles of gold. There was something very familiar about it.... She had some experience with Time-Turners, and given the situation that she currently found herself in, she would have liked to study it in more detail, but as she touched his chest, he took a hissing breath.

"*Doctor Granger... If you wouldn't mind...*"

Feeling guilty, she tore her attention away from the Time-Turner and his chest his nipples were puckering and goose flesh was forming on his skin in the cool air of the laboratory. She steadied her breathing once more and focused her intent on the injured shoulder and chest. His shoulder was very swollen and mottled with livid bruising. His chest on the right side also looked odd; the collarbone was pushing up prominently under his skin, and the flesh surrounding it was stained a sickly yellow colour.

"*Ostendere*," she commanded. Slowly, she began to see the skin growing thinner and becoming like a translucent shadow, and the muscles and ligaments shivered into view. Then, after a moment, they also paled and grew transparent, and the bones became visible.

*Ouch*. Hermione recoiled slightly at the damage to Snape's shoulder. She was no Healer, but it was obvious that the head of his humerus was split into three parts. The rest of the shoulder bones looked to be whole, but as her attention was drawn across his chest, she could see that the collarbone was also badly broken. The bone was snapped in two, displaced at an angle with one edge jutting above the other.

"What can you see?" he asked with a trace of impatience.

"Um," she began. "I think your shoulder is broken."

He grunted, "*Really?* What does it look like?"

She described the damage as best she could.

"What about the chest? How badly is my collarbone broken?" he asked.

"Badly," she confirmed. She felt rather ill looking at the broken ends of the collarbone flexing as he breathed in and out shallowly. "I think it's what Healers call a displaced fracture." She could see that he didn't understand the term. "The bones are completely separated and overlay each other," she explained, moving one flat hand on top of the other to demonstrate to him. His lips thinned and he nodded slightly.

"Check my ribs and wrist," he said.

She turned her attention to his arm and ribs and repeated the same charm.

The ribs looked fine on the left, but she was not surprised, given the dark bruises around his upper chest, to see thin linear marks denoting greenstick fractures on three of the upper right ribs.

The arm was another case altogether.

Both bones in his forearm had snapped at the point where the arm must have taken the brunt of his body's impact against the corner of the pillar. The breaks looked clean, both of the bones broken at about the same point on the forearm, but they had been pulled past each other, displaced by the contraction of his ligaments and muscles. It must have been unbelievably painful.

Again, she described the injury to Snape, trying to be as detailed and dispassionate as she could, although she could hear her voice wavering as she spoke about his arm.

She lowered her wand, and the charm dissipated. Hermione found herself staring at his damaged pale skin once again.

"What do you want me to do, Severus?" she asked quietly, trying hard to keep her voice steady, even though she felt faintly sick at the thought of having to set the bones underneath the unnatural bulges that marked the various fractures under his skin.

"Take my hand, Hermione," Severus instructed her calmly, "Lace your fingers through mine and lift my hand up, *without* twisting my palm. Hopefully, the weight of my arm will apply enough traction to align the bones so you can set them properly. Use the charm *Os Sarcire* to knit the bones together, and I should feel them click back into place as they mend."

"What about your shoulder? Won't that pull the joint apart?" she asked nervously, unwilling to hurt him more than absolutely necessary.

He grimaced. "You'll have to mend the arm first before we can move onto the shoulder and clavicle, or you won't be able to apply enough force to draw the bone there back into place."

"Right," she said without much conviction.

He stared at her for a moment.

She stared back still obviously reluctant to act. How could she possibly do this without causing him agony? What if she couldn't apply enough pressure to set the bones correctly? If he passed out again, would she remember the charm and get the traction right? She froze as those thoughts plagued her, her right hand gripping her wand, and her left hovering just above his chest, feeling the heat radiating off his skin into the cool air. She couldn't do it! There were too many variables, and she had no anatomical training. She knew *basic* skeletal anatomy, but the bone at the top of his arm was shattered! How could she possibly picture the correct alignment of the shoulder joint so she could fix it?

As if sensing her doubt and fear, Snape simply raised his eyebrow again. He looked at her coolly but with utter confidence. Slowly, under his regard, she calmed and came back to herself. Her eyes fluttered shut as she dug deep for the fortitude needed to help him.

"Well? Shall we get *on* with it, *Doctor* Granger?" he drawled deliberately. The unfamiliar use of her formal name was a challenge, and it stirred her into action.

Carefully, she laced her fingers between his, acutely conscious of the pain that simple act caused him. His lips thinned, his face blanched, and beads of sweat began to gather on his brow. She shot one last look of uncertainty at him, and he scowled back.

"Do it!" he ordered roughly, then, "Remember! Don't twist the arm, just lift it up."

He moaned slightly as she stood to raise the limb, trying to be as smooth in her actions as she could. She kept the limb untwisted, and sure enough, after a few seconds, he nodded, and she incanted, "*Os Sarcire!*" on the arm. She felt a faint shiver in the limb, and Snape hissed sharply, and after a pause, he squeezed her fingers with his own. Carefully, so as to minimise the pain to his shoulder and collarbone, she returned the arm to his side and sat down once more as she did so. She wasn't sure if he had fainted again, and impulsively, she placed her left hand on his belly gently, her fingers brushing through the soft, wiry hairs that tracked down its centre, as if to try and soothe the pain away.

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He lay still for a moment, his eyes closed as he fought for control. *Oh Christ, that hurt!* His shoulder felt like it was a ball of agony. When she had lifted his arm, he had felt the shattered humerus fragments grate against each other in his shoulder and an almost intolerable pressure on his collarbone. He concentrated on calming his breathing, utilising long-forgotten strategies for accepting pain and controlling it.

Unbidden memories sprang into his mind from his past: the hideous Dark revels, the scenes of torture he had witnessed and endured at the hands of Riddle and his followers. He groaned slightly and tried to banish the images of twisted figures, screaming and contorting under Death Eaters' wands, which thrust themselves to the forefront of his mind, as well as the memory of those times when he had displeased the Dark Lord and had felt the punishing effects of the Cruciatus Curse as his reward.

To his embarrassment, he realised that he was crying, and he was shamed by his weakness. He tried to pull himself together and then felt the blessed relief of a cool, damp cloth wiping gently across his face, disguising the flow of tears. Opening his good eye, he saw Hermione leaning over him, her face white and concerned.

She smiled bravely at him, her own eyes bright with empathy, "One down," she said softly, "three to go."

He nodded slightly. The pain in his shoulder was receding slightly. It had now dulled to a flaming ache that he could cope with, and he was able once again to focus on the young woman before him, her face anxious in the light of the magical sconces that illuminated the laboratory.

He became conscious of her other hand resting lightly on his abdomen, the fingers curling slightly on his skin, sending delicious waves of sensation through his lower body. He caught his breath and felt his ribs grate in protest. "My ribs," he hissed. "Just aim your wand at them and say the charm, *Os Sarcire*."

She nodded and pulled back a little, taking aim, saying, "*Os Sarcire*," with a lot more confidence this time. There was a sharp pain in several places but not nearly as bad this time. Once the pain had passed, it had become much easier to breathe. He lay quietly, bathed in sweat, but enjoying the simple act of breathing for a while.

Hermione watched him, not moving, frown lines formed between her eyebrows.

"Severus," she began. "I'm not sure I can visualise the bones properly to mend your shoulder. I... I haven't studied human anatomy since my NEWT Transfiguration lessons. I looked at it again at uni... but that was mostly for recognition of bones in an archaeology site...."

He lifted his left hand and laid it gently over hers on his belly, delighting at the contact. It was obvious what he needed to do, but suddenly he felt a rush of nervousness at the prospect. He was a private man, unused to permitting the sharing of his thoughts. "I'll show you what it should look like. Look at me."

Hermione's eyes widened, and Snape doubted that she had ever attempted this particular magical skill before.

"Look at me, Miss Granger," he repeated, his fingers tightening on hers. "I will show you the shoulder joint as it should appear to you. You will then be able to cast the spell to bring the broken pieces of the bone back together in the correct form. Then we will be able to address the broken collarbone, and I will be healed. The incantation is *Legilimens*, as you know. I will then show you what you need to see." He paused and then continued, his eyes boring into hers, "There will be no need to wander about in my mind. You will simply be a passive observer. Once you have the image, you may cast the spell, and I will break our connection."



He saw her smile and nod, clearly relieved and reassured by his confidence in their plan of action. Nevertheless, she had not withdrawn her hand from his belly, and he had not let go of her fingers either. Snape looked into her eyes, and he felt her attention focus on his, saw her irises widen and sensed the pressure of her mind on his as she whispered, "*Legilimens*."

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It was like falling into water, a strange, disorientating sense of being struck, enveloped, then cushioned. Hermione could see images forming before her. She saw a picture of the top third of the humerus, the ball joint clearly delineated.

She recognised the parts of the bone she was seeing: the smooth, dome-shaped head in relation to the two tubercles (the twin bulges at the top of the bone) and the deep groove that ran between them down the shaft.

She felt a rush of sympathy as she recalled the image of the split and damaged bones in his shoulder. Uncontrolled, her compassion for him pushed through her mind and charged forwards into his.

She felt him start and then recoil from the contact, sensing the opaque shields he raised sharply against her blundering consciousness.

His voice sounded in her mind, tense, defensive, and irritated. "*Do you have what you need? Say the charm, girl!*"

Feeling foolish, Hermione focused on the joint in his shoulder, as he had instructed her to do, and murmured the incantation while keeping the image he was showing her within her vision.

Snape keened, a high and desperate sound in his throat, as the broken pieces of bone came together through the mass of damaged muscle, ligaments, and nerves, all knitting together at the top of the bone. Mentally, she could feel him shaking with the effort of not passing out. He clung on to consciousness just as his hand convulsively squeezed hers on his stomach.

She should have pulled away then, but she did not wish to break the mental connection between them. Instead, upset at the pain she was causing him, she sought blindly to provide him comfort. Without knowing what to do, she brushed her consciousness against his gently and felt his shields weaken and shiver in response. She thought of her desire to heal him, her wish that he should feel comforted, and felt, in return, a desperate wall of agony burst against her... and then suddenly... nothing.

She felt his hand go slack in hers he had passed out from the pain.

Suddenly, a barrage of images and emotions assaulted her. Her stomach churned as her perception shifted. It was like watching extracts from a film that had been fast-forwarded without the security of viewing from a distance:

*A dark, thin man, a strap hanging from his hand, a poor woman on her knees washing a flagstone floor with a scrubbing brush and a tin bucket.*

*Hatred, contempt, pity.*

*A flower lying on an open palm, blossoming into a lovely bloom... a hungry glimpse of a redheaded girl as she raced and laughed with friends along a corridor.*

*An argument, the redhead shouting at Hermione, close up, her pretty face contorted into a rictus of dislike and scorn.*

Hermione was confused *What's going on? Who...?*

*Longing, a desperate craving.* Her body cramped, and she felt sick with self-loathing.

Hermione's head was swimming. Images bled into other images, and she was drowning in feelings so intense that she feared she would be sick.

The images kept coming, pushing around her, swarming up close. She had to find a way of controlling what she was seeing. Desperately, she grabbed at a passing image, and the disorientation lessened.

*She was at Slughorn's party, the one she had attended with Harry and Cormac in her sixth year. She could see the charmed mistletoe, the glasses of elf-made wine, and she felt a strong resentment that students were being encouraged to drink and socialise when they should be preparing relentlessly for the darkness ahead. She was standing sullenly to the side of Slughorn's sitting room in the shadows, watching... watching....*

*But I don't remember the party like that!* Hermione thought. *The room was brighter, surely? The music was much happier... How can I be watching myself in my own memories without a Pensieve?*

She realised with a shock that she was seeing *his* memories and dreams from his unconscious, not his rational thoughts. The knowledge frightened her this was not normal Legilimency. Instinctively, she tried to pull away from him, to open her eyes and quit his mind. But the temptation to see more, to take the opportunity to pry a little in particular, to see *why* he had pulled away from their intimacy during the previous day proved far too enticing for her to leave his thoughts.

She was locked onto *his* memories, feeling his emotions as if they were her own.

*There I am!* she thought, and then she became confused as she watched her teenaged self walk into Slughorn's rooms on the arm of the burly Quidditch player, a false and brittle smile plastered to her features.

*She felt a surge of something feral in her stomach, curling through her body with tendrils of dislike. 'That oaf McClaggen is all over her....' She felt a swift moment of satisfaction as she saw herself push him away and escape behind a curtain to the window balcony....*

She remembered something that Harry had told her about his lessons with Snape in their fifth year. Emotions were the key. They would help her to navigate this strange, disorientating dreamscape. Fascinated by the insight into Snape's mind, she returned to her study of the scene playing out before her as she watched her younger self avoid McClaggen and seek out Harry. Hermione caught the covetous emotion swelling in her body *Snape's body* and felt it draw her to another memory.

*Quieter now... and cold... so cold... A clearing in the Forest of Dean, watching a thin, wan-looking young woman in an ill-fitting jumper carefully gut and clean a dead rabbit by a tree stump. She worked methodically, all her concentration on the little creature, limp and lifeless in her hands. She cut the skin around the feet of the animal, removed the head and abruptly pulled the furry pelt off the carcass. Her lips were thin with concentration, and she looked... capable... beautiful.*

*Beautiful... she was in his arms his arms! Coming out of the painting, landing on top of him... crying on his chest, soaking his tunic with the salt of her sorrow and fears... arching against him in the warm water, kissing him, wanting him.*

*She felt her slowly rubbing his back, washing his hair, running her hands through the limp, sorry mess as if it pleased her. She felt him turn her around in front of her and experienced the exquisite delight of finally being able to touch her naked skin, rubbing the olive oil lightly into her soft flesh. She relished the sensation of massaging his hands in her hair, feeling her push her bottom back against him, making him hard despite the warm water... turning with her in his arms and bringing her to his bed.*

*She felt his emotions as he claimed her with soft kisses: nipping, sucking, tasting... her skin warm and damp beneath his lips. Slowly, he brushed his hand down her body, feeling her move sinuously under his fingers, his thoughts overwhelmed by the imperative to reach release and satisfaction, but also to please her, to thank her for wanting him, for trying to make him feel better after Pertus' death, to make her feel the same fierce joy at his touch as he felt in her arms.*

*Hermione felt herself pushing into her heat, as if she were him, and she felt as if she were newborn. It had never felt like this before. Her mind was suffused by his feelings of pleasure. Jagged, blistered edges of hurt and loss were soothed and mended. She looked at her own upturned face in the dim light with the same lust-hazed regard that he felt for her. 'Mine. Mine!' She pulled back, and the girl in his arms, her herself whimpered, curling her legs around him and urging him deeper into her once more. She pushed back inside and kissed her lips, her cheeks, her chin... holding her head cradled in his hands.*

*Hermione heard herself saying wonderful things glorious things to him, to her... indecent things about what she felt and what she wanted him to do. How tight she was! How utterly incredible it felt to be embraced by her warm, moist canal, that heavenly tight heat. She felt it as he pushed himself up on his hands and began to thrust with more force, amazed at how it felt from this perspective. 'Yes... yesssss...!' She no, **he** couldn't think... didn't have to.... Instinct took over, and she reveled in it, pistoning into her, her head lolling to the side, her mouth open as she sucked in desperate breath after breath, searching her face in the darkness for any sign of her pleasure, feeling her spine contract and her balls tighten as a tremendous, rushing sense of urgency drove her no, **him** onwards, into her, glorying in her, only her, Lily forgotten, cast aside as he had been so often. Unloved, unwanted, unworthy....*

*Unworthy... Hermione once again saw her face illuminated in a shaft of light, but this time she, still feeling his emotions as if they were her own, was unable to move. Her neck was in agony, the acid burn of Nagini's venom coursing through her his veins. She fumbled for the beautiful perfume bottle that was her no, **his** mother's. He couldn't find it! He clutched instead at the glittering thing around her neck, hanging low between them.*

*Hermione felt his desperation and his savage will to keep himself alive. No matter the cost. Whatever it took, whomever he used. Death Eater. Survivor.*

*He didn't need to hold the vial just to picture it in his mind that's enough! Say the incantation! Save yourself!*

*That feeling of defensive selfishness was suddenly lost in his regard for her, her hands on his chest, her wild hair, her frightened face. She would save him, would keep him safe. Her compassion frightened him... thrilled him... satisfied him.*

*Hermione heard herself say the incantation as she no, **he** stared into her eyes as she hovered uncertainly over his bloody chest. She felt the rip and tear, the deep agony of the splitting of his soul.*

*Then the scene faded, and now she was in his bath suite in Pompeii. She reveled in the deep satisfaction that warmed her after their night together as he washed his body in the morning. Her gaze fell on a glittery object in her discarded stola, and Snape's hand not hers reached down and withdrew it... his mother's perfume vial!*

*Horror and self-loathing rushed through her as she recognised what she had done.*

*Hermione was suddenly hit with the unshakeable belief that his feelings and, therefore, hers were false and corrupted. She could feel his thoughts as if they were her own: the Dark thing inside him had called her, and she had come, enslaved by the old perfume phial.*

*His Horcrux.*

\*

Snape's eyes slammed open. His shields smashed against her, and she was suffused with terror hers or his, she didn't know.

"S-Stupefy!" Hermione reacted instinctively, throwing herself backwards and away from his body as she hexed him, landing hard on her backside on the flagstone floor of the potions laboratory, her chest heaving, bile rising in her throat, and adrenaline rushing through her body. With her left hand she scrabbled at the front of her dress, pulling the perfume bottle out and breaking the silver chain that bound it around her neck. With a strangled cry of revulsion, she threw it away from her, watching it skitter across the floor and hit the far wall. It didn't break.

"Severus?" A man's voice was calling from the stairs outside the room.

Hermione squeaked in alarm and scrambled to her feet. *What? Who the hell is it?*

Footsteps were coming close, scuffing on the stairs.

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"Severus, old man? Are you down here? I've brought your 'niece's' *palla* over. Marcella insisted I came round to thank you and Hermione for saving her and the children the other night...." Conviva's voice drifted away as he took in the scene, Severus lying unconscious on the low bed, Hermione standing facing him, her face wild, pointing a stick at him with a shaking arm.

"Hermione?" he asked. "What's the matter with Severus? Are you all right?"

## Chapter 17

*Chapter 18 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

my work - I really enjoy reading your thoughts!

JKR owns it all, but graciously allows us to experiment....

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## Chapter 17

The girl was standing there as if frozen to the spot. She was holding her wand out in front of her, pointing it blindly towards the doorway, and blinking tears out of her eyes. By her side, Severus lay unconscious on a low trestle bed. The left side of his face was bruised and swollen, his eye puffy and closed, and the skin covered by a yellow paste that made his flesh look cracked and sickly. His naked chest was rising and falling steadily, up and down... up and down. His collarbone was clearly broken, sticking up unnaturally above his chest, the skin around it stretched and discoloured.

Conviva took a faltering step forward, holding out the *palla* he was returning to the girl with both hands, almost like an offering. There was a crackling in the atmosphere, similar to the feeling in the air before a summer thunderstorm, and he was a little afraid.

He *liked* Hermione. He had been pleased to meet her, pleased to see that his dour, saturnine friend seemed to have *finally* found somebody prepared to put up with him. Marcella had once told him that Severus was pining away for some great lost love. Conviva had thought he was simply living the life of a vestal and needed to go with a few of the women in the local bars they weren't even that expensive!

But now Hermione had appeared, the girl from Severus' portrait in his dining room. Conviva remembered teasing Severus mercilessly about the beautiful little image one evening. The older man had coloured up, muttering some sort of rubbish about a 'niece', which had not fooled anyone. Was this Severus' great lost love? He really wanted to ask there had clearly been something between them yesterday when they showed up out of the blue at his party looking as guilty as a pair of teenagers. But the atmosphere was so odd here in this unpleasantly dingy chamber that asking her intentions did not seem to be appropriate.

He stopped wordlessly in front of her, the *palla* soft in his hands. He wasn't sure what to do.

After a moment, she seemed to shake herself and lowered her hand, stowing the stick into a small pocket at her side. Her shoulders slumped, and she suddenly looked like a much younger woman than she had appeared to be at his party.

"Hermione?" he prompted softly, hoping that his smile would encourage her.

She sighed, wiped her hand across her face, and scrubbed at her cheek, but stood a little taller for all that.

"H-hello, Aulus Vettius Conviva." She stuttered over his formal name, stepping back from him to stand closer to the inert man on the bed. "Severus was hurt...." She didn't finish the sentence.

"I saw his slave's body on the pallet by the front door." Conviva's voice was gentle. "I suppose he was killed when Severus was injured in the earthquake...?"

She was blushing and didn't answer, but he barely noticed as he moved to stand closer to the unconscious man.

"Has his spirit left him?" Conviva asked, a little nervous himself as he looked down at Severus' pale face. Up closer, the livid bruises across his friend's upper torso and the grazes on his neck looked worse than his first impression.

"Yes," she agreed after a moment. "I need... I need to fix the bone here before he wakes up. Would you help me?"

Looking over his shoulder at the girl, he saw similar-looking grazes on her arms and dirt on her face and clothes. They had clearly been through some trial, although so far, despite the fallen masonry and brickwork in the street, he could not remember seeing any damage to Severus' house....

"Of course," he said, smiling at her, and placed the *palla* gently at Severus' feet.

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"Professor, please would you explain to us exactly what the Wiggeweld Potion actually is and what it will do to our daughter?" Helen Granger's voice was strained with concern. Sitting beside her, Robert was still simmering with barely suppressed frustration and annoyance at being made to look an idiot in front of the Healers a few hours earlier. The reappearance of Professor Spleen at their daughter's door, this time without his gaggle of apprentices, had reawakened their anxiety for their daughter. Hermione had been still for a long time. Her chest continued to rise and fall in a quiet rhythm attuned to the throbbing of the magical life-support net that surrounded her. Her eyes remained closed, her cheeks wan and pale through the haze of the magic.

Spleen danced into the room with the confidence of experience and sat carefully in one of the chairs facing the Grangers. Before he could speak, however, there was a quiet knock on the door, and Luna wafted in to the room on a breeze of rosemary and calendula. She walked up to Hermione's bed and gingerly placed the handful of rosemary and marigolds in the vase by her head.

"Here's rosemary for remembrance," she said softly in her singsong cadence before smiling dreamily at Hermione's parents and sitting down beside them. "I hope that you don't mind, Mr and Mrs Granger," she said politely, "but I thought it might help to draw out the stingers..."

*Weird*, thought Robert ungenerously.

Helen smiled. "Thank you, dear," she said and turned her attention back to Professor Spleen. "You can speak professionally to us, Professor," she said to the Healer, holding tightly on to her husband's hand. "We have medical training and are well versed in scientific principles."

"We are dentists, you know," Robert added with a defiant lift of his chin.

"That means a Muggle tooth doctor," supplied Luna helpfully. Robert turned to stare at her. He hadn't quite forgiven her for the 'Wrackspurt' reference.

"Ah-ha! I had forgotten that you are a medical man!" Professor Spleen clapped his hands together in evident pleasure and completely missed Helen Granger's hiss of exasperated annoyance. "Well, then, let me talk you through the properties of this potion, and then we may consider the contraindications and other concerns that you have before the Mandrake has finished stewing."

"Right, yes...", said Robert, feeling like he was about to step completely out of his depth, medically speaking.

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Hermione carefully folded the *palla* into a long, thin bandage, the fine wool making a narrow slip of material that she could run easily through her small hands.

"If I lift him... like this," Hermione said, kneeling carefully behind the unconscious man and pulling his upper body up in front of her. Conviva was surprised to see the ease with which the young woman raised Severus from the bed. It was almost as if the man weighed nothing at all!

"Can you wrap the *palla* around each shoulder and across his back in a figure of eight pattern, like this?" she asked, using one hand to trace what she wanted with her finger.

He immediately understood and hastened to comply, carefully passing the rope of material around Severus' shoulders like a twisted omega.

"Good," she said, her brows furrowed with concentration. "Hold him for me, would you?" She indicated that he support Severus at the front of his chest so she could deal with the ends of the *palla* behind his back. Conviva was confused. What was she going to do with the *palla*? She seemed to know what she was doing, but he had never heard of female healers before.

Before he could ask her any further questions, she had placed her knee into Severus' back and pulled back on the ends of the *palla* with her upper body. Conviva saw Severus' back arch and his shoulders roll backwards. In front of his nose, he saw and heard the broken ends of the collarbone snick back into place, the abnormal lump on his chest reduced to a bruised swelling. Conviva could not see her clearly but thought that she had muttered something under her breath, and now she was fiddling with something behind Severus' back. By the time he raised his head sufficiently to look, the ends of the *palla* were tied into a flat knot and Hermione was lowering Severus gently back to the cushions on the bed, a peculiar expression on her face.

Conviva found his voice. "How did you learn to do that?" he asked.

"Oh," she said absently while stroking Severus' unblemished shoulder with her fingers, "an old riding accident. My parents insisted that I take lessons, and I fell off and broke my clavicle. I always hated riding, just like... oh.... Never mind...." She smiled tightly at the memory. "The doctors mended my collarbone like this in the hospital," she continued. "He should be able to breathe more easily now that he won't be in so much pain." Her eyes remained fixed upon the prone man, the same troubled expression on her face.

"It looks like you have your own injuries to salve, Hermione," Conviva said. When she looked up at him sharply, he gestured towards her shoulder and back; the material of her deep blue *stola* was torn and bloodied, the skin beneath grazed and broken.

Hermione blushed again. "Oh, it's nothing," she said. "A quick bath should sort me out, and some of this healing salve." She fingered a broken pot on the low table by his bed.

"Well, then," Conviva said brusquely, clapping his hands together. "Go. Take your bath."

Hermione did not move, uncertainty crossing her features.

Conviva grinned. "When Severus first came to Pompeii, we cared for him in our house as he recovered from his wounds. Two days ago, you and he helped my family escape the wrath of Vulcan, and Marcella and my children are now safely on a boat, travelling to my estate near Salernum. I came to return your *palla* and to thank him for the warning about the volcano. After the feast day tomorrow, I shall be joining them. We are *friends*, Hermione. My family owes him a life debt. I am certainly capable of sitting with him for a little while until his spirit returns from its travels. You seem exhausted; take time to heal yourself."

Hermione looked at him again with a strange mixture of emotions running across her expressive face. Conviva saw gratitude, guilt, and almost a flash of anger. But she picked up the broken pot of the yellow salve and made to leave the room.

"What if he wakes?" asked the Roman, settling himself down beside his friend on a low bench seat.

Hermione flashed him a quick look, then regarded Severus' passive face. She seemed to be fingering the piece of wood in her pocket.

"Oh, he won't wake just yet," she said with a confidence that seemed almost unsettling to Conviva. She paused again. "Thank you," she said quietly. "I need time to think about things. Thank you for sitting with him."

She walked to the doorway and then seemed to remember something and turned. "Please don't touch anything in here," she said. "I won't be long."

\*

About twenty-five minutes later, she was back.

Conviva recoiled slightly at her outfit.

"I thought you were supposed to have been cleaning yourself up?" he blurted out as he saw what she was wearing. Hermione was dressed in a crude *tunica* made from a dirty grey material and roughly belted around the waist. The cloth came slightly below her knees and seemed to be too big for her in general. Her hair was as it had been before, although she seemed to have tied it back further away from her face. She did not even appear to have washed! Conviva shifted uncomfortably on his seat, thinking, *Why is she dressed like a cheap household slave?*

Without a word to him, she walked to the pot that sat on the bench in the centre of the room. The air around the metal pot seemed to shimmer for a moment and then was still. Hermione carefully placed the length of wood onto the bench and picked up a curved ladle, which she slowly dipped it into the cooking pot. She ladled a quantity of the liquid into a nearby dull glass bottle, holding it carefully by its handle as she decanted the silver liquor into the container. When the bottle was full to her satisfaction, she stoppered it and placed it on the table.

Conviva cleared his throat. "Will that help him?" he asked, looking at the bottle on the bench. It might have been his imagination, but he thought he'd seen the air shimmer above the cooking pot again when she had put the bottle down on the bench.

"Sort of," Hermione answered. She frowned, lost in thought, and rubbed her hand on her chest bone between her breasts as if soothing an itch. She looked as if she had been crying. She picked up the broken pot of yellow paste and crossed the room until she was standing close to Severus' left, uninjured, shoulder. Snape lay quietly, although sweat was still beading on his forehead and running in channels down his face and neck.

"Would you watch over him for a while longer, please? There is something I need to do for a little while." She traced the outline of the sleeping man's stubbly jaw with her forefinger.

Conviva suddenly felt that he was intruding on a very private moment between the two of them. He wriggled uncomfortably again on his hard wooden seat, casting his mind about to try to think of something lighthearted to say that might break the tension.

Conviva cleared his throat, "Well," he began, "I had promised to visit Restitutus later this morning...." One look at her face, however, and he knew that he could not refuse her. Pulling a face, he moved his buttocks on the stool awkwardly. "Well, could you pass me a cushion or something?" he grumbled, pleased to see her face lighten into a small smile as she gently tugged a cushion out from underneath Severus and passed it over to him.

"Where are you going, dressed like *that*?" Conviva asked, now sitting more comfortably as she walked back over to the bench and picked up the glass bottle with the silver liquid in it. He looked again at the battered face of his unconscious friend and felt a shiver of uncertainty once more.

Hermione turned, stowing the smooth stick of wood in an unseen pocket in her skirts. Her eyes glittered, and her face was resolute. He thought that she looked rather impressive despite her ridiculous garb.

"I'm going to deliver this to one of Severus' customers," she said. "It is important that he is kept satisfied, or he'll take his, erm, *business* to another city," she continued. "I hope that I won't be long. If Severus wakes up..." She cleared her throat and seemed to change her mind about what she was going to say. "If he wakes, would you tell him that I understand why he did what he did? And I don't blame him for it."

"You... understand what he did, and you don't blame him for it," Conviva repeated, faintly baffled.

"Yes," she confirmed, and with one final look at the room around her, she walked swiftly to the door, and her footsteps sounded loudly on the stone steps.

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"And so, you see, Mr and Mrs Granger, the Wiggensweld Potion works by encouraging the sleeper to actually metabolise it into a potent auto-immune response which forces the patient to awaken," Professor Spleen concluded with a flourish and paused. Helen Granger had the distinct impression that he was expecting a round of applause.

"So... essentially what you are saying is that you are going to give our daughter a powerful *poison* in order to stimulate her body to reject it and, in so doing, force her to consciousness?" Helen frowned as she processed the information the Healer had been imparting for the last thirty minutes.

Professor Spleen's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Why, yes, Mrs Granger, in a Puffapod, that is precisely what I am saying."

"Nutshell", Professor," corrected Luna thoughtfully. "I think you mean 'nutshell' Muggles don't have Puffapods." She was still in the room, sitting quietly next to Helen Granger.

"A *poison*," repeated Helen Granger carefully.

The Healer shrugged. "Is not that the same theory that lies behind your vaccination process? Helping your body to create sufficient anti-toxins to counter the original infection." He smiled what seemed to be his biggest, most encouraging smile.

Helen blanched at the mangling of medical science. "Not exactly," she replied. Her husband was very quiet, and she turned to look at him. Robert's attention was fixed on Hermione upon the hospital bed.

"She looks thinner than she did yesterday," Robert said. "More drawn." He reached across to the bed, fearful of trying to touch her through the magical net covering her body.

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She did not know where Sabazios was.

The absurdity of that fact was not lost on Hermione Granger as she stepped into the street outside Snape's house.

She stood, blinking in the bright Pompeiian sunlight, gripping the Metamorphmagus Potion that she had brewed, dressed in one of Pertus' old *tunicas* with her wand in her pocket.

She felt utterly alone.

Far from taking time to think, after she had left Conviva looking after Snape for the first time, Hermione had mechanically cleaned and healed her wounds and quickly slipped into her comfortable Muggle clothing.

Thinking was not something she had wanted to do.

*Thinking* meant coming to terms with what she had seen inside his head when he had slipped into unconsciousness.

*Thinking* meant trying to understand how he could have made such a Dark object to save himself *why he had tied it to her* After all, she had tried to save his miserable life when he had been lying there eleven years ago, filthy and abused with his throat half ripped out. The second most hated man in wizarding Britain.

So many things began to fall into place. How she couldn't get over his loss... couldn't settle down... couldn't move on... couldn't maintain relationships. *The bastard! Fucking bastard. Controlling... selfish... self-centred... self-serving egocentric...*

*Ahh yes, a small, treacherous voice inside her head argued, but he made you feel whole here* Her heart flared, a warm wash of emotion flooding her chest and torso, as if to emphasise the point her mind was making. *You enjoyed touching him, healing him... making love with him...*

*But love, real love, cannot come out of something as perverted as a Horcrux, can it?*

She shook her head angrily, banishing the dangerous, ambiguous thoughts. No time for them now.

She needed to find Sabazios. Snape had said he was in one of the disused water cisterns in the city.... She wracked her brains. The largest water cistern in the city was in the north, where the Pompeiian branch from the mighty Aqua Augusta aqueduct came in to the city. Hermione began to walk quickly through the now-familiar streets.

Mindful of her new status as the lowest form of human life in this society, she took care to keep her head down, avoiding passersby and other obstacles in the street. When she needed to, thoughtful of her position, she jumped down lightly into the filthy streets to allow citizens to pass before regaining the pavement. She was heading north again, following a similar route to the one they had taken to the Vettii House. She was looking for a huge building close to the Vesuvius Gate, which was later called the Water Stronghold, the *Castellum Aquae*.

Hermione tried to visualise the academic journal papers she had read about the water system to the city. The earthquake of 62AD had fatally damaged the water supply to the city, and the water supply from the aqueduct had been cut off. Archeologists believed that the baths and fountains were served by rainwater, which was collected in vast lead-lined tanks across the city. She remembered the other guests complaining to Marcus about it at Conviva's party. She was certain that the aqueduct had not been reconnected before the volcanic eruption buried the city.

The *Castellum* would, therefore, have been dry at the time the eruption took place... With more than one hundred square feet of space, it was a perfect location to hide a number of people.

It was a good place to start.

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The city was clearly gearing up for the Festival of Vulcan, which was scheduled for the next day. Lines of colourful bunting were being strung between the houses, and shop keepers along the main streets were dragging braziers outside in preparation for the bonfires that would be lit along the streets in order to honour Vulcan. Hermione was well aware that the Forum would be a hive of civic activity orchestrated by Marcus Fiducius, if indeed he was still in the city (a slight thrill of fear ran through her at the thought).

As she marched along the high pavements, with city life unfolding around her, her chest... *itched*. She still felt the loss of her pendent. She was so used to its reassuring presence around her neck. The bottle itself was the perfect shape to nestle safely and comfortably between her breasts beneath her shirt.

She rubbed her breastbone nervously and felt her chest burn again in response. Maybe she should not have left it behind. She had been foolish to overreact in the way that

she had, throwing the lovely thing across the room. She pictured it lying abandoned in the shadows in the corner of the laboratory and knew a brief, crazy wish to turn around to reclaim it. *Pull yourself together, Hermione it's just a habit! You couldn't wait to throw off Slytherin's locket, she told herself sternly. You'll be better off without it clouding your thoughts and judgement. It's obviously been doing that for years. You know what you have to do. Deliver the potion. Persuade Sabazios that there is more to come. Buy yourself time to get back to the house and work out the runes around the stupid portrait so you can activate it again and get back home. Buy time so Severus can recover his strength. His bones are healed, but it will take a little while longer for the soft tissue to knit as effectively. Buy time until the mountain explodes and there is no time for anything anymore.*

Why did she suspect it would all be easier said than done?

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Later that day, Harry knocked lightly on the door to Septima Vector's apartments in the Tower. He felt her wards shiver in response and heard her cheery welcome from inside. He pushed the door open.

Septima's rooms were in their usual state of epic chaos.

Even with two active young boys and a baby, it was still possible to see the floor for most of the time in their apartment! Harry gingerly made his way across the sitting room, carefully placing his feet in between piles of books and academic journals, sheets of parchment and odd, undefinable piles of papers, bins overflowing with scrunpled-up papers, discarded clothing falling off the furniture onto which they had been discarded, and other detritus.

Vector's messy habits were the stuff of legend at Hogwarts. It was widely rumoured that house-elves refused to clean her rooms.

Hermione had taken private lessons with Septima here during her additional NEWTs year. Harry glanced over to the mantelpiece in the room. Various cups and glasses were lined up along it, fighting for space with a Muggle clock, a small plaster copy of Rodin's *The Lovers*, and a vase of perpetual flowers. Harry remembered Hermione telling the fascinated and appalled Potters how, when she was a student, she had watched a pear slowly decay on Vector's mantelpiece over a number of weeks. It had eventually dropped off the mantle and onto the carpet, where it had gradually become a dark stain on the floor.

Vector had not appeared to notice.

She looked up and smiled as he came in. "Good morning, Harry," the witch's rich New England drawl greeted him warmly as he approached. "Did Filius send you over?"

Harry smiled back. Septima was at her desk at the far end of the room, busily scanning through a sheaf of parchment, quill in hand. A series of rather complicated-looking mechanical devices were dipping and whirring on the table in front of her. To the left of her desk, facing him, was a large blackboard, which had a large parchment copy of Snape's portrait stuck to the centre of it. Lines of scribbled chalk notes in different colours radiated outwards from the parchment image. The notes were unintelligible to Harry, a combination of letters and numbers rather than words.

Harry was utterly baffled by Arithmancy it was never a subject that he had studied at school, and when Hermione had tried to explain (very patiently) about the key principles that underpinned it, he had quickly felt his head spinning and had known that he couldn't keep up.

"Uh, good morning, Septima. I just wondered how you were getting on with the portrait?" he inquired, moving closer to her desk and the blackboard.

"Fine, just fine, thanks. Actually I've just arrived at a really interesting point." She reached forward and flicked one of the silver devices on her desk, sending it spinning more quickly. She watched it for a moment and then made a quick note on the parchment in front of her.

Hermione had also once tried to explain the use of such charmed devices to Harry when he had visited her as she had been finishing off her PhD in Australia. She had compared them to Muggle calculators or simple computers, but he had not really understood what she had been saying beyond the fact that they helped Arithmancers to make complicated calculations.

"Would you like some tea, Harry? I only have Chinese chrysanthemum tea at the moment, but the pot has just brewed...?"

"Ungh.... No thanks, Septima." Harry winced slightly at the thought of drinking tea made from cut flowers. He thought it sounded horribly bitter.

"How is Hermione doing?" Septima asked, waving her hand to indicate that Harry should sit down on the chair in front of her desk.

Harry shrugged, "Still the same," he replied, carefully moving a pile of papers from the chair seat onto the sofa beside the desk so he could sit down. When he was settled, Septima sat back in her chair and looked fully at him.

"Okay, well," she began, twirling her quill between her fingers. "The good news is that I think I know what the runes around the portrait mean."

"Right-oh....," Harry said, hoping that she would be able to explain things more clearly than Hermione could.

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"Okay," Septima began, standing up and moving towards the blackboard. "Have you ever studied Arithmancy before, Harry?" At his blank expression, she sighed. This was probably going to be quite difficult. She took a deep breath and tried to think of him as a third-year.

She picked up a piece of chalk and pointed to the runes, numbers, and sigils surrounding the portrait in the centre.

"So, these Arithmantic runes define life lines. Life lines can usually be defined in terms of straight lines, like this...." Septima flipped over the blackboard and began sketching a rough grid on the board. She drew simple x- and y-axes, and then, changing the colour of her chalk with a muttered charm, she drew a diagonal line that crossed both axes through the centre. She checked back with Harry he was scrunching his eyes and trying to stay focused.

"From the runes around the portrait, I can draw a simple, straight life line, like this one here," she explained, pointing to the coloured, diagonal line in front of her.

She flipped the board over again, back to the charmed copy of the portrait, and indicated three similar-looking runes around the portrait.

"I have isolated the requisite function which determines the rational variables for plotting the line *here*, *here*, and *here*," she said, pointing to the runes in turn. Harry nodded, as if he was following her.

"Okay... so far, so typical. But now look... The problem is that the runes in the portrait changed as the image changed. The functions appeared to *realign*. When I first looked at the portrait, the rune function that was dominant was this one." She tapped the board, and it shimmered, the patterns of the numerals in the runes surrounding the image of Snape and Hermione shifted and changed colour.

Septima looked over her shoulder at Harry, who was perched on the edge of his seat still concentrating fiercely on what she was saying.

"But a day later, when the image in the portrait changed, the runic signature had done as well, *to this*." She tapped the board, and the numbers and runes rearranged themselves once more.

"Then yesterday, it changed *again*." Septima tapped the board once more, and the original sequence shimmered into view.

"So, you see," she continued, "we appear to have *variable* chain of functions, which in turn define an interactive Arithmantic sequence creating an asymptote. In other words, a line of a curve such that the distance between the curve and the line approaches zero as they tend to infinity. Like this." She flipped the board back to the graph she had sketched on the other side, and with a quick flick of her practiced hand, she drew a curved line that mirrored the first one, but did not touch it at all.

"It's really very interesting," the Arithmancer continued, hoping to the Three Fates that Harry thought so too. "If we apply Simpson's rule to this sequencing, it appears to describe a composite function denoting an asymptote which defines nothing less than an infinite life line."

Septima paused, taking in her companion's rather glazed expression. *Ooops*, she thought, *lost him*. He was much more of a practical man than a theoretician, she reminded herself. She thought carefully and then shrugged.

*What the hell this isn't class...*

"Uh, what I mean to say, Harry, is that these runes together show the life line of a human who means to try to cheat death and live forever."

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The ugly clock on the wall above their heads ticked loudly in the silence that followed Vector's statement.

"So... the portrait can make you immortal...?" asked Harry, desperately wishing he didn't sound so idiotic.

To his relief, Vector did not laugh at him. She shook her head. "No, Harry. The portrait is a *reflection* see how the runes are aligned in a mirror image of each other? This is an *inverse speculation*. Now the last time I saw this pattern of runes was when I took an elective course back at Salem." At his blank expression, she smiled. "I mean I opted to take extra classes," she explained.

He nodded and gestured that she carry on. Septima took a breath. Her eyes were shining. "The course was on Egyptian attitudes towards the afterlife. It was really exciting to see how the Muggle theories matched up to the wizarding papyri.... The *Books of the Dead* each have slightly different variations, and this one," she picked up a worn scroll from her desk and waved it at him, "is called the *Book of Thoth*, and it is perhaps the most interesting of all."

"*Book of Thoth*," repeated Harry slowly, trying hard to keep up with this second line of reasoning.

"Sure." Septima's enthusiasm was overtaking her. "The *Book of Thoth* contains a set of instructions that mortals can follow in the afterlife so that they can move through the netherworld and break into heaven to converse with the gods. My old professor at Salem postulated that the *Book* was really a coded reference to being able to live forever you know, to 'keep talking to gods', so to speak."

"So, the portrait lets someone live forever? So why...?"

"Oh no, Harry. The portrait is a *reflection* I told you that the runes are *inverted*. There must be an original someplace that is the source of the power. The thing that gives you the necessary ability to extend your life indefinitely."

*Hang on*, thought Harry. "Like the Philosopher's Stone?" he blurted out, remembering his first year in a rush.

"Well, the Stone isn't the only magical thing that can preserve life, Harry, now is it? We know that unicorn blood can be used, for example, despite the damage that it causes. But there are other methods from other wizarding traditions that have been thought to be as effective as the Resurrection Stone and the Philosopher's Stone, and not all of them utilise Dark Magic for their success."

"So, let me get this straight," Harry said. "You are suggesting that there is something *somewhere* that can make people immortal, that is currently being reflected in this portrait of one of my best friends and a dead man. Something that may be connected to the *Book of Thoth*...?"

"Uh-huh," Septima agreed. "I'm just working on the specific time frame which will fix the temporal parameters in place.... But that doesn't really help to explain why Hermione is flat out in St Mungo's." She sighed. "Or how we can wake her up."

"How would the artifact work?" Harry asked.

Septima frowned. "Well, you would need something to activate it. Something that would make the runes function and key it into a specific genetic code or individual."

Harry pictured Hermione's face as she had been lying on the hospital bed when he had first seen her in Napoli. The pale skin, the bruised cheekbone, the dressing on her forehead covering up that nasty gash where she had cut herself on the mosaic floor...

"Blood!" Harry nearly shouted, springing to his feet. Septima frowned, considering the idea carefully, running her quill carefully between her fingers.

"Yup," the American Arithmancer allowed finally, "blood might just do it."

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A/N2: Luna is dreamily quoting Shakespeare more specifically, part of a speech by Ophelia in Hamlet.

## Chapter 18

*Chapter 19 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: All praises to JKR for inventing the Potterverse. Huge thanks to beawesley2 and Clairvoyant for their marvellous advice, support, and grammatical know-how. Thank you also to those of you who take the time to review ("bows low").

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## Chapter 18

She felt the earth tremble as she crossed the lane from Snape's house to the *Via Stabiana*, the main northern road to the Vesuvius Gate. It was only a shadow of the larger earthquake that had struck two days previously; nevertheless, the feeling of the ground shaking beneath her feet was enough to cause her to stumble slightly. She clutched the bottle of the Metamorphmagus Potion to her chest for safety and turned instinctively to look up at the mountain.

Vesuvius stood quiescent, the cylindrical cone tip of the volcano just visible above the buildings of the city.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Hermione pictured the magma chamber beneath the mountain, the rising lava, the increasing pressure within the rocks, and the inevitable explosion and raining death that was to come. Fighting her beating heart and the irrational desires to run home, cast the strongest Protego Charm she possibly could, and bury herself within the safety of the walls of Snape's house, she forced herself once more to think only of the task ahead of her in the short term.

She must find Sabazios and deliver the potion.

Only the prospect of more of this magical substance, to enhance his followers' and his own powers, would be sufficient to contain the god within the walls of the city for the time being.

She hoped.

The tremor was over very quickly within a few seconds and beyond a few cries of alarm, there was no panicked reaction like there had been two days previously. Hermione looked about her to gauge the reaction of people on the street, but it seemed very much like business as usual on the pavements around her.

Or perhaps that was not quite the case.

Hermione had been concentrating on remembering the route to the *Castellum Aquae* the first place she was going to look for signs of Sabazios and his cult. She had been so lost, picturing the interior specifications of the *Castellum* and considering alternatives should that place prove empty, that she was barely taking in the details of civic life in the streets.

As she continued to make progress along the *Via Stabiana*, Hermione could not shake the impression that all was not quite as it should have been. The street was quite quiet compared to what she had come to know as Pompeian standards. While there was some evidence of preparations being made for the festival, she had the distinct impression that the local residents did not seem to be as excited by the prospect as they might have been. A number of shops were still closed, and while there were a few bars opening up for the lunchtime trade, the feeling in the street was subdued and restrained.

The *Vulcanalia* was a major event in the festival diary of this provincial city. Of course, it had taken on a greater significance to the modern archaeologist because of what came less than a day later in AD 79, but even so, she would have expected more excitement and more preparations than she was seeing in one of the major thoroughfares of the city.

She skirted past a house with a large ox cart that was stopped outside the front door. The cart was being loaded up with various goods from inside. Hermione watched two slaves carefully balance an elaborate, ornamented dining couch on top of a patterned rug on the cart. As soon as they had finished propping up the *lectus* safely in the cart, a further pair of slaves brought an ornamental iron brazier out and attempted to fit it in the front of the cart alongside the *lectus*.

"Moving out?" Hermione surprised herself by asking the question of another slave who had just emerged from the house and was now waiting to pass up an armful of cooking vessels to the cart. The young man looked her up and down, shrugged and bobbed his head before answering her.

"The Master has decided to take the family to his estate out of town for the rest of the summer." The boy's accent was quite thick, but she found that she could understand him due to Snape's translation spell, which *still* seemed to be holding despite Snape's incapacitation. He passed the cooking vessels up to another servant who was stacking the goods carefully on top of the cart.

*Just in time*, Hermione thought, darting another look at the tip of the silent volcano. She looked back at the heavily laden cart. *I hope they make it. I hope where they are going is far enough.*

She continued to walk north along the *Via Stabiana* towards the Vesuvius Gate and the *Castellum Aquae*. The temperature was almost intolerable at this time of day in the city. There was no breeze, and the heat seemed to radiate upwards from the pavement slabs, burning her skin and making her head throb. Hermione felt a dribble of sweat run past her shoulder blades under the coarse material of the *tunica* she was wearing.

She was looking for a large brick-built civic structure about forty feet high. She pictured the exterior of the giant cistern, remembering the arches on the front of the building, the detail of the architraves, the arrangement of the pilasters in the external decoration. She knew that it would be jutting slightly out into the street and flanked by a town house on either side. There was no modern idea of zoning in this city. She smiled and shook her head. The excavations here had changed how historians understood the development and function of Roman cities. The sense of class that so dominated later town planning seemed to be entirely absent in this ancient urban environment. Shops butted up against bakeries, taverns stood next door to fulleries, and the rich lived hand-in-jowl with the poor.

Her nerves jangled louder and louder the closer she walked towards her destination. Despite having eaten and drunk something before leaving Snape's house, she found herself fighting a hungry, empty feeling in her belly as she walked along the street. It was becoming harder to keep calm and focused on the task ahead.

Not that she really had much of a specific plan for the task, *per se*, beyond 'find Sabazios, give him the potion, try to get back home'.

*And save Severus*, her treacherous mind added quietly.

She shivered again despite the burning sun. Hermione was *aplanner*. She had no idea *how* she was going to do these things, and all this lets-see-how-this-works-out, seat-of-the-pants business was utterly *terrifying*.

She had a sudden, profound sense of *déjà vu* and a mad urge to shout for help to Harry and Ron.

The potion weighed heavily in her arms, sloshing about in the bottle as she walked.

She kept walking, looking ahead with resolution towards her goal, her heart hammering painfully in her chest.

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*This stool is still damned uncomfortable!* Aulus Vettius Conviva wriggled in his chair, wondering again for the umpteenth time why he had agreed to stay in this odd cavern, staring at an unconscious man and sitting on an insubstantial cushion.



Hermione had said that he wouldn't wake up. Or that if he *did*, he had to tell him that she didn't care what he'd done and she forgave him... or some other ridiculous, female nonsense. He looked again at his friend's face. He was an ugly sod. Hooked nose, greasy hair, sallow face despite his tan. *Too thin by half*, Conviva thought, looking at Snape's ribs, the jutting edge of his recently set collarbone. Marcella was forever trying to feed him up. *What does the girl see in him?* Two lines of doggerel he'd heard recently popped into his head unbidden:

*"If, from the baths, you hear a round of applause/*

*Maron's giant prick is bound to be the cause!"*

He sniggered at that thought, tempted to look beneath the line of the blanket that covered his friend's hips and lower body. Snorting again, but then feeling mildly guilty for his juvenile behaviour, Conviva returned his attention to Severus' face.

Conviva could not shake the impression of great tension exuding from the silent body beside him, even though Severus had not moved a muscle since they had settled him back down onto the bed. Sweat was running freely down the injured man's face. The bruises beneath the skin of his face and shoulder were still livid and unpleasant looking, although (Conviva frowned) there must have been something wrong with his eyesight because he could have sworn that the bruises seemed less extensive than when he had first sat down next to the man.

Despite the apparent calm of Severus' features, there was a profound tension in the atmosphere. Conviva remembered the odd feeling in the air when he had first arrived in the rooms to be faced by a wild-looking Hermione pointing a stick at him. The air felt the same again now. It was almost *buzzing*. Conviva's skin was tingling, as if goose flesh was breaking out all over him. It felt... otherworldly... ghostly... mysterious.... He shook his head to banish such thoughts. *Rubbish! You're thinking like an uneducated slave, Conviva. Only the gods can do magic.*

He shifted again in his uncomfortable seat.

*Oh, Mercury fuck it, my arse is sore!* He stood up, wincing and rubbing his left buttock.

Conviva cleared his throat and looked around him. *"Do not touch anything"* she had said to him. *Mmmmmm*. If he had only ever followed instruction, he and his brother would never have made enough money to buy their freedom from that pig Prometheus.

Severus had never allowed his friends into this area of his house before.

Conviva was intrigued by the contents of the little pots and containers that were sitting on the shelves and benches around the room. *And where is the light coming from that is illuminating this place? We're underground, aren't we? Mmmmmm... I'll just have a little look around....*

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Hermione felt the uncomfortable tension of the city wards prick on her skin before she saw the building that she was looking for.

The *Castellum Aquae*, a huge holding cistern for the waters of the Augustan Aqueduct, had fallen into disuse over the past seventeen years. Rather than risk the loss of water further down the line of the Aqueduct in larger and more important cities like Neapolis, the Roman state authorities had refused to reopen the Pompeian spur of the *Aquae Augusta*, after the destruction of the earthquake in 62.

Without pausing for self-doubt, Hermione muttered a quick Alohomora Charm and pushed open the heavy oak door and walked in.

With a gasp of intuition and a rush of adrenaline, she knew immediately that she was in the right place. Dancing torches, which illuminated the narrow passageway and high vaulted ceiling with flickering flames, lit the corridor that she had walked into. The atmosphere in the hallway was warm and dry, unlike the damp tunnels that led to the Manticore's cell. No one was in sight, but she could hear faint echoes of low singing voices, rhythmic drumbeats, and the high wailing sound of an *aulos* flute from out of sight. The corridor sloped away from her, and she could see steps cut into the earth leading downwards into the darkness.

Assuming the demeanour of a put-upon slave girl, keeping her mind as blank as possible, and trying to keep her pounding heart from giving her away, Hermione Granger moved with trembling determination onwards.

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Conviva moved slowly around the darkened room, exploring. He was an inquisitive man with a finely honed sense of mischief. He moved towards the shelves at the side of the room, fascinated by the broken pots and bottles on display. *Why on earth are most of them cracked or broken?* Severus' spiky handwriting could be seen on a number of the little containers, and Conviva found himself mouthing the unfamiliar words as he tried to make out the writing.

He could both read and write, something he was immensely proud of. He and his brother had been taught to read by the old slave bailiff of his master's estate. The *vilicus* had undertaken the task when Conviva and his brother had shown that they were intelligent enough to learn. As a result, Conviva now kept his own ledgers and tallies; it was, after all, the only way for him to ensure he wasn't being ripped off by his own household slaves as he and his brothers had ripped off his old master.

*What in Hades is 'Murtlap'?* he thought idly as he prodded the contents of one pot, sniffing suspiciously at the sweet scent that erupted from the powdered substance. Further investigations yielded few answers. Conviva recognised some of the plant leaves in the clay containers, but by no means all. He poked and prodded, moving slowly from one little broken container to the next. *Mmmmmm*. He sniffed one that made his eyes smart, another that seemed to make his eyes cross for a few seconds, and another that cause him to sneeze violently.

Chastened, he moved his attention to the bench and the metal cooking pot with its shimmering silver contents. He looked inside. Hermione had taken about half of the contents away, but something about the remains of the liquid inside it was off-putting although he didn't really know why. Perhaps it was the way it seemed to be roiling and churning within the container that made him feel a little queasy.

He looked at the sheaf of parchment beside the pot, and as with the labels on the broken pots, he was concerned that he didn't recognise the words on the pages. It seemed to be in a different language, *but Severus only spoke Latin, didn't he?* Conviva shot a quick, nervous look at his insensible companion. Severus was still silent and unmoving on the trestle bed, but Conviva could not shake the feeling that *something* was about to happen. An air of expectation filled the space around and above the unconscious man. Telling himself that he was being ridiculous, Conviva moved away from the bench and turned his attention to trying to find the natural source of the lighting in the room.

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Hermione made her way slowly down the stairs towards the noise of drumming and revelry, her throat dry and adrenaline coursing through her like acid.

She was perspiring freely underneath the harsh material of her borrowed *tunica*, her palms so slick with sweat that she had to grip the square shape of the glass bottle tightly to prevent it from slipping through her hands. She kept remembering what Severus had said about his encounter with Sabazios. He had underestimated the entity. Severus was one of the most accomplished Legilimens in the wizarding world, but Sabazios had looked straight into his mind and seen through his mental defences.

How the bloody hell was she going to prevent it from happening to her?

She understood the theory behind Occulmency, but she suspected that the experience of doing it would be very different from the theory. Books and cleverness can get you only so far.

It would be impossible for her to defend her mind against a skilled and powerful Legilimens, so she had resolved to try her hardest not to be put in the position of having to do it.

She had disguised herself as a simple slave, hoping that the god would simply accept her story that Severus had sent her along with the potion as a temporary gift while he was brewing more. She was simply the means of delivery while Snape was busy producing more of the potion. *It will work, it will work*, she repeated to herself.

She needed to avoid eye contact well, that would be easy; all the slaves she had encountered here, apart from Pertus, had avoided looking directly at their masters. She needed to be as passive as possible... deferential and submissive. Her mind needed to be calm and dull.

She paused on the stairs, leaning against the brick walls, forcing her breathing to slow...*In through the mouth, out through the nose*, she repeated to herself like a mantra.

She still missed her pendant.

His Horcrux.

...No.

*Push those thoughts away and bury them! Think only about the day-to-day life of a slave. Fetching water. Boiling it. Cleaning... washing... cooking. You don't know what is in the bottle; you only know that your master required you to bring it to this place. Go into the room. Offer the bottle to him, promise him more, and get away as quickly as you can.*

*Dull and blank, dull and blank.*

She pushed herself away from the wall and resumed her slow progress down the stairs.

At the base of the steps was another short corridor, and at its end stood a doorway.

Clutching the potion to herself like a talisman, and more frightened than she could remember being for a long time, she stepped through the doorway and into the chamber.

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"How do we know this isn't going to make her worse?" Robert's chin was set aggressively as he confronted the Healer by his daughter's sick bed.

"Robert..." Helen's voice cracked with emotion. She gripped his forearm with a restraining hand.

Professor Spleen frowned. "We are *Healers*, Mr Granger," he said, and his voice carried a trace of reproof that was not missed by Hermione's parents.

"The Mandrakes will not be ready for a few hours. Once they have been shredded and added to the potion, it will be ready to administer to Hermione. We will then see if this can reawaken her from the coma she is in."

"And if it doesn't work?" Helen's voice was quiet.

Healer Spleen smiled as encouragingly as he could. "Then we will look for other options, Mrs Granger. We won't give up on her, I promise you."

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Hermione stood uncertainly at the entrance to the chamber, trying to take in what she could see in front of her.

She was standing about fifteen feet above the floor of the hall at the top of a short flight of stone steps. Braziers in each corner of the room were lit and burned brightly. Beneath her, she could see an open space, some sixty feet square, with a sand-covered floor and concrete-lined walls. At the base of the chamber were low walls, arranged to guide water through the system and towards the various channels and aqueducts that had been designed to flow outwards from it. It was a giant, empty water tank.

Wait... *empty*?

She could still hear the noises of revelry, the drumbeats and moaning voices echoing around her, but as her eyes adjusted to the darkened space, she could see nothing at all in front of her aside from the sources of light in the room. She moved down the stone stairs into the tank, watching her step on the slippery surface.

Her feet crunched on the surface of the floor. Before she could look around any further, however, she felt a twisting and pulling in her guts and a spinning in her mind like she was experiencing Apparition, and the world turned dark.

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Suddenly, she found herself in a different place altogether. She stood, holding the bottle of Metamorphmagus Potion to her chest, in a huge chamber that was full of noise and people. She faltered backwards a few steps and winced as her head banged against the rock of the wall behind her.

*Where... what... how...?* Her mind was spinning crazily as she tried to take in her new surroundings while recovering from the disorientation of Apparition. She stumbled around, trying to make sense of what was happening. *Oh Merlin, where am I? More to the point, how do I get out of here?* Her courage escaped her for a moment, and she sagged, almost losing her grip on the glass potion bottle in her arms.

Her senses were overwhelmed.

Noise assailed her ears thundering, pounding beats that she could also feel reverberating through her chest. Music filled the air, spinning and whirling about her. The melody was harsh, strident, and utterly compelling.

The heat in the chamber was stifling... the atmosphere thick and almost unbearably humid. Hermione took some deep breaths to steady herself.

Different aromas filled her nostrils. Beyond the underlying sulphurous odour in the chamber, she could distinguish the sickly smell of burning herbs. She thought she could recognise the distinctive tang of rosemary, lavender, and something even sweeter than that. She looked around her again, trying to work out where she could be so she might have a hope of escape. *Would Apparition work here?* she wondered. She had been able to Side-Along Apparate Snape home from the Manticore tunnels....

The cavern was bathed in firelight, most of which was coming from a huge central fireplace, a giant brazier half-buried in the sandy ground in the centre of the room.

The walls of the chamber were rough and looked like black, igneous stone. The space was very large, about one hundred and fifty feet square. Huge, narrow, rough-hewn rock pillars supported the ceiling of the chamber. Hermione briefly made out primitive cave-paintings on the walls nearest to her before her attention was drawn once more to the people writhing and dancing around the central brazier in the chamber.

The initiates surrounded the central fire, dancing and twirling in the heat and light of the flames. Hermione had read about ecstatic rites before now indeed, she had written a number of academic papers on the subject herself but this was the first time since witnessing an ecstatic celebration in Gujarat that she had seen such a dance first hand.

The fire leapt higher and higher as the dancers, about fifty in number, twirled and twisted, leapt and grovelled, in concentric circles around the central brazier. Hermione watched, fascinated, as the dancers contorted themselves into increasingly frantic movements. They threw their bodies into the dance, abandoning themselves to the driving forces of the music and rhythms. They were naked apart from scraps of material and animal skins, their bodies were stained and painted with different coloured dyes, and each initiate carried a slim thyrsus staff in one hand. A deep wailing moan seemed to fill the cavern.

The beat from the drums grew further in intensity and volume, and the dancers picked up the pace in time to the insistent, driving rhythm that was guiding their movements.

The dance was increasingly sensual and compulsive. The initiates began to twirl and whirl even more closely around each other. Hermione had researched and written about the ecstatic frenzy of these ancient rituals, but the reality of seeing it was like nothing she had ever experienced.

Hermione was fascinated and appalled. The idea of losing control like this both intrigued and repelled her in almost equal measure. As she watched the writhing figures moving together around the flames of the brazier, she was also reminded disturbingly about the last time she had lost control of her own body at Severus' hands.

Thoughts of Severus once more rose up in the forefront of her mind.

Ruthlessly, she suppressed them.

No one seemed to have noticed her standing awkwardly against the rough wall of the chamber. She shrank instinctively into a small, natural alcove in the rock of the wall and continued to observe her surroundings in an attempt to plan her future escape. When the dancers parted for a moment, Hermione caught a glimpse of a dais at the far end of the cavern. On the raised platform, she saw a fine dining couch and a small group of people surrounding a figure that was reclining on the fine cushions.

The dancers whirled past again and obscured her view, so she looked elsewhere, trying to get a sense of the layout of the cavern, trying to calm her breathing and ease her hammering heart as she adjusted to this frightening new environment. Beyond the flame of the central brazier and along the opposite sidewall of the chamber to the side of the dais, she thought she could see the outline of a number of large metal cages in the shadows. It was impossible to see inside the cages with any clarity, but she was sure that they were occupied. Dark shapes were moving within them. *Animals? Humans?* She wasn't sure.

A fierce shout from the assembled worshippers drew her attention again to the dais. Slowly, the figures on the platform were moving backwards from a central point, their arms raised and heads bowed. The music was peaking, the drums thunderous, the screeching tone of the *auloi* reaching higher and higher.

Hermione's heart failed her again as she saw the central figure on the couch stand up and reveal itself slowly to the assembled initiates. It was in the shape of a man, a beautiful golden figure with glorious curling locks of hair that fell beyond his shoulders in thick swathes. A fine gown was draped about him and around his hips, revealing a naked torso that glittered and shone in the firelight.

There was something very feminine about the sinuous way that the figure moved, and yet the set of its muscles and the deliberation of its actions were emphatically masculine also. It was terrifying and beautiful, compulsive and repulsive.

This, surely, was Sabazios.

She found herself staring at the being. She watched it move with grace and precision, raising its arms and slowly revolving in front of its worshippers. Hermione could not help being intimidated by the presence of this creature.

The response from the dancers was immediate and intense. They howled and screamed, pushing their bodies into an ever more extreme frenzy.

Sabazios looked on with what seemed to be a gentle and benign smile worn on its face.

Hermione looked more closely at the deity's features and found it hard to concentrate. Its face seemed to shimmer and glisten, and Hermione thought in a moment of clarity, *That's some sort of Concealment Charm. Whatever Sabazios really looks like, I don't think it... he... really looks like this....*

With a final frenzied flourish, the dancers appeared to spin in the air, and then with a crash of cymbals and a clash of drums, they collapsed on the floor, insensate.

Sabazios gradually sank backwards onto the cushions of his ornate couch. He was immediately attended by his close acolytes, who offered him food on golden platters. The god was still smiling with indulgent peace on his followers, clearly delighted that they had spent themselves so utterly in their worship of him.

Hermione realised that she had been holding her breath and slowly let it out. She felt strangely calm in the heady silence following the rite. She had no idea where she was, how she was going to get back from there, or what she was doing. The only move now that she could make was towards the shining god on the raised platform at the end of the cavern.

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Conviva was growing ever more uncomfortable in the underground chamber, having spent a confusing ten minutes testing the flames in the sconces against the walls finding them bizarrely cool to the touch before being drawn back to the body on the trestle bed.

He was shocked to see that the bruises on Severus' face were now faded to dull yellows and pale greens. The grazes and bruises on his shoulder were also much changed. They seemed far less angry and livid.

Conviva had lived through much hardship in his life, and he was not about to be intimidated by a man who was not even moving. Scowling a little at his own nervousness, Conviva picked up the dampened cloth and wiped the sweat from his friend's face, neck, and shoulders. Severus' skin contracted as the cold cloth stroked across it, and Conviva felt a corresponding shiver run through him. The feeling of *intensity* in the room seemed to increase yet further, although Severus' features remained as impassive as ever.

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Hermione stepped towards the dais, schooling herself to keep her head down and her eyes on the floor. She held the bottle containing the swirling potion in both hands and out in front of her. As she approached the podium, she could see that Sabazios' close attendants had noticed her. Startled voices were raised as the god's attention was drawn to her presence.

She risked a glance upwards and was immediately aware of the god's attention on her. She looked quickly away from the shining creature and towards the acolytes to see if Marcus Fiducius was one of them. If she was recognised, then her disguise would immediately be worthless. To her relief, she did not see the *Aedile* among Sabazios' attendants on the platform.

She took a further step forwards and cleared her throat. Her mouth was dry. She had tried to rehearse what she was going to say as she had walked through the city towards the *Castellum*, but everything she had thought of had seemed either pretentious or trite.

*Nothing for it*, she thought. "Mighty Sabazios," she began, striving for the stumbling words of a humble house slave. "God of all. Most powerful and glorious of gods. I bring a gift from my master, Severus the Healer. He has brewed more of the Metamorphmagus Potion for you... so that you may be pleased... and more... err... exalted, oh mighty ruler. He sends his greetings, but he has been injured in acquiring the ingredients for the potion, and... he... umm... needs only a day longer to recover before he will

be able to make larger quantities of the potion for you. Mighty king."

With trembling hands, she proffered the glass bottle of the swirling silver-coloured liquid. She stood as still as she could for what seemed like ages, tension thrumming through her frame, hoping to all the heavens that Sabazios would take the offering *and let her go*.

For seconds, all she could hear was her own beating heart, thumping fast and strong in her chest, and then she heard a hiss of breath being taken and a sibilant whisper.

Fingers plucked the bottle from her hands, and she allowed her arms to fall back numbly to her sides. She held her breath. *Had it worked? Would he stay?*

The silence stretched on and on.

Hermione fought her instinct to look up again at the figure before her.

Thinking quickly, she dropped to her knees and stretched her hands out in front of her in the dust of the floor.

There was another sibilant whisper, the quiet pop of the cork being released, a pause, and then a low chuckle of laughter.

Hermione screwed her eyes closed. *Please, oh please, oh please, oh please* she whispered to herself in her mind.

"Get up, little one," the god commanded, its voice seemingly modulated in different layers of sound.

Hermione struggled to her feet on numb limbs. She felt hands take hold of her upper arms and forced herself not to react, to stay in character the humble, subservient slave. She kept her eyes lowered.

"Look at me, girl," the god's voice instructed her once more. "I wish to speak with you."

Hazarding all, Hermione shook her head, keeping her head down. "I... I cannot, master," she said respectfully, "I cannot look into the face of a god."

There was a pause, laced with possibilities and hope.

Then... a chuckle. High-pitched and girlish. So out of place in this environment.

"Oh, Doctor Hermione Granger, if only that were the case," Sabazios said, and laughed once more.

She shot a shocked, naked look at him and realised that all was lost.

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\*Second Author's Note: Conviva is remembering Marcus Valerius Martialis' epigram 9:3, a contemporary poet of the time....

## Chapter 19

*Chapter 20 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: All praise to JKR and her world. Grateful thanks to the incomparable beaweasley2 and Clairvoyant for their help and support. I am sorry that this has taken so long to get to you, particularly as I left you all hanging with an evil cliffie (TM) I had to finish my first SS/HG Exchange fic before the deadline! Here we go....

### Chapter 19

Hermione felt a cold finger beneath her skin. Her chin was tilted upwards, and she looked into Sabazios' face. To her surprise, she felt the unmistakable shiver of personal wards. This creature... this *god*... was surrounded not just by normal concealment charms these glamours seemed also to be some sort of magical shield.

She wondered why a god would need to make use of glamours and personal wards?

It was hard to focus on what she was looking at. The god's features shimmered and seemed to blur in a manner that owed nothing to the great burning brazier behind them. It was deeply disconcerting. Hermione caught her breath and was ashamed to feel her body begin to respond to the featherlight touch of his fingers on her skin.

This was not the arousal that she had felt when Severus had kissed her all earthy excitement and promise; rather, she felt possessed and constricted like an object or a *thing* in the creature's grasp. She shivered, but that only served to increase the uncomfortable feeling of stimulation that she was experiencing.

It was *perfect*. It was frightening. It was terrible.

Hermione forced herself to try to be calm, to think of nothing, to make her mind a blank space. She stared into Sabazios' eyes and became lost in their golden depths.

The god smiled at her, and she quailed in the face of such implacable beauty.

"So, my dear," Sabazios' musical voice reverberated with uncomfortable harmonics, "why are you *really* here, then, mmmmm?"

"I... I have told you, my lord." Hermione stumbled over her words. "I've brought you the potion you require from my... from Severus the Healer."

Sabazios chuckled mirthlessly again, tipping her head further backwards so that her whole throat was exposed.

"Is this who you say came to Severus from his world, Marcus?" the god drawled loudly, Hermione's chin still held in its fingers.

Hermione's heart sank when she heard a familiar voice.

"Oh yes, great lord." Marcus Fiducius' voice was smooth and urbane once more. Gone was the desperation of a few nights ago when he had threatened to drink her blood in the little darkened room at Conviva's house. Hermione swivelled her eyes around to try to catch sight of the *Aedile*, but he was just out of her vision.

"And you say that Severus is very fond of her?" Sabazios asked, tilting its head thoughtfully from side to side as it continued to regard her with consideration.

Fiducius moved a little closer, almost to the god's shoulder, and Hermione could now see him. The *Aedile's* face was calm, but his eyes seemed to glitter in the firelight. He was regarding her with a mixture of disdain and dislike, and the pulse beneath his left eye twitched and flickered. "Yes, my Lord. Severus seems to be... *attached* to the girl." The Pompeian met her stare with his own, and she briefly re-lived the unpleasant confrontation in the House of the Vettii when Severus had come to her rescue.

Sabazios tongue clicked in his mouth. "I wonder who you *really* are, little one," he purred. "What is *Doctor Hermione Granger*, mmmmm?"

Hermione could feel the faint points of his long nails on the vulnerable skin beneath her jaw. She had known that this would happen, and she had prepared for it. She fought to keep her thoughts vague and colourless. *Dull and blank, dull and blank, dull and blank*, she repeated over and over again in her mind.

*Impossible.*

Sabazios was in her thoughts, carefully picking his way through her initial attempts to keep everything empty and bare. Unbidden, she saw her own individual memories began to play in front of her much like when she had looked into Snape's consciousness.

Hermione understood the theory behind Occlumency. However, like Legilimency, it was a magical skill that she had only practised a little.

She knew that if she could entice Sabazios with certain memories, she stood a chance of keeping the creature away from what she did not wish him to know. She knew that she had to resist, had to fight, but she needed to be clever. He would push into her mind for her secrets, but she had to control what information she allowed him to see. They needed to be strong memories, ones that she had an emotional connection with. Sabazios wanted to know who she was. Perhaps if she gave him that, he could be kept away from more important concerns.

Praying that she could keep Sabazios away from finding out about the imminent volcanic eruption, Hermione concentrated as hard as she could to bring particular images to the forefront of her thoughts.

It *hurt*.

She felt her mind twist and yaw under the direction he was forcing her thoughts, and she fought back, pushing memories forward for the god to see.

Who was she *really*?

She felt him rip into images from her consciousness.

Hermione pushed images of her parents to the front of her mind. *Her father's scowls in the bathroom mirror as he fought to comb his hair into shape. Her mother delighting in taste of a really strong cup of coffee. Relaxing with her parents, perusing the Sunday newspapers in Melbourne as the sun shone brightly through the patio windows into the sitting room. Reading about Ron's Quidditch team's latest match. Seeing a picture of Ron spinning wildly on his broom to make the decisive save of the match, ever the hero.*

Hermione sensed Sabazios' distaste at the harmonious scene before him and felt him grasp onto her lingering sense of irritation at Ron's picture to follow her emotional link towards him.

*Suddenly, she was screaming at Ron as he threw his belongings into an expandable bag, his shoulders hunched and defensive.* Hermione threw a counter image across her consciousness of Ron laughing and sharing an ice cream sundae with her at Timis Gelato, a popular ice cream parlour in Brunswick Street. She looked about the room and sensed Sabazios' shock and interest in the glinting, reflective surfaces and the strange mechanical devices in the parlour. *She looked back at Ron. He had a smudge of whipped cream on his nose, which made him look rather boyish and attractive.*

Unbidden, her mind suddenly contorted. *Sharing another meal, a rough fry-up of foraged mushrooms and sorrel, sitting on logs in a cold autumnal camp site. Harry joining them, sitting down beside her.* Hermione fought to control her surge of emotion as she saw the memory of her tousled-haired friend, Slytherin's Locket around his neck. Sabazios became interested in the locket, but quickly, Hermione slammed herself into the memory of a storm of bats rushing past her from a cave at Goa Lalay in Java.

Sabazios recoiled with her as the creatures screamed over her head. Instinctively she ducked, terrified but enthralled, as they shot past her into the darkening evening light. Sabazios tried to follow her fear and terror, but Hermione, who had by now become used to the mental game they were playing, countered his thrust with another image of joy and discovery. *She was uncovering a beautiful mosaic image of a dancing girl. The detail was exquisite, and Hermione allowed the rush of excitement that she always felt when she found something that had been lost.*

*Lost?* Snape filled her mind suddenly, strong, confident, and comfortable in *histunica*, walking with her through the city, and Hermione realised that Sabazios had caught her with a sly manoeuvre and was prying into her feelings about Severus. She struggled to repel him, but her own confusion and upset at her strange situation made the action doubly difficult.

A barb of pain spiked through her as Sabazios pushed further into her thoughts.

*Snape stalking along a corridor at Hogwarts, hooded, tense, and bitter as she had first known him... spinning around in front of her, his pale chin jutting out, spittle flying from his mouth, features twisted into fury.... Then lying lifeless and bloodied on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.... Later than that, his pale form, peaceful and composed, dressed in fine cloth as they lowered him with their magic into the granite tomb next to Dumbledore's.* With a huge effort, Hermione pulled back from the images, trying to deny Sabazios any views of the magical world she had largely left behind eleven years before.

Sabazios hummed a little in his throat, his head falling to one side as he weighed her up. "Your mind feels... different than these others," he said as he made a dismissive gesture at Fiducius and the other acolytes. "Hmmmmmm. More *deeply*, I think...." One hand slid around to grasp her throat while the other cupped the back of her head in a parody of a lover's embrace. Hermione's body spasmed into an arch as the god's presence in her mind redoubled.

*Who is this human in front of me?* The question rolled lazily through her consciousness. She felt the barbs of the god's Legilimency spike once more into her thoughts.

She caught onto his question and determined to show him only her 'Muggle' life in Australia. *She was in a library, researching for her doctorate, revelling in her fascination with Archaeology, her search for answers, her dogged determination to succeed. She revisited her graduation at Maquarie, standing in line to receive her doctorate from the vice chancellor, her heart pounding with pride and satisfaction. Doctor Hermione Granger. Finally!*

*Now she was screaming at Ron the last of their rows.* As the images played out in her mind, she relived the feelings of liberation and numbness that seared through her as she watched him pack his bags and leave for good.

Sabazios tried to follow her trail of emotions again, but Hermione pushed forward her experiences in Pompeii. *Her excitement and interest in the houses, roads, and shops that she had seen; her fascination with the architecture and the unusual layout of Snape's house: the beautiful peristyle garden, the decorated rooms, the atrium, the potions laboratory; the feeling of protection and safety that the house offered to them.* Her mind lingered in particular on Snape's private bath suite with its deep marble bath and the grinning mosaic skeleton on the floor.

Abruptly, Sabazios recoiled away from her mind, as if stung, but its hands still clutched tightly around her head. Hermione sagged, but forced herself to stand upright, taking great raking breaths to keep conscious, to recover from the mental assault she had just endured.

"That place..." Sabazios gripped her jaw, and Hermione whimpered at the harsh contact of his fingers. "That is where your... *master*... lives?"

Hermione was confused. Why was Sabazios interested in Snape's house after everything he had seen in her mind? She gasped as Sabazios' hands moved upwards from her jaw, digging his fingers into the skin on either side of her skull.

"Is it?" it insisted, its face close to hers, its features shimmering unpleasantly.

"Yes, lord," Hermione whimpered.

"What do you know of it? Why is he there? The flooring... Where is the shrine in the basement?"

For once, Hermione did not need to dissemble. She was genuinely confused by his questions. Beside her she heard Fiducius shift uncomfortably.

"There there is no shrine, lord," she choked out. "Only his... ahh... workspace, and his bath suite...."

"And how did he come to live in *this* house, this potions man with so many secrets?"

Hermione's heart was beating wildly. She was lightheaded with panic. *What's he talking about? What's so special about Snape's house, and why does Sabazios seem to know about it?* "...I don't know, lord.... He has lived there for years." She twisted in his grip, her eyes falling on Fiducius, who was looking distinctly uncomfortable. Again, Hermione felt that she was missing a crucial piece of information. "Fiducius helped him to find it when he needed a place to live," she gasped. "Please, may I return to him? I will bring more potions to you."

Sabazios' eyes narrowed, its fingers convulsing again on her face and neck as it thrust again into her mind, searching through image after image of Severus' Pompeian home, as if searching for something, relentlessly tossing aside each image as she parried and danced, pushing memory after memory at the shining god. Soon, he caught the startling image of Snape naked on the edge of his bath, healing his wounds. With a growl of something like triumph, Sabazios pounced on the arousal she had felt as she stared at the muscles writhing beneath Severus' skin as he rubbed the healing salve into his bruises. Desperate to avoid Sabazios following *that* emotional line, Hermione countered with the shocking image of Pertus, his head caved in, blood clotting in his hair, his sightless eyes shining in the moon- and torchlight, the terrible sorrow that she felt at the slave's death. But then, all too soon, she was staring again at Severus, watching him care for Pertus' body and performing the funeral rite for him, silent tears running down his face, his jaw set and brows fiercely furrowed. Her heart constricted at the sight, her hands twitched, wanting to reach forward, to console him... to comfort him...

Suddenly, she felt the god pull away from her memories and heard the god's laughter. She screwed her eyes shut in relief and reeled in his hands as her head swam.

Sabazios laughed again, and Hermione's teeth were set on edge by the sound of that high, girlish giggle. The god bent over her once more. She dared not open her eyes, but she could feel the creature's hot breath on her cheek. "So, little one... Severus is something more to you than just your *owner*?" he hissed.

She said nothing, and then she heard the unpleasant sound of him sniffing her face and neck and recoiled instinctively as a long and narrow tongue licked her cheek and lips.

"You taste of Severussss. Why can I smell his blood in you?" the god mused, and Hermione shuddered slightly as she caught the sibilance in the observation. Calling upon reserves of energy she didn't know that she had, she stiffened in its arms, hardly daring to breathe and uncertain of what her response to that question should be. She decided not to answer again and to hope that the question had been rhetorical.

Time dragged by in tortured seconds. Her pulse pounded in her constricted throat. She began to see faint stars in her vision behind her shut eyelids.

"Take her," the god ordered abruptly, and she felt strong hands grip her upper arms on either side. "Put her in with the others. I will see to her later."

Sabazios released his grip on her head and neck, and she dropped her chin to her breastbone immediately, praying that her ordeal would be over and that she would soon be able to get away. She was not sure she could sustain another Legilimency attack from the smiling god.

"But, my lord... the potion maker..." Fiducius voice held just the right level of cautious obsequiousness. He was clearly nervous at the prospect of meeting Severus again.

Hermione held her breath and strained her hearing as she waited for the god's response.

"Severus will come. Do not doubt it," Fiducius pressed. "He will not be able to prevent himself from playing the hero. I have seen enough of him to know it. We *need* the potion, Master, if we are to grow even stronger...."

"Marcus... *Marcusss*..." Sabazios' voice was mockingly confident. "You must not be concerned, my son. I will not allow any mere *human* to best ussss, no matter how many clever tricks and potions he has. There are other ways for humans to escape their humanity."

In the pause that followed, Hermione could hear her heartbeat thump in her throat. She swallowed roughly. Her legs shook with the effort of remaining as still as she could.

"Besides, my dear Marcusss," Sabazios said eventually, "We hold Severus's *special* friend. He will come, but he will also do exactly what I wish him to do. Or the consequences for this little one...." Hermione heard a shared chuckle between Fiducius and the god and felt sick. She had thought to appease Sabazios and buy herself time to decode the portrait. *What a bloody fool!*

Hermione kept her head down and her eyes focused on the ground. Abruptly, she felt herself pulled backwards, away from the dais, and she stumbled but fought to remain on her feet, back peddling through the harsh grit of the cavern's floor.

She was being half-dragged and half-carried towards one of the metal cages at the side of the cavern. The door to the cage was opened, and she was thrust roughly inside, coming to rest with a barely contained cry of pain, sprawled on her knees upon the floor.

She could smell sweat and the sickly sweet smell of urine in the cage.

Hermione rose to her hands and knees, panting with the effort of clearing her head, using the bars of the cage to pull herself upright. She looked through the cage towards the dais.

A trembling acolyte poured a measure of the Metamorphmagus Potion into a shallow bowl and offered it to the golden figure. Sabazios delicately dipped its finger into the bowl's contents and raised it to its lips. Its eyes fluttered closed as it tasted the brew. The aura around Sabazios pulsed and grew in intensity. The god smiled and then drained the remaining contents of the bowl.

Hermione's watched as its body seemed to blur before her eyes, appearing for a moment to change shape. She had a brief, horrible vision of a mass of bloated flesh wound about by snakes. She blinked, disbelievingly, and saw his form reassemble into the image of a perfectly formed human body once more.

Hermione watched, thinking, *I brewed that potion. I caused this. I made this happen.* She realised that Severus carried this guilt, too, and wondered how he had borne it for so long.

The figures on the platform were moving around Sabazios. She was too far away to be able to make out the individuals' faces. They were all wearing long, dark hooded robes. She shivered uncontrollably. The parallel with Voldemort's Death Eaters was appallingly clear. She watched as one of the acolytes carefully decanted tiny quantities of the potion into smaller terracotta cups before placing the bottle and its remaining liquid on a small table to the right of Sabazios' cushioned couch.

Sabazios' men moved silently around him, holding a cup each in both hands. At the god's signal, each man raised the cup high above his head and then drained its contents.

"My lord, the *time*..." Fiducius' voice was laced with excitement. Hermione felt the vibration of uncontrolled magical energy in the room.

"Aaah, yes, I did promise my loyal subjects the opportunity to enjoy some of the pleasures of the city, did I not? It is time. Gather the acolytes, Marcus. We shall go and explore the city. Tonight, my children, you will walk with me as gods upon the earth!"

"My lord... What about the humans?" Fiducius' voice was cautious and strangely deep *was that from the effect of the potion?* Hermione wondered.

"What of them?" replied Sabazios. "The dancers will guard them. They will serve me later, as all humanity shall. Now, my children! *Engorgio!*"

Hermione's grasped the bars of the cage and pulled herself into a seated position in the shadows, watching with widening eyes as the god seemed to grow physically in stature and become larger and larger. As he grew, he appeared to shine more brightly, become even more painful to look at, his glammers increasing in intensity and pulsing with energy. He spread his hands out and swept them around him.

To her horror, she saw the others also begin to grow in size until they were almost fifteen feet tall. The god laughed in delight and then led his followers from the podium, past the brazier and the circle of unconscious dancers lying about it. They walked with aggressive purpose in the wake of Sabazios. When they reached the other side of the cavern, she saw them disappear into the shadows.

Hermione shuddered with relief.

She turned around and slid down the bars until her bottom thumped onto the floor. She put her head in her hands and shakily tried to come to terms with the events of the last few hours.

She felt in her *tunica* for her wand, which she had tucked into a Transfigured pocket on the inside of her clothing. It was still there. She rubbed the place between her breasts where her pendant usually lay.

*Gone.*

She let out a shaky sigh.

The more she thought about it now, the greater the difference she felt between Slytherin's locket and the old perfume bottle. While the locket had seemed to leach all hope and optimism out of the wearer, she had always felt that the little bottle had soothed and calmed her.

Well, she was certainly feeling far from calm and soothed now.... Her chest was aching without it, and she felt desperately uncomfortable.

She should not have felt upset like this *without* the thing around her neck, surely?

She considered her feelings for Snape. Again, she was astonished at how quickly her feelings had grown for him and how strongly they affected her here in this place.

Hermione was not much of a romantic in real life, but she had made an exception to that emotional rule for the memory of Severus. It was embarrassingly true that, for years, she had put the dead wizard on a pedestal... had idolised him, even. She had admired his self-sacrifice and dedication to his duty. She had been envious of his determination to do the right thing, to follow Dumbledore's orders, even though it made him a murderer who would be hated, his actions misinterpreted and misunderstood.

A shrewd Muggle psychiatrist had once told her that she was simply using the memory of Snape as a means to keep others at a safe emotional distance. Naturally, she had disagreed with his suggestion and had refused to go back to revisit the therapist. She had been frightened, both by her transparency and his insight.

She now blushed when she considered the stupid, girlish crush she'd had and compared her feelings for the dead martyr to the living man. Meeting Severus, working with him here in this world and in this *time*, sharing some of his secrets, seeing something more of his own cares and feelings, had put flesh on his bones and had turned him from a revered image to an earth-bound reality.

She wondered how far the Horcrux that she wore around her neck had controlled those feelings.

Now that she'd had time to distance herself from her actions, she was beginning to suspect that knocking Snape out and bringing the potion herself to Sabazios had been more of a grand and foolish gesture than a practical act.

*Oh God, I wish he was here.* She rubbed her face with her hands, regretting the strength of the hex that she had used on him. Unthinkingly, she had removed any chance of a rescue. Hadn't *she* been the one who made the argument about them working together in this place? She was on her own. Idiot. *Idiot.*

She grasped her wand, thought of the Stunning Spell she had used and said, *Finite Incantatem!* as loudly as she could in her mind. Maybe it would work... although she feared that it would not. She sighed. There was surely no way he could break through that curse and awaken. It would take a superhuman effort of will to be able to do so.

Well, part of the plan had worked. Sabazios had given every sign of wanting to stay around in the city. She was still alive, and the god did not appear to know about the imminent eruption. At least she had kept that from him.

The only problem was... This cavern looked as if it was too deep in the earth to be affected by the eruption. She had to find some way of drawing him out of this safe environment to allow the volcano to destroy him if indeed that were even possible.

Snape's plan now seemed to be far less of a sure thing from her new perspective.

*Then* there was the issue of how in Merlin's name she was going to manipulate the portrait runes to enable them to escape this time and return home.

She allowed her head to loll backwards against the metal bar of the cage, her eyes still shut in exhaustion. *Okay, she thought tiredly, what's your next move, Hermione?*

A scuffling noise in front of her made her open her eyes quickly in alarm.

Sweet Merlin! She had forgotten about the animals in the cages!

Her fingers tightened on the smooth wood of her wand, and she pushed her hair back from her sweaty brow as she peered into the darkness of the cage before her.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see a small group of figures, clumped together at the furthest end of the cage. She relaxed as she began to make out human forms rather than bestial.

Hermione saw one figure break away from the group of cowering figures in the shadows at the rear of the cage and begin to crawl towards her haltingly. Her fingers tightened defensively again on her wand. Caged, desperate humans could still be dangerous. She watched the woman approach her. She had been badly beaten, her face marked by savage cuts and bruises, her clothing was torn and bloodied.

Hermione stared in dumbfounded recognition as the woman drew closer, and her face came into the firelight from the brazier.

It was Marcella.

\*\*\*

Conviva cursed his soft nature. He had no idea of the time, but he seemed to have been stuck in this unpleasantly charged underground atmosphere for far too long. Why had he agreed to watch over an unconscious man? This was surely a job for a household servant!

He was late for his agreed upon meeting with his brother, a pleasant prospect involving some lovely *oldalernian*. There had been no opportunity to get word to Restitutus to tell him he would be delayed. He had shouted for a slave, but none had appeared.

Meanwhile, Severus was.... It was impossible to say that he was behaving oddly because he was not 'behaving' at all. He still lay silent and unmoving, half-naked on the trestle bed. Conviva sat down again on the uncomfortable stool and tapped his foot on the floor.

He tapped it again.

He cleared his throat.

He shifted his buttocks awkwardly.

It was chilly in the room, and Conviva noticed that Severus' skin was turning mottled, the hairs rising slowly into goosebumps. It suddenly seemed very quiet indeed inside the cellar room. Conviva shivered. Was it getting even colder in here? Don't be bloody ridiculous!

Conviva reached across to gently tug the blankets up over his friend's chest.

"**GRANGER!**" Snape's bellow filled the laboratory, reverberating off the walls and even causing the lighter glass phials to vibrate in anxious sympathy.

With a startled cry, Conviva reared backwards, almost falling off the uncomfortable stool he had perched upon to watch his friend. He flailed his left arm out and caught himself on the side of the bed, pulled hard, then pitched himself forward, instead, over his friend's prone body.

He was nose-to-nose with a furious and utterly wide awake Severus.

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" Severus snarled. His stare was terrifying in its intensity.

"Hermione asked me to watch over you while she went out," Conviva stammered dumbly and was ashamed that his voice sounded so high pitched. He was still frozen in place above Severus' face, his arms braced on either side of the other man's shoulders.

"What?" Severus jack-knifed upwards on the mattress, spilling his blankets onto the floor and causing Conviva to jump backwards off the bed to avoid having his nose broken. Severus struggled upright and shoved himself to his feet, where he swayed slightly but then steadied.

Conviva watched, too shocked to move as his friend took stock of his surroundings. Less than a few hours previously, Severus had had broken bones, and his torso had been a mass of bruises and bloody cuts. Now he was standing lightly on the balls of his feet, flexing his hands and breathing aggressively, deeply... looking for all the world like a gladiator about to enter the amphitheatre. His ripped black *tunica* was still belted around his hips, but he was naked from the waist upwards, dried blood and yellow bruising painting his torso with wild patterns. Conviva quailed slightly at the image that he presented: an avenging, barbarian spirit.

"Where the *bloody fuck* did she go?" Severus grabbed Conviva's *tunica* and pulled the other man close.

"I don't *bloody fuck* know!" Conviva bellowed back, partly out of relief and partly out of fear, shoving Severus backwards. He watched, with some satisfaction, as the other man winced when his injured shoulder was twisted. *Not quite recovered, then*, thought Conviva nastily, regaining his equilibrium a little.

Severus looked almost deranged with worry as he paced the lab.

Conviva shrugged. "She said she had to take something to one of your clients. Then she grabbed a bottle, filled it with something from that cooking pot over there and walked out. Oh... she also told me to tell you that she forgives you for what you did and..."

"She said bloody *what?*" Severus asked him in a strangled tone, running his hand through his greasy hair.

"Um, her exact words were..." Conviva screwed up his eyes as he tried to recall what the girl had said, repeating, "'Tell him that I understand why he did what he did and that I don't blame him for it.'" He opened his eyes in time to catch Severus' face flush a dull red and his expression evolve from stunned, to disbelieving, embarrassed, and contemptuous.

Immediately, Severus spun on his heel and stalked towards the metal cooking pot and its shimmering contents. He hovered over it for a few moments, appearing to check the roiling liquid within. Seemingly satisfied, he grunted, then moved to the shelves with the broken pots and containers on them. As he picked out various items, Conviva could hear Severus muttering under his breath, but the baffled Pompeian could not make out the words that the other man was saying.

Judging from the man's body language, however, he did not think Severus had taken kindly to Hermione's forgiveness. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Severus frowned and didn't answer. He picked up a few bottles and tipped the contents into a ceramic bowl, stirring them together with a metal spoon. "What day is it?" he asked gruffly, not looking at his companion.

Conviva paused for a moment. "It's the evening before *Vulcanalia*," he replied and then added rather petulantly, "I should be meeting Restitutus and Fiducius to go over our preparations for the feast in the Forum tomorrow rather than watching over your worthless backside."

The dour man shot him a quick, guarded look. "Fiducius?" he asked. "Have you been in touch with him since the evening of your dinner party?"

Conviva snorted. "No. But that doesn't mean the snake won't be expecting us to pull out all the stops to make the event something special. He has some new friends he keeps telling us he wants to impress, you know."

Severus smiled grimly, his lips a thin line. He finished stirring the contents of the bowl and then, without ceremony, picked it up and gulped the liquid down, grimacing slightly afterwards and holding on to the bench in front of him for support.



After a few seconds, Severus straightened up once more. He turned around and regarded Conviva carefully.

"You need to listen carefully to me, Conviva," he said. "You need to take Marcella and the children and get out of Pompeii."

Conviva rolled his eyes. "Oh, Hercules, not you *too*, Severus," he groaned. "After the earthquake two days ago, Marcella insisted that the children leave the city for the rest of the summer. She's on her way to Salernum right now with the boys. I'm going to join her as soon as the festival is over. Silly woman, I think she's gone crazy in this heat!"

Severus shook his head. "You need to go now, Conviva. With or without Restitutus, you need to leave. Now."

Conviva snorted and made to retort, but his friend appeared to be distracted.

Severus rifled through his bed cushions, then picked up his blankets and shook them. He had begun prowling around the room, searching the shadows. He was clearly looking for something. He glanced across at Conviva, as if he were trying to make a decision, held his hand out and paused, as if waiting for something, shook his head, then continued onwards.

Conviva watched him, feeling as confused as he had done when he watched Hermione prepare to leave the chamber. *What in Hades is he doing now? Have they both run mad?* Severus scratched his chest and rolled his shoulders tentatively. Then he rubbed his hand over his stomach and scowled again. *Is he still in pain? Mother Gaia, what is the matter with him?*

Conviva watched Severus move stiffly over to the far wall.

He seemed to pause slightly before he bent over and picked something up. As he turned around, Conviva could see that it was a small glass pendant of some sort. The silver chain dangled from between his fingers. Severus rolled it between his fingers, and he seemed to be lost in thought.

"I'm going out," he said shortly, by way of explanation, as he headed to the door.

"*Where?*" asked Conviva, exasperated.

Severus stopped. Conviva could see his eyes glittering in the light of the room and his jaw was clenched. "I mean it, Conviva. Get out of the city. Right now," he said.

"Where are you going?" Conviva insisted, bewildered by his odd behaviour.

"I'm going to find that bloody woman and wring her bloody neck," he replied curtly, rubbing his fingers over his stomach gingerly before turning to leave.

Conviva was left alone in the darkened room with its strange contents.

He looked about him and shivered, thoroughly unnerved. From the hallway outside the room, he could hear Snape's feet stomping purposefully up the stone steps towards the *peristyle*.

He shivered again and made a decision. "Well, put some bloody clothes on before you go!" he shouted after the retreating figure and scrambled to follow him up the stairs.

## Chapter 20

*Chapter 21 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: Thanks as always to the lovely beaweasely2 and Clairvoyant for their invaluable help and support over this story. I am also very grateful for your thoughts and reviews. We are moving towards the end game here....

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### Chapter 20

It was Marcella.

Hermione froze in shock at the sight of the woman in front of her. Marcella's face was filthy and grazed, and her lip was split. Her once-fine *stola* was ripped and soiled. She stared at Hermione, her eyes wide with terror, as she crawled towards her.

"Marcella?" Hermione couldn't believe it. Hadn't Conviva assured her that his wife was on her way to Salernum with their children? *Has something gone wrong? Where are the boys?*

Marcella came closer and grabbed the younger woman's arm so hard that Hermione hissed in surprise and pain.

"Hermione?" Marcella's voice trembled with emotion. "Is it really you?" Tears began spilling onto her cheeks. Her nails were still digging into her arm.

Hermione shook herself mentally and pulled Marcella into a hug. Marcella clutched her tightly, sobs wracking her body.

After a few moments, Marcella relaxed her hold, sniffled and pulled backwards, swiping a hand across her face self-consciously. "I'm s-sorry," she gulped, and her voice shook. "I was just so..." She broke down again, and Hermione rose forward onto her knees to embrace the distraught woman once more, holding her tightly as she shook, feeling the sharp grit of the rough floor cut into her knees.

"It's okay, it's okay," Hermione tried to reassure Marcella, even though she felt far from confident about their situation. She looked beyond Marcella, into the darkness at the

rear of the cage, and saw a number of equally frightened human faces staring back at her from the gloom.

"How many of you are here?" Hermione asked, gripping Marcella firmly by the shoulders. The Pompeian woman seemed to come to her senses and pushed herself backwards from Hermione's embrace once again to sit on the filthy floor of the cage opposite her.

"There are eleven of us," she said, turning around to beckon the others forward.

"Your sons...?"

Marcella sniffed and shook her head, a relieved smile briefly crossing her features. "No, no," she replied, relief clearly evident in her voice. "They are on the boat to Salernum. I came back to the city to try to persuade Conviva to come with us for the rest of the summer."

"What happened?" Hermione was attempting to keep Marcella talking while she fought to think clearly. Things had just become so much more complicated.

Marcella frowned and rubbed her hand over her face once more. "I put the boys on the boat, and then I walked back into the city." She sighed. "I didn't have a slave with me because I left them both with my children. As I walked back towards our house... It was late... I was so *stupid!*" She took a deep and shuddering breath. "Two men jumped out at me from a side street. They hit me...." She started to cry again at the memory. "I said that my husband was rich and that he would pay them for my safe return, but they just laughed... and then I don't remember anything else. I woke up here with these other people in the cages."

Hermione turned her attention to the other Pompeians, some of whom were now clustered around the two women. She saw a motley arrangement of slaves, children, and one elderly lady. They were all eerily silent, their eyes haunted, their faces lit by the flickering flames from the brazier. Hermione frowned in concern.

"Erm, hello," she said uncertainly. She smiled at one young woman who must have been about fourteen or fifteen years old. The girl gave her an anguished look and opened her mouth to speak, pointing at her tongue and making a quiet noise in her throat.

Hermione realised with a shock that the girl's *tongue* was missing. In horror, she looked to the elderly lady crouched beside her.

"You as well?" asked Hermione. The old woman nodded sadly. Hermione's eyes widened as she looked at the others. "*All* of you?" Her voice was little more than a whisper, and she could feel her skin crawling. "*Why?*"

"They had been here for a while before I arrived." Marcella's voice was subdued with shock. "I don't know who or what did this to them, but when I first got here, they all told me be to be quiet it seemed to be very important not to speak. So I did what I was told and hid among them in the shadows of the cage. I saw... I saw..." Marcella's eyes closed in anguish at the memory, and then they opened again. "Did you know that Marcus is one of them?" she asked suddenly, as if changing the subject.

Hermione nodded, frowning. Her mind was starting to work overtime again, and she was casting about for her next step. Her first thought *had* been to remain in the cavern and wait for Sabazios' return, ready to delay and confuse him for long enough until he could be caught in the volcano's eruption. She had entertained wild fantasies of duelling the god, spinning and twisting as she flung curse after curse at Sabazios, until he was subdued.... Then she'd simply Apparate back to Snape's house, find a way to activate the runes around the edges of the portrait and get back home.

*Oh, gods.*

It was a terrible plan.

She felt sick.

And now Marcella was looking at her with such desperation in her eyes, her body language still and expectant. Trusting.

There was no way that Hermione could leave her and the other captives at Sabazios' pleasure.

She needed another idea.

Marcella looked to be in a bad way, but she did not appear to be as traumatised as the other captives, huddled at the rear of the cage. They all needed her protection. There was no question of leaving any of them behind.

Hermione withdrew her wand from the pocket in her grubby *tunica* and took a deep breath.

"Marcella," she said in a low voice, keeping her tone firm and precise, "we have to get these people out of here. Can you help me please?" Marcella stared back at her blankly.

"I think I can get us out of here," Hermione continued, still speaking deliberately slow and looking deeply into Marcella's eyes. "But I need you to concentrate and *help me.*"

Marcella's eyes seemed to come back into focus, and she stared back at Hermione, her expression hardening with resolve. She bobbed her head in acknowledgement and gave Hermione a wobbly smile.

"Okay?" asked Hermione. Her right fist was closed tightly around the handle of her wand.

"Okay," acknowledged Marcella. Then she looked around at the heavy metal cell doors appraisingly. "But how are we going to get out of here, Hermione?"

Hermione dithered for a moment, her fingers flexing on her wand. If she did magic, then she would be seen.... But if she didn't.... She got to her feet stiffly and inspected the lock of the gate. It was a huge lock, and the mechanism was hidden. Experimentally, she rattled the cage door. It did not budge. There was nothing for it. She looked quickly back over her shoulder. Marcella had turned around and was trying to explain to the other prisoners that they were going to try to escape.

Hermione turned quickly back around, pointed her wand at the lock and whispered, "*Alohomora!*"

To her dismay, nothing happened. *Shit!*

Hermione had Side-Along-Apparated Severus from the corridors outside the Manticore's cage, so she knew that she could Apparate within Pompeii, but this door was warded magically. She worried that if she tried to Apparate out, she'd splinch herself and anyone that she took with her. *Not worth the risk*, she thought. *I just need a stronger incantation....*

After a few more moments' thought, Hermione focused her intent on the lock and felt her power begin to channel once more through her wand. "*Aperire Portus!*"

To her satisfaction, the lock snapped open, and the cage door began to move. She spun around happily and gestured for Marcella to come closer. She waited until she joined her at her elbow. Marcella frowned at the open door and flicked a surprised look at Hermione, who met her eyes steadily and tightened her lips. Marcella nodded slowly without breaking eye contact, not pursuing the point. The two women turned to look through the cage bars towards where the entrance portal appeared to be beyond the brazier.

"We need to get across the cavern to the other side." Hermione whispered, gesturing with her free hand. Marcella reached out and grabbed it in a convulsive grip.

"We have to be careful not to wake them!" she hissed. "The dancers are dangerous."

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at her companion.

"I have seen such terrible things, Hermione," the woman explained. "They are not really... human." Marcella's face was pale under the grime and blood smeared across her face.

Hermione looked again at the sleeping dancers, lying curled and entwined about each other. The air seemed to shimmer slightly about them as she stared, and she thought once more of the concealment charms that swathed Sabazios in his glammers.

*Right, then. Don't wake the dancers*, she thought, doing her best to quell the sense of nausea in the pit of her stomach.

She turned again to face Marcella. "Get them up," she said quietly. "We have to get past the dancers to that point on the other side of the cavern so we can escape."

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Snape stalked through the city. The night had set in, and the moon was full, casting its silver light on the streets around him.

The evening was warm and heavy with excitement and anticipation. Braziers were still being maintained in the streets in honour of Vulcan. He skirted past a group of people in a bar drinking and chatting noisily. It was impossible to judge the exact time, but Severus knew that the first major eruption of the volcano supposedly occurred at around midday on the day after the Vulcanalia. Tomorrow. There were only hours to go before the mountain exploded. He had to find her... He had to find her.

Without a wand, he was unable to Apparate. *Miss Granger* (she was back to being Miss Granger in his mind) must have left it in the Manticore's cell when he was injured. *Bloody woman*.

He moved as quickly as possible without breaking into a run. His bones were mended, and the soft tissue injuries were easing thanks to the medication he had made for himself and taken, although he felt far from perfectly fit.

Adrenaline was also lending him its benefits, as was anger. How *dare* she Stupefy *him*! Conviva was beside him, prattling away, but Severus barely paid him any attention.

Fighting through her Stunning Spell had taken a considerable effort of will. He had drawn upon all of his magical reserves and mental discipline to dismantle her curse, marshalling his will against hers to enable him to break through and awaken, driven by his anger and humiliation at what she had witnessed in his mind.

When he had finally felt the vice of her curse lift, he had been disorientated and confused, blundering around the laboratory trying to recover. He was a little better now, but his head was still swimming with disjointed images, and his heart swelled with emotions that he was fighting to control. He had to focus regain his composure and equilibrium if he was to be able to think clearly enough to find the irritating woman and save her from Sabazios.

Minutes later, they were making their way towards the wider boulevards of the larger streets in the city. The number of party-goers, along with the level of noise and revelry, was increasing. The Vulcanalia celebrations were reaching their raucous peak.

Severus kept stomping along, pushing through groups of revellers and ignoring Conviva in his wake as he raced towards his goal.

The night air was gradually lending him more clarity.

He tried to cast his mind back to the jumble of thoughts he experienced as he came to consciousness. He had blacked out due to the pain from his shoulder as she was healing it. He scowled, concentrating fiercely and trying to put into place the exact run of events that led to her attack on him.

He remembered opening his mind to her inexperienced Legilimency. He had shown her images of how a shoulder should appear, highlighting the soft tissue and indicating where his own injuries were located, so that she could heal him effectively. He winced as he recalled her incantation and the shifting of jagged bone against the shredded nerves in his shoulder. Then he remembered how the pain had reached intolerable levels, how he had clamped down on his tongue, tasted blood in his mouth and then felt... nothing....

He swerved to avoid a particularly drunken party-goer, pushed him away and resumed his urgent progress along the street, trying to think how he might have upset her. Behind him, he was dimly aware of the "*Ooufff*" that meant that Conviva had run into the same enebriated reveller. He scowled, shaking his head, and returned to his thoughts.

The rest of his healing was a disorientating shuffle of memories and emotions, marking the difference between his waking mind and his unconscious. He became increasingly uncomfortable as he relived the dreams that he had awakened from.

His stomach clenched as he remembered dreaming of her looking at his memories of Voldemort and the Shrieking Shack. He saw through her eyes his collapse to the floor, his futile fingers clutching at his bleeding neck. He watched as she hovered over him.

When he had burst back to consciousness on the pallet in his lab, she had been looking at his Horcrux, slippery in her hands, as he gasped for breath.

He faltered a little as the realisation struck him that his selfish act of self-preservation was possibly out in the open.

*Oh, fuck. Does she know? Fuck.*

He was still holding the perfume bottle in his hand, the broken chain wrapped around his fingers. He had *felt* her fascination for the little flacon when they had shared each others' thoughts, how comfortable it had made her feel. She was warmed by it. The thought made him feel hot and uncomfortable as he stumbled onwards through the city streets, the bottle gripped in his fist.

He had to return it to her. It did not feel right in his possession. She had kept it all these years, and she must have it back. *Foolish woman, throwing it away like that!*

He dodged another reveller and pushed another out of the way.

Anger was quickly replaced by anxiety. The feeling thrummed through his chest, adding to the awareness of *tightness* there, as his damaged muscles and ligaments mended. He had to find her... had to find her.

A rough thump on his injured arm brought him back to reality. "Are you even *listening* to me?" Conviva's voice was raised in annoyance and frustration. Severus scowled afresh at him but still did not stop walking.

"I *said*," Conviva continued, "that I'm late for my arrangement to meet Restitutus and Marcus in Ornatus' Bar, just off the Forum. As you seem intent on ignoring me completely, I'm bloody *going*."

Snape spun around. "You *should* be going straight to the docks," he said through gritted teeth, fixing Conviva with a fierce glare. "That fucking mountain is going to explode and destroy the whole bloody town in about..." Snape looked up at the moon wildly, trying to judge where it was in the sky. "Eleven hours' time."

Conviva made a contemptuous noise and rolled his eyes. "Oh, please, Severus. That's what Hermione told Marcella. Don't be ridiculous! Look about you!" Conviva

indicated the bars and revelry, the lit braziers and the happy celebratory music surrounding them. "Vulcan is happy, Severus! He is loved and being honoured by our celebrations!"

"I don't have time for this, you stupid man," Snape hissed. "Go and have a great time. It will be your last evening on earth unless you do what I say."

Conviva snorted and clapped him on the arm, and Severus recoiled. With one final glare of desperation and frustration over his friend's pig-headed attitude, Severus watched Conviva turn down the main street at the junction towards the Forum, while Severus continued onwards towards Sabazios' lair.

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There was little sound in the cavern.

Slowly and quietly, Hermione led the small group of terrified captives across the harsh grit of the cavern floor. They had managed to get the door of the cage open without attracting attention, thanks to Hermione's muttered Silencing Charm, and they were now edging their way with extreme caution past the group of sleeping initiates that were lying around the fire.

Hermione's breathing was harsh in her ears. With infinite care, she led the ragtag line of Pompeiians across the gritty floor of the cavern, picking her way past the sleeping figures of the dancers on the floor. She could feel the unpleasant sensation of sweat trickling down the small of her back underneath the rough material of her *tunica*. Beside her, Marcella stumbled along, one hand locked on Hermione's wrist, her other hand clasped around that of the elderly Pompeian woman.

With each faltering step, Hermione became more and more nervous. She could see her goal the dark overhanging rock wall on the opposite side of the cavern. At her feet, the sleeping women barely stirred. Hermione frowned as she saw the softly shimmering evidence of concealment charms playing across the dancers' skins. She moved her wand slowly in front of her in a protective arc, her mind on the next step... then the next.

She was beginning to relax, and her heartbeat was slowing. *Just keep walking... Just keep walking*, she repeated to herself.

They were getting closer to the far wall. *Come on... Come on... Just a few more steps...* Hermione winced as Marcella's fingers tightened on her arm, squeezing the already bruised skin.

They were almost past the dancers when two things happened at roughly the same time.

There was a sudden rumbling noise, and the ground beneath her feet began to shake violently.

Concurrently, rocks became dislodged from the ceiling of the cavern and began to rain down on their heads.

Hermione ducked instinctively, but it was a couple of seconds before she had the clarity of mind to use her wand to cast a quick Protego Charm over herself and those she was trying to save.

Some of the rocks, however, found their mark slamming down on the bodies of the unconscious dancers. Howls of dismay and sibilant hisses began to sound from the waking initiates as, one by one, the dancers uncoiled themselves from their sleeping positions and began to rise to their feet. Hermione kept moving, backing away from the nearest initiates and bringing Marcella with her.

She was not able to look where she was going very well, however, and suddenly, there was a fearsome screech and a hissing noise very close to her, and then Hermione felt a cold and clammy hand around her lower leg. She reared backwards, pulling away from the female dancer who had wound her hand around her limb. As she pulled away, she kicked out with the trapped leg and caught the female firmly under her chin. The beautiful skin and features of the dancer discoloured and then melted away, only to be replaced by reptilian scales and flattened snake-like features. The creature was revealed in its true form. Hermione kicked out again, and the beast unhinged its jaws and bared its fangs in anger. Marcella shrieked and helped Hermione to stay on her feet as she lashed out again at the snake-woman.

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When the tremor hit the city, Snape was virtually at the *Castellum Aquae*. As the ground began to shake, he broke into a run, pounding towards the large red brick building that jutted out into the thoroughfare on the *Via Stabiana*.

He reached the building quickly and found the door unlocked and unwarded. He shoved it open and raced inside.

The torch-lit corridor sped past him as he half-ran, half-skidded towards the central chamber that he knew was at the end, gathering his strength and preparing himself for the confrontation to come. Wandless magic was crude and took a lot of energy, and he was tired to the point of exhaustion already.

He pushed through the door at the end of the corridor, catching hold of the door frame as the ground continued to rumble and shake under his feet, expecting to encounter the usual scenes of revelry and sybaritic indulgence within the deserted cistern that he was used to seeing from his previous audiences with the god.

His breath caught in his throat, and he choked.

Nothing.

The *Castellum* was an empty space. There was no evidence of any habitation in the rough concrete cistern whatsoever.

He paused at the top of the staircase and looked down at the floor of the unoccupied water tank to take in the vacant scene before him as the floor shook beneath his booted feet.

He felt utterly numb. Sabazios was gone. Hermione was not there either. *Where is she? Shit! Shit!*

The ground continued to rumble underfoot, making him tighten his grip on the doorway to keep standing. He could feel a faint tingle against his fingertips as he gripped the wooden door frame, but he dismissed it impatiently as muscle tension. His mind was reeling with something like panic as he stared about him at the empty room. *Where is she? Where's Sabazios? Oh, God! Am I too late already?*

Severus shook himself, forced himself to take a breath, to be calm. *Can't stay here. Must move on and find her.*

*Where in all the hells would she be?*

He concentrated hard, trying to feel the wards he had put in place on the city walls. With some relief he felt them there, a tingle on the edge of his consciousness. If Sabazios had tried to breach them, he would know, wouldn't he? He raked his fingers through his hair. What if it had happened when he had been unconscious? He had to hope that the god was still within the city.

Snape's head snapped up.

Vulcanalia the perfect opportunity for Sabazios to give his new 'Death Eaters' an opportunity to be seen about the city during the celebrations! If Hermione *had* reached him with the Metamorphmagus Potion, then perhaps he and his supporters were testing their enhanced powers like Voldemort's supporters had done all those years ago.... He had a sudden memory of Albus Dumbledore's staff briefing before the beginning of the school year in 1994, in which the Headmaster had described the Death Eaters'

rampage at the Quidditch World Cup. The screams of frightened people... the bodies of Muggles hanging like ragdolls in midair. Snape groaned. *Oh, Hermione! Where are you?*

His hand grasped the little glass pendant so tightly it felt as if it were cutting into his flesh. His belly ached. He *had* to try to find her. He would tear the city apart if necessary.

Severus turned and ran out of the *Castellum Aquae*, heading towards the Forum.

\*\*\*

"*Expulso!*" Hermione shouted, and a green jet of fire shot out from the end of her wand, catching the reptilian creature full in the face and throwing it into the fires of the brazier. Elsewhere, other dancers had been awakened by the shower of rocks from the ceiling. Hermione watched in horror as one creature grabbed the young woman she had tried to speak to earlier. It pulled the girl's head back and sank its teeth into her white throat. The girl went down in a mass of flailing limbs and spurting arterial blood. Eagerly, other snake-like creatures leapt upon her to join their fellow's feast.

Hermione wrenched her vision away from the sight of the young woman's twitching limbs and screamed, "Run!" She grabbed Marcella and pushed her towards the far side of the cavern. Marcella did not need telling twice. Grabbing up her long skirts, the Pompeiian dashed for the safety of the far wall.

The dancers were moving aggressively towards the escaping humans, but in their true forms, they were slower and less nimble. Hermione shot curse after curse at them, blasting them away from the fleeing Pompeiians. She grabbed at least three other people and shoved them after Marcella.

"What are you *doing?*" Marcella's voice was hysterical, her eyes as wide as saucers as she saw the green spell-fire erupt from Hermione's wand and cut into the advancing snake dancers. "*What is that?*"

Hermione nearly laughed out loud at the absurdity of the situation.

Marcella's eyes were wide with confusion and fear as she struggled to comprehend such power. *Where do I even begin?* thought Hermione, drawing breath to try to explain.

But before she could say anything, a dancer leapt at them, its arms and fingers outstretched. Hermione shouted out in alarm and reflexively shot another curse at it.

Marcella screamed, but another thunderous noise from the ceiling distracted them both.

Hermione's Shield Charm was holding, but only just. The roof was coming down more rapidly than before as the ground continued to shake. Larger and larger boulders were falling to the floor of the cavern, bouncing and rolling on impact.

One rock hit the brazier in the middle of the floor, and it exploded in a shower of oil and flames, some of which doused the nearest snake dancers and set them ablaze. The room instantly became much darker, and the remaining creatures began to move more quickly towards the small group that were cowering in the shadow of the rock overhang on the far side of the cavern.

Pulling one last Pompeiian with her a boy of about nine years old Hermione scrambled for the portal on the far wall. Marcella was waiting there, screaming for Hermione to hurry up. Hermione turned and fired off a few more curses as she stumbled across the last twenty feet of space.

"What do we do now?" Marcella shrieked in Hermione's ears. The sounds in the chamber were deafening.

*Perhaps this is it?* Hermione suddenly thought in horror, casting a final Petrificus Totalus on the last two snake dancers. She saw them hit, stiffen and fall, feeling a savage sense of satisfaction. *What if this is the eruption itself? Oh, GOD! What the hell am I going to do?* But almost as soon as those thoughts came to her, the rumbling noise from the earthquake abated and the ground calmed.

In the sudden silence that followed, Hermione heard the angry flames that were still blazing in the remnants of the brazier and on the bodies of some of the fallen creatures. Marcella and the other captives were crying and terrified when Hermione reached them. Only six people had made it past the dancers, including Hermione and the boy she was leading.

Marcella kept looking behind Hermione's shoulder at the carnage in the centre of the cavern, but Hermione focused her attention on the walls in front of her as she searched desperately for the trigger that would activate the portal back to the *Castellum Aquae*.

After a few moments of frantic searching, her hand seemed to disappear in front of her and fall into the bare rock. Shaking with relief, Hermione called to the others to follow her through the gate to freedom.

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Severus pushed his way through large groups of drunken citizens as he forced his way through the crowds towards the Forum. There seemed little evidence of the recent earth tremor aside from some broken roof tiles in the street. Clearly, the recent shock waves had not blunted the Pompeiians' appetite for a good street party.

He looked up at the moon again and wondered how many hours he had until daybreak, the beginning of the last day that the city would see before Vesuvius destroyed it.

His instincts were screaming at him to head for the centre of the city.

He would check the Forum for her and, if she were not at the Forum, then he would head back towards his home and look for her there. Surely, she would still be alive? His head swam with the possibility that she had been killed, and he gripped the little glass phial once more. She couldn't be dead; she was too powerful for that... too resourceful... too intelligent. He would feel it if she were gone. He remembered too well what *that* sensation was like.

Severus gritted his teeth. He would find Hermione *and* a way out of Pompeii.

This time they would *both* endure.

Old survival habits were hard to break.

He turned the final corner from the *Via Flaminia* into the northern entrance to the Forum and took in the street theatre that was playing out in front of him in the largest open space in the city.

A series of enormous male figures were striding in tandem about the area before the side wall of the Temple of Apollo. Flames were shooting from their hands and landing in huge conflagrations on the granite-slatted pavements. The crowd were hugely entertained. To them, it appeared that these huge figures of men were some kind of clever illusion, an extraordinary part of the Vulcanalia celebrations.

The blood seemed to freeze in his body. Quickly, he darted to his right, flattening himself against one of the old fluted columns of the building he was now standing next to.

As Snape watched, transfixed, from his vantage point at the side of the steps of the dilapidated Temple of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, the central figure of the group, a huge golden figure that Severus recognised immediately as Sabazios himself, stepped forward and bowed to the crowd before him.

"People of Pompeii! Whom do you worship tonight?" Sabazios' voice was magically amplified, and it echoed around the tall buildings that flanked the central area of the Forum.

The crowd was good natured. Street theatre was commonplace in the city. A few shouted back praises for Vulcan, others pushed forward to get a better view of the action. Snape felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to climb. He strained to see more. *Was she there? Did they have her?*

"No, my people..." Sabazios' beatific smile was otherworldly, serene and virtuous. His followers stood about him. "Vulcan has no power here.... Tonight you will see a *real* god before you, and you will worship him."

"Ha! Hera's tits!" A shout rang out from the crowd, and Snape saw a thickset and pugnacious Pompeiian step forward from the crowd, his hands on his hips. Severus recognised the man from the butcher's shop near his house.

Sabazios looked around and down at the short human who was confronting him. He whispered something, and the man slowly rose in the air in front of the crowd. The audience clapped and whistled in appreciation, utterly fascinated by the illusion before them. The Pompeiian's mouth opened and shut as he screamed for help, his hand clutching at his mouth, but Sabazios had clearly cast some sort of Silencing Charm on him because he made no noise as he slowly revolved about twenty feet off the ground.

Snape's fingers convulsed on the cold marble of the column he was sheltering behind. He had a familiar feeling of dread about this....

Sabazios lifted his hands, and suddenly, his body shimmered and seemed to elongate. It appeared that he was no longer on his feet. His legs were apparently joining together and extending into a giant, curled tail. The crowd roared its appreciation at the wondrous sight.

Severus noticed that Sabazio's supporters were slowly working their way around the outskirts of the crowd.

The Pompeiian was still levitated, spinning in midair. His arms were waving with almost comic abandon.

Sabazios' body began weaving sinuously, its tail coiling and recoiling as it moved slowly towards its levitated victim.

With an exaggerated sense of theatricality, Sabazios slowly plucked the silently screaming man out of the air and slowly brought him closer and closer to its smiling mouth.

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Hermione emerged gasping from the magical portal into the cool atmosphere of the abandoned water cistern in the *Castellum Aquae*. Around her, the other escapees were crying out wordlessly in their relief and scrambling to climb the stone steps to rapidly get away from the place.

Hermione caught hold of Marcella. "We need to find Severus and Conviva!" she said urgently. Marcella nodded blankly, but made no move to turn towards the staircase and the exit corridor. Evidently, the events of the past few minutes and hours had completely overwhelmed her.

Hermione caught Marcella's arm in a firm grip. "Take a deep breath and shut your eyes," she said clearly to the older woman. *Destination, determination, deliberation*, she thought firmly in her mind and Disapparated.

\*

Hermione landed in chaos, slipped and fell. She was inside Severus' bath suite, lying awkwardly on her back, with Marcella half-draped across her body on the mosaic floor. She winced. The floor was no longer a flat surface. The earthquake that she had felt in the cavern had clearly had a much stronger impact on the house than the last major one that had hit. She could feel that the *tesserae* of the mosaic underneath her had split and broken, and sharp edges were digging into her shoulder. Dust swirled about them. Quickly, she focused her attention on the walls and ceiling. They seemed stable and solid. Snape's protections had held, even though the floor had split from beneath.

Marcella coughed violently and gagged in the choking atmosphere, pushing herself off Hermione and rocking backwards onto her haunches.

She put both hands to her head and looked about, her eyes wide and frightened. "Did... did I black out?" she asked in a tremulous whisper and then succumbed to another bout of coughing.

Hermione sat up and wafted her hand in front of her face to clear the dust a little. "Not exactly," she replied.

"Where are we?" Marcella's voice was cracked with fear.

"Severus' house, don't you recognise it?" Hermione answered, pushing herself to her feet and swaying a little with the effort of doing so. "Conviva?" she called, assuming that both Marcella's husband and the unconscious Severus would still be next door.

Hermione looked around her at the damage in the bathroom. Truth be told, the impact of the earthquake had only seemingly been felt on the floor. Hermione could see that the image of the laughing skeleton was split and torn open. The red, sandy earth underneath the image was spilling up through the gashes in the mosaic. As she looked, she could also see something else peeping up through the *tesserae*... a flash of pale parchment...? No, tougher than paper... *papyrus*?

"Conviva's here? And Severus? Oh, thank the gods!" Marcella's voice was strengthened with hope, and it distracted Hermione from her study of the floor.

"Come on," Hermione said, grabbing Marcella's wrist and pulling her to her feet.

She led the taller woman out of the bathroom suite, across the hallway, and into the laboratory.

But when they opened the door, the room was empty.

Severus and Conviva were gone.

## Chapter 21

*Chapter 22 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She

has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: All praises for the incomparable JKR as well as the adorable beaweasely2 and fabulous Clairvoyant. Thank you to everyone who is sticking with this story. Some of the answers I keep promising you lie within...!

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## Chapter 21: In which dreams are made....

*Robert Granger held his little girl's hand. They were walking along Brighton Pier in the bright sunshine of an early summer's day. Hermione was laughing happily, her wild curls bouncing and vibrant, her face turned up towards him in joy and trust. Her hand felt small and tacky in his; the other was clutched around the stick of seaside rock\* that she was waving about as she chattered away. The pier's old wooden boards were solid and reassuring beneath their feet, and Robert drank in the heady combination of the seagulls' cries, the shouts and laughter of the surrounding people, and the swirling slaps of the waves about the ancient iron pillars that held the pier above the sea. He smiled down at Hermione and stroked her wonderful hair, feeling the soft bounce of her curls beneath his skin as his fingers teased and tangled.*

*Hermione giggled again and pointed to the old set of metal binoculars that were fixed at the side of the pier in front of them. She wanted to be able to look through them out to sea. Robert felt himself nodding, and she squealed in delight, bouncing over to the little metal step beneath the contraption and standing on tiptoe as her father leaned over her and put twenty pence pieces into the machine's slot. Hermione strained upwards once more to try to reach the sights of the binoculars. She could not quite do it, and she sighed in frustration.*

*He smiled, his heart full of protective adoration for her. "Let me help you, little one," he murmured, but as he reached down to pick her up and balance her on his knee so she could see through the binoculars, he suddenly saw the machine's mount shift and change, sinking lower towards the little girl so that she could see clearly without having to stretch.*

*"You don't have to, Daddy," he heard Hermione say in his mind as she looked up at him with a satisfied smirk. "You can't help me I can do it myself!" Robert's heart ached. He felt an acute sense of loss and powerlessness.*

The memories became fractured images of similar incidences where Hermione had used her magic instead of accepting his aide. Like ticker tape images, they blinked past him mechanically. It was like watching an old home cinema Super 8 reel. His father had taken home movies like that. He remembered sitting on an uncomfortable sofa watching hour after hour of the flickering pictures, his father's chest puffed out with pride at his technological wizardry...

Robert awoke with a start. His hand was still curled about hers, but the Hermione before him was silent and still. He felt his heart spasm again and the hot swell of tears in his eyes.

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Harry arrived at St Mungo's with a powerful sense of determination thrumming through his body. He had not felt this heady level of adrenaline rush since facing his first lesson at Hogwarts as a new teacher ("Worse than the Dark Lord any day," he had joked to Neville in the professor's common room afterwards). Vector's confusing explanation was racing around in his head. All that talk about aligning runes and temporal parameters had washed over him, but he had clung onto the idea of blood activating a link between the present and the past, and that idea had filled him with the hope that they might be able to awaken his friend.

He and Flitwick had tried for two hours to detach the mosaic portrait from the wall in the Headmaster's study to no avail. Eventually, conceding defeat and sweaty with magical depletion, both wizards had come to the conclusion that they had to bring Hermione to the portrait rather than risk dismantling the castle to move the image to the comatose witch.

Harry reached the fifth floor of the hospital. Blood was still pumping erratically through his veins as he tried to marshal the arguments he would need to employ to Hermione's parents and to the Healers looking after her. It would not be easy to persuade either party to take such risky action, but there was something about Vector's research, allied to the lack of progress through conventional Muggle or magical methods, which had convinced Harry that something more had to be done. But how to form the right words...?

As he walked along the corridor approaching Hermione's room, he was relieved to see the familiar auburn flash of his best friend's hair. The sight of Ron, his shoulders hunched as he bent forward over something in front of him on the low coffee table in the visitor's area, filled Harry with an absurdly happy emotion. With Ron beside him, suddenly his mission did not seem quite so daunting.

"Hullo, mate," he called, coming up behind the sitting man. Ron turned around and grinned up at him. His broad face lit up as he stood, and he returned Harry's greeting with a huge bear hug.

"Any change?" Harry asked.

Ron shook his head ruefully. "Nah. Nothing. She's just lying there still. The Wiggeweld Potion didn't work. Robert went mental."

Harry pursed his lips in a rueful grimace and nodded. He had sometimes been on the receiving end of Robert Granger's temper.

Ron looked at him shrewdly. "You've got something, haven't you?"

"When did you learn Legilimency?" Harry countered and then grinned. "I think so. It's a bit of a long shot, but..."

Ron laughed and clapped him on the shoulder again. Harry winced at the impact. Ron moved back to his seat, gesturing for Harry to sit down next to him. He shuffled some sheets of parchment out of the way. "We've got a new American coach. I'm trying to learn some 'plays' for the end of the season," he explained wryly at Harry's inquiring look. "Sit down, Harry, and tell me what you've got."

"Okay," Harry began. "Vector seems to have worked it out, I think. She's been looking at the runes around the edge of the portrait, and she thinks that there's somebody out there who tried to set himself up to cheat death and live forever... in Snape's portrait. But it's not Doge, 'cos he just painted the picture, *he didn't* paint the runes around it; they just appeared *after* the painting turned into a mosaic! So the runes make a line that does not bisect a living lifeline, just, sort of, keeps going... like you can't die... And that power drew Hermione into the picture. Well, not *her* exactly... but some sort of shadow of her, like, erm, well, her mind, her..." Harry floundered, staring at Ron, hoping that his poorly worded explanation and half-arsed summation of the situation would be understood. Ron was staring at him as if Harry had just been babbling Mermish.

"Her soul?" asked Luna brightly, sitting down lightly down bedside them on the hospital chairs. Harry jumped. Neither of the men had heard her approach.

Ron rolled his eyes in a well-practiced motion. "Oh, don't be daft, Luna," he moaned. "There's no such thing as, *oooooh*, 'soul magic'." Ron hooked his first two fingers into a mocking gesture as he pronounced the last two words. "That's just stupid nonsense for soppy teenage witches." He snorted at his own joke and then grinned for confirmation at Harry.

Luna made to argue, but Harry lifted up his hand to silence both of them. Harry looked seriously at his friends. "It's all about the *blood*," he said, pointedly agreeing with neither of them. "Blood seems to have activated the mosaic do you remember that Hermione had hit her head when she passed out?"

Luna and Ron both nodded.

"Well," Harry continued, encouraged. "We that is, Filius, Septima, and I think that we need some of Hermione's blood to set the mosaic off again and sort of activate it so that she can stop dreaming and come back to us. I want to take her back to Hogwarts with me, and I need your help to do it."

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Severus was dreaming. It was the same dream that he had had for years.

*He was trapped in a cold, dark room, unable to move, the atmosphere pressing down upon him, claustrophobia threatening to overwhelm him. He was not much more than a consciousness trapped in nothingness. There was nothing to think of but guilt and remorse.*

*His mind turned over the memories of his life, drawn to their darkness, worrying at them as if they were newly healed scars, tight and itching. He felt his self-loathing and despair rise up inside him like waves circling around the entrance to a sea cave. Pushing inside, clearing him out, pushing inside again.*

*He thought of the people he had tried to save and failed to do so.*

*He thought of the people he had betrayed and lost.*

*He thought of Pertus as he lay cradled in Hermione's lap, the lifeblood draining in great clots from his wounds.*

*He thought of Potter's son crouched over him, his green eyes burning.*

*He thought of Hermione staring down into his face, her own in shadow in the dark room, her amber eyes desperate, and her fingers grasping at his coat.*

*Severus felt the roughness of the scuffed wooden floor underneath his head, the pain of his wounds, and the pressure of her body upon his... But he also experienced an absurd sense of peace and hope as she put her hands on him. Her face was made beautiful by her generosity and his obligation.*

But now for the first time in this familiar dream, her face began to age imperceptibly into the woman he had known in the last few days.

*Now she teased him and smiled gently at him and closed her eyes, rolling her head back as he moved his fingers through her hair, stroked her face, ran his hand lightly down the taught line of her throat, between her breasts, to finally rest at her waist. His breath caught, and he began to drift into arousal. A delicious tightness began to spread throughout his groin, tingling tendrils spreading upwards through his lower belly and to his spine. There is redemption here, he thought. I could begin again....*

Then, however, he began to feel cold seeping into his chest, and a frightful tightening began to restrict his breathing as, to his horror, he saw Hermione's face began to change again. *Her features flattened, her skin paled, her lovely eyes grew cold and burning. Her irises elongated, her pupils dilated, and he tried to cry out in fear and anguish as, before his terrified gaze, the corrupted face of the Dark Lord took her place.*

*He felt long-nailed fingers grasp his face as Voldemort drew back his lips in a snarl and made to bite at his neck.*

*He gasped... and was back in the black room, his claustrophobia crashing in on him again. Unable to escape, to move his limbs, to cry out...*

*He was stuck in this limbo. It was a terrible sort of torture. Not seeing, not knowing, barely feeling. He took thready breaths, sucking air down into ravaged lungs slowly... slowly. Never enough. It was like trying to breathe under water.*

*Dimly, a fresh awareness shook through him, and he began to sense his limbs aching.*

*Pins and needles ran like fire across his skin.*

His head began to clear gradually, and he became aware of a restraint at his wrists and a burning pain that was shooting up his arms and into his chest. His weakened shoulder was particularly sore. There was a metallic taste in his mouth, and as he swirled his tongue gingerly around his mouth, he realised that it was blood. He appeared to have lost a tooth.

He became aware of light, and the atmosphere moved from black, through dark shades of red, to orange, to yellow, to white light as his eyes slowly flickered open. He could smell the sickly sweet aroma of votive incense and hear the sounds of a burning fire.

He could sense that he was in a large indoor space. It was chilly he could feel gooseflesh rising on his skin. A hall? No, he thought, *a temple...*

The ancient Time-Turner about his neck was hanging on its thin golden chain in front of him, catching the early morning sunlight that was slanting in through the roof. He blinked stupidly at it as it turned lazily on its chain. Its sands were fused... useless.... A few inches below it, his mother's perfume phial swung gently on its slightly longer chain. As he breathed in and out, gasping for air, the two pendants began to intertwine with each other. He blinked furiously to try to clear sweat from his eyes.

Before him, as awareness of his surroundings slowing improved, dressed marble flagstones swam into his view.

He was on his knees with the front of his *histunica* ripped open. He looked slowly to his left and saw that his wrist was bound to a nearby pillar by a thin, pale cord. His hand was swollen due to the constriction. He could feel that his other hand was similarly tied. The ropes were pulling his arms out from his sides in a cruciform shape. His chest muscles hurt with the stretch from the ropes, and his breathing was laboured.

Slowly, and trying to make as little sound at all, Snape shuffled his knees forward and underneath his body, trying to relieve the pressure on his chest from the ropes. As one leg inched forward, it scraped slightly on a patch of fine grit on the flagstone floor.

Immediately, there was an intake of breath in front of him, and Severus froze. Clearly, he was not alone.

"Ah," Marcus Fiducius said silkily, "you're awake, I see. Good morning, Severus... my dear friend."

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"Lumos."

"Lumos."

*The light from the two wands flared and stung her eyes. The office was eerily quiet. Hermione was not expecting anyone to be in there. Harry had described how Snape had just fled Hogwarts, the erstwhile Headmaster diving through a window, sending the shards of coloured glass tumbling after him as he leapt to freedom. The Headmaster's office was still and silent. She shivered, conscious of how cold it seemed. The room was dark and bare, dominated by the ancient oak desk in the centre of*



the lower level. Beside her, Ron shifted uncomfortably, as ill at ease as she was in the atmosphere.

"Now what?" he asked gruffly in the expectant silence. Hermione frowned and flushed. She had led them up to Dumbledore's office with the half-formed thought of asking the portrait of their ancient mentor and much-missed leader for his help in finding something to destroy the Horcrux in the cup. Looking around her in the wand-light, she tried to make out Dumbledore's image in his ornate picture frame, but the old wizard was slumbering. He gave every impression of not having woken as yet. She was disappointed, but not deterred.

"Okay." She took a deep and steadying breath. "Now we need to have a look around to see if we can find anything suitable."

"Suitable for what?"

She sighed in frustration. "Suitable for destroying Horcruxes, Ron! We've still got the cup, remember?"

Ron scowled and stuck his lower lip out mulishly, and Hermione silently berated herself. She had embarrassed him.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" She looked around them in the gloom. "I just thought that Snape might have something here. Something dark and powerful. Insurance, you know. Just in case..." Her voice faltered at the end of the half-formed sentence. She had a profound sense that Snape would have some sort of protection built around him.

Ron grunted and walked further into the office towards the great desk. She followed him, casting her eyes about at the bookshelves, searching for anything that might help. Her eyes alighted on the Sorting Hat, high on the shelves... But it looked silent and still almost as if it were aloof from them. No help there, she thought with sudden insight.

"Oi, what's this?" Ron asked, his hand on a large leather-bound book on the Headmaster's desk. He looked up at her as she reached his side. Her fingers traced the elaborate binding on the front of the tome. The words "Ultio Ultionis" were embossed into the soft leather.

Hermione frowned, then gently opened the book and looked down the page in front of her. An involuntary hiss escaped her lips. Her eyes traced the contents of the pages before her.

"It's a punishment ledger," she said evenly. Ron leaned over her and followed her fingers as they traced down the page.

'Creavy, Dennis... Ten lashes... Insubordination.

Weasely, Ginevra... Crucio... Lying.

Dobbs, Emma... Five lashes... Insubordination

Moon, William... Crucio... Theft

Perks, Sally-Ann... Ten lashes... Defacement of Property'

"That's Snape's handwriting," Hermione breathed. "He's written down every student's name that has been punished here since he took over from Dumbledore."

Ron stiffened and pulled a face. "Urgh. Sick bastard."

Hermione was still turning pages, her fingers caressing the evidence of the brutality of the regime.

"Look, Ron," she said suddenly. "Most of these punishments were changed. Look at Ginny's. Snape's crossed through 'Crucio' and written 'gamekeeper'. And again, here..." She pointed out other examples of Snape's spidery handwriting neatly amending the lists in the ledger. "This one now says 'R.H. detention'. So does this one."

Ron shrugged and looked about the silent office again. "This place is freaking me out, Hermione. I thought we were looking for something to kill Horcruxes." He moved slowly over to the bookcases on the right side of the office.

Ignoring Ron, Hermione continued to leaf through the pages of the ledger, flicking through the pages quickly to the end of the book. She frowned as her fingers encountered some resistance halfway through the ledger. It was as if about half of the pages were stuck together in a block. She flipped the book over carefully. It was heavy. She tried to open the book from the back, but the cover wouldn't budge. She pulled at it with her fingers with no success. Frowning, she tapped the back of the ledger, and her eyebrow raised as she heard a faintly hollow reverberation. She rubbed her lip thoughtfully with her right thumb.

Hermione picked up her wand from beside the ledger and tapped the back of the volume with it. With a small 'click' the leather binding came free, and she was able to open the back of the ledger.

There was a secret compartment at the back of the book. She allowed a small snort of amusement to escape such a cliché! But then, perhaps wizards had not seen or read many Muggle mystery stories....

She opened the cover wider. Inside the little compartment was a small velvet-covered box. It was threadbare with age; the material was stained in places and worn away at the corners.

"Ron..." She lifted the little box out of the compartment and turned to look at the red-haired young man beside her. Ron walked back over to her and lifted his eyebrows. Both felt a sense of anticipation as they looked at the thing in her hands. Slowly, Hermione nicked open the little metal catch on the box and lifted the lid with her thumbs.

"Wow," said Ron. "Is that what I think it is? I thought they were all destroyed."

Hermione felt a thrill of adrenaline prick her skin.

It was a Time-Turner.

Slowly, she picked it out of the box, looking at it critically.

"Bet that could be useful," said Ron softly as he watched the little device spin on the end of its thin golden chain.

"Mmmmm." Hermione was staring intently at the rings around the charmed hourglass. "I'm not sure..." She didn't finish her point.

"What?"

"Well, it's not the same as the one I used in our third year. Look, the writing on the rings is different. It's not really writing at all. They're ancient runes, I think... I wonder if it still works. It looks really old. See, the rings are not quite even. The rings on the Time-Turner that Professor McGonagall gave me to use were smoother and more regular

in shape."

She slipped the chain around her neck and took a quick short breath, twisting the outside ring one deliberate turn. Realising belatedly what she was doing, Ron made a shout and clutched at her arm, clearly expecting her to disappear.

Nothing happened. For a heartbeat, Hermione held her breath. Then Ron's other fist connected heavily with her upper arm.

"Ow!" Hermione dropped the Time-Turner and held her arm.

Ron glowered. "That was a bloody stupid thing to do, Hermione! You could have appeared right in front of Snape in here! What are you playing at?"

What are you playing at?

What are you playing at?

What are you playing at?

Hermione awoke with a start in the cold light of early morning, a sickening rush of adrenaline rushing through her chest, the echoes of Ron's accusation still ringing loudly in her ears.

She couldn't have been asleep for very long. She was sitting in a low chair in the laboratory. In front of her, Marcella was asleep on the pallet that she had healed Severus on.

The women had wolfed down the remaining cheese and dried meat in Pertus' stores before Hermione directed Marcella firmly (and with a little magical compulsion) to lie down and rest. Then she had walked about the internal perimeter of the house, resetting wards and attempting to strengthen Severus' protection of the building. Marcella had wanted to find Conviva immediately, but Hermione had been too frightened and weary to go wandering about the city looking for him, knowing that Sabazios was abroad. She Hermione had needed to rest and regroup.

She also had hoped desperately that Severus would return.

Thinking of him again now caused another spike of adrenaline to rush through her with a force that was painful. Giving in to the feeling of loss that still swept through her, she had tried to find his glass potions phial after she had settled Marcella down to sleep, but the little container was nowhere to be seen. She couldn't imagine where it could have gone. She had dashed away her frustrated tears at its loss and schooled herself sternly to think instead about the portrait runes.

Her last conscious thought, before exhaustion had claimed her and she had drifted into sleep in the chair, had been of the Arithmantic sequences surrounding the portrait of the young woman in the *triclinium* and the mosaic picture of Death in Severus' bathroom.

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"You don't have much *time*, Severus."

Snape tried to focus. Why the hell was he so *tired*? He could barely move his head and shoulders as he fought to look up towards Fiducius' voice. He scowled as he tried to focus on the man before him. Marcus was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of Severus, his black robes pooling around him, his hood pushed back away from his face, and the twisted metal mask on the flagstone floor beside him. His face was pale, but his eyes were glassy, and there were twin spots of bright pink flush in his cheeks.

Snape rolled his tongue in his mouth and tried to speak. All that emerged was a dry cough that sent droplets of blood from his lips onto the white marble floor.

Fiducius tapped his fingers on his knees. He regarded Severus for a few moments more, then tilted his head on one side.

"Sabazios is sleeping in one of the rooms at the rear of this sanctuary with the rest of my new brothers," he said eventually, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Severus said nothing, concentrating on drawing in breaths to his starved lungs. His arms were mostly numb, and he could barely feel his hands at all.

Marcus leaned forward, cupping his chin in his hands, resting his elbows upon his knees. More seconds ticked by.

"He will awaken soon, and will want to talk with you." He leaned forward, whispering confidentially, "After that, I think you will probably be dead." The *Aedile* took a deep breath, rocked backwards and hummed a quiet, little tune.

Severus was silent, apart from his panting breaths, but his eyes flicked to Fiducius' face, noting the madness in his eyes. *The potion*, he thought. *He's got more potion*. Then, suddenly, he remembered: *Hermione*. He felt his heart lurch in his chest. *Oh, gods!* He tested the strength of the ropes that bound him. They dug viciously into his wrists and didn't break.

Fiducius teased something from between his teeth with one of his nails, flicked it into the darkness to his left, shivered, then regarded Severus again, his eyes dancing with an inner fire.

"He was *magnificent* last night, Severus. I have never seen power like it. He had those fools in the Forum bowing to us all! With him, we are unstoppable. Those bastards in the Senate, Titus and his cronies, will not stand a chance. All armies will be swept away." He leaned forward again, and Severus could smell the desperation, and the sweet smell of the potion on his breath. "Once Sabazios has control of the Empire, all will bow to *our* will. Celts, Egyptians, Persians, the fucking Jews in Palestine... No one will be able to withstand us...."

"You look like shit." Fiducius added and smiled nastily, rubbing the side of his neck. "How the tables are turned, eh, Severus? Not quite the all-powerful 'wizard' *now* are you? What on earth were you thinking last night, trying to intervene to save that stupid *human*." Marcus spat the word out with loathing in his voice.

Snape frowned at him. He remembered watching from behind a crumbled pillar in the forum as Sabazios had silenced and levitated the heckler and drew him close. He remembered the man's flailing arms and legs, his body arched backwards as the Pompeian screamed silently and writhed, trying to escape. He remembered the sudden rush of fury that had suffused his mind, the almost involuntary shout that had exploded raggedly from his throat as he had raised his hands, casting a crude Protego as he did so, Sabazios' head snapping around to see him standing exposed and with his hand extended as he had attempted to protect the silently screaming man from his fate.

He remembered a heavy hand falling on his shoulder and the crushing Stupify that had sent him tumbling into unconsciousness.

Foolish! What had possessed him? It was the sort of unthinking behaviour he would expect from a sentimental Gryffindor.

He tried to gather his magical energy, but found it sluggish and unresponsive. He frowned again and tried once more to marshal his powers.

"Your stupid display of energy drained you," Fiducius explained evenly, darting a look at the ropes that bound him to the pillars. "I know how that feels...."

"While he grows stronger every day," he added with a smile.

Severus followed Fiducius' look to the ropes and reached out with his senses. He could still sense the wards around the city. He had bound the magic so carefully into them that they would be the last part of him to fail. Nevertheless, he could sense the critical drain on his reserves. He needed time, food, and drink to regain his strength. He was so tired. Fiducius' face swam in and out of focus.

"I expect you'd like to know about Hermione," Fiducius taunted casually.

Snape's head snapped up, searching the *Aedile's* face. He coughed again in his throat, willing his vocal chords to function.

"Where...?" Severus' voice was a bare whisper.

"Sorry, brother, I didn't quite catch that." Fiducius smiled nastily and crawled closer to Severus. As he grew closer it became easier to focus on his features again. With a tremendous force of will, Severus looked at the *Aedile*.

"If you touch her...," he began and felt impotent frustration when the smaller man simply giggled in response.

Then Fiducius' face grew predatory and calculating. Snape recognised once again the signs of addictive madness from the Metamorphmagus Potion.

"The magic in my veins is wearing thin, too, *brother*," the *Aedile* said, his voice trembling as he spoke. "You know I took more from your private stocks when I killed that insolent slave of yours after our... difference of opinion... at Conviva's house. When I realised that Hermione had brewed more of it, I was able to take that, too after our little... *display*... in the Forum. I need to know how to brew the potion so I may never be without it. You can do this for me, Severus." He smiled and tried to appear solicitous. "You know what I want. What do you want, Severus?"

Severus shook his head. *Nothing. Hermione. I want Hermione.*

"I can get her for you," the Pompeian spoke into Severus' ear, his cheek hot against Snape's. Severus started had he spoken those words out loud? He cursed himself for his lack of control.

Fiducius leaned forward again. "I know where she is being kept. In my master's cavern beneath the volcano."

He pulled back slightly and then cupped Severus' face with sweaty hands that trembled against Severus' skin.

"I will help you both to escape from here. You can save Hermione. You need only show me the secrets of the potion."

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It was about six o'clock in the morning. Hermione had left Marcella sleeping in the potions laboratory and walked out into the *peristyle*. The sun had risen, but it had not quite gained sufficient height to shine directly into the garden. Hermione cast a worried look into the sky.

Pliny's account of the eruption in 79AD clearly stated that the mountain had blown its top at midday. Hermione hoped desperately that he had written accurately and not simply placed the eruption at a suitably dramatic time of the day for additional poetic impact. If Pliny was truthful in his account, they had about six hours until the first explosion. Deep in thought, as she tried to remember as many details about the eruption as she could, Hermione climbed the stone steps to the *triclinium* and the portrait that she had fallen through into this time.

Her feet crunched on the sandy stone of the steps, her mind a jumble of questions.

*Where is Severus? What am I going to do about Marcella? Can I find Conviva? How am I going to get back? Am I going to die here? Oh, Severus, where are you? I need you! Ooops!*

Her foot slipped on a step, and she fell on her knee, putting out her right hand instinctively to stop herself. The heel of her hand scraped painfully on the rough stone, and she hissed at the pain of the graze in her skin. Shaking her hand to ease the throb from the little cuts, she recovered her footing and walked into the room.

The portrait was still and inviting. She moved closer to it, her mind a whirl of Arithmantic equations. The young woman in the portrait stared frankly out at Hermione, her stylus pressed invitingly to her lower lip, her expression in the image beckoning Hermione forward.

Hermione bit her lip as she approached the painting, feeling a light earth-tremor rumbling beneath her feet; another reminder of what was certainly to come.

There was *something obvious* about the runes that felt just out of her reach.

Another rumble sounded deep in the earth, and the ground shook again. Thrown off balance, Hermione reached forward with the flat of her hand to steady herself against the wall.

As soon as her right hand touched the portrait, she felt the prickle of magic activating, and a hollow tug behind her navel.

Beneath the heel of her hand, the runes were shifting and changing. The portrait had begun to sink backwards like a tunnel beginning to deepen before her.

She pulled her hand back sharply from the image and looked at her tingling palm. The smear of fresh blood from her abrasion met her eyes. She looked again at the portrait and saw that it had stilled again and was flat.

*Oh gods, that's it! That's the way home. Blood activates the runes and opens the portal.*

Triumph surged in her chest. She had done it! She had fucking *done* it! There was a way out. She punched the air with her grazed fist.

It was then she heard the frantic shouts and hammering on the back gate to the garden.

\*\*\*\*\*

"She *moved*, I tell you!" Robert Granger's voice was raised and shot through with frustration as he shouted at the Healer. "You don't bloody well know what you're doing! Go and get Spleen! My daughter bloody *moved*."

As the young Healer fled to find his senior, Robert collapsed back in his chair by Hermione's bedside, still holding her hand in his. She *had* moved. He sighed and closed his eyes, resting his head on the back of the high backed leather chair.

Was he going crazy?

A noise at the doorway prompted him to snap his head sideways, his features still scowling, as Harry, Ron, and Luna edged into the room. Robert looked at their concerned faces and relented. He knew how much they cared for his daughter. They had proved it many times.

Harry stepped forward and held out his hand.

"Mr Granger," he began, "I've got a proposition for you."

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\*Seaside rock is a traditional sweet (hard candy?) in the UK. In its original form, it is a mint-flavoured cylindrical stick of boiled sugar, measuring about an inch in diameter and about a foot long. It is traditionally sold at seaside resorts. It is probably responsible for more emergency holiday trips to the dentists than any other sweet in the UK. Hermione, therefore, has *really* got her dentist father wrapped around her little finger if he's allowing her to have one. It also explains her very sticky hands....

## Chapter 22

*Chapter 23 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: Beawasley2 and Clairvoyant are fabulous. So is JKR. So are those of you who read and review.

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### Chapter 22

Hermione raced down the stone steps to the rear of the *peristyle* and came to the back entrance of Snape's house. The reinforced pine door was practically jumping off the hinges under the assault from outside. Despite the protective spells in the plasterwork and bricks of the walls, the hinges of the door were rocking. Hermione could not make out the individual words that were being bellowed outside the door because they were being obscured by the thundering of fists on its wood.

Hermione approached the door cautiously, her wand drawn.

"Who is it?" she called out, fighting to keep her voice calm and strong. The thumping on the door ceased.

"It's fucking *me*! Aulus Restitutus Vettius. Let me in, you fucking stupid cow I need to see your master!"

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. Conviva's brother... what on earth was he doing here? Restitutus' voice was cracked with panic and fear. It was a far cry from the urbane and witty intonation from the party a few days ago. Hermione's brow furrowed at the insult in his words, but, nonetheless, she waved her wand, and the door sprang open, revealing the frenzied form of Conviva's brother.

Immediately, he leapt inside, grabbing at her throat. Hermione recoiled, and the door slammed back into place in answer to the magical wards on the house. Restitutus' eyes were wide, his long, dark dress robes dishevelled and filthy, his red hair dusty, wild, and untamed.

Shocked, he released her with a strangled cry. "*Hermione?* I'm s-sorry! I thought you were a slave. Why? What?" Clearly embarrassed, he flushed and rubbed his hands on his sides, taking several deep breaths. Hermione was shocked by his appearance and continued to back away from him.

"Have you seen my brother?" he asked urgently, following her in to the house.

"No, Restitutus," she replied, still confused by his near-hysterical behaviour. Restitutus had struck her as being the calmer of the two Vettii. To see him in such a state was frightening. "What's the matter?"

Restitutus ran his hands through his short hair distractedly. "Haven't you heard about what happened last night?" he asked roughly. "I came to find Conviva because he was last seen with Severus, heading into the city. Is he *here*?"

"Restitutus, what has *happened*?" Hermione repeated firmly, trying to stay calm in the face of his anxiety. Her magical senses were snapping to attention. There was something ... alien... radiating off the tall Pompeian. She narrowed her eyes and looked carefully at him.

"Marcella is here," she offered quietly, watching how his hands trembled.

"And Severus?"

Her shoulders dropped. "No."

He swore and wiped his hand across his face. Hermione noticed the dried blood on his sleeve, and then her attention focused on the dark stains on the hem of his long black toga. She saw that Restitutus was sweating despite the cool temperature of the early morning. His eyes were unfocused, and he could not rest.

She had seen those symptoms before.

Hermione raised her wand slowly and pointed it at the shaking man.

"Restitutus," she said slowly and evenly, "*tell me* what happened."

\*\*\*\*\*

"No, no, no. Absolutely *not*."

Professor Spleen's voice had lost all of its previously avuncular cheerfulness. The diminutive Healer stood, his arms folded firmly across his chest and his lower jaw set.

"Why the hell not? She's *my daughter*." Robert was failing to keep the annoyance out of his voice. He could feel the blood rising in his chest and neck. He had been sitting in this bloody weird place for days, and they had not been able to do anything for Hermione. Now Harry had come along with a sensible plan based on wizarding

mathematics that offered a chance to do something that Spleen had been unable to do, but the Healers were rejecting the idea and refusing to allow her to move from the hospital.

"It is absolutely out of the question, Dr Granger. Hermione is in a very delicate condition. I could not possibly countenance such a dangerous endeavour!"

"You have had *days* to try your methods. Harry believes that he has a good idea to wake her, and my wife and I think that we should try it."

Spleen spluttered, his hands fluttering with distress. "Dr Granger, here at St Mungo's we have all the appropriate facilities to ensure that Hermione is properly contained. To risk moving her is to risk her health, perhaps irrevocably!"

"Contained? It sounds like she is being held captive," Robert growled.

Ron stepped up beside him. "Look, she was breathing perfectly well before we brought her here; you said so yourself. What exactly is she risking being moved? She's just... lying there!"

Professor Spleen bridled at both men. "I can assure you, sirs, that we have Hermione's best interests at heart. I will not rest until we have exhausted all possibilities for a solution... *here* at St Mungo's. Where it is *safe*. Not in some...", he waved his fingers again in a dismissive gesture and continued, "*school infirmary*. We may not have a way forward quite yet... But I am sure that we will certainly have another pathway to explore very shortly."

Robert Granger made to advance, his hands balled tightly in frustration at the Healer's intransigence. Quickly, Harry reached forward and placed a hand on Robert's shoulder to restrain him.

"Professor Spleen," Harry began, moving past Hermione's father to make his case "I tried to move Snape and Hermione's portrait from the walls of the office, but it would not come away. Poppy Pomfrey is a superb mediwitch and Professor Vector believes"

Spleen interrupted him with a derisive snort. "*Arithmancy!*" he exclaimed disparagingly with a wave of his hand. Harry could see twin patches of heat in his cheeks. "Hocus-pocus dressed up as mathematical projections."

"That's unfair!" Harry began hotly but stopped when Ron snagged his elbow with a determined grip.

Harry spun around to face Ron, who wagged his eyebrows at Harry and said deliberately, "That's enough, mate. Professor Spleen has made his case."

Next to the redhead, Luna was resting her fingers on Robert Granger's arm and was whispering something in his ear.

Harry looked from them to Robert Granger, who, he saw, was now wearing an uncharacteristically measured and thoughtful look on his face.

Not fully understanding what was going on but prepared to trust his best friend, Harry forced himself to take a deep breath, and his shoulders sagged in defeat. "Okay," he said quietly to Spleen. "As you say, Professor."

The little Healer huffed and nodded in satisfaction, his characteristically smug smile appearing once more on his face.

"Yes... well. Thank you... *Dr Granger*," he said, bowing to Hermione's father. "I am sure that we will find the solution to our little medical conundrum here very soon."

With that, the Healer turned around and left the room with a sprightly step.

Harry immediately spun around with his arms wide to stare at the others in Hermione's room. "Well?" he demanded, "What was ~~that~~ all about?"

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Restitutus took another shaky draught from his goblet. He was sitting on the bed in Snape's laboratory next to his sister-in-law. Marcella was rubbing his back, watching him with sympathy as he choked down the *falernian* wine. The alcohol seemed to calm him.

Marcella took the goblet from him without words. She looked across at Hermione, and Hermione could see the shadow of uncertainty still evident in her features. Hermione could see that Marcella was still somewhat fearful of her. Marcella had been asleep that morning when Hermione woke up, and they had not had any time to discuss the frightening events of last night.

Hermione shifted her seat awkwardly on the low bench. She still had her wand in her hand as she turned her attention again to Restitutus.

"It began a few weeks ago," Restitutus began quietly. "Marcus told me about a new rising power in the city. This was someone who was going to make us very rich. Conviva and I would be able to become the most powerful merchants in *Italia*, and we could take our business to Rome itself.... You don't know how hard we struggled to establish the business, Hermione. It was backbreaking work for very little reward. After years of graft, we were finally starting to make decent money. You've seen our house look at what we have achieved, former slaves and the sons of slaves! Marcus' proposition was another business opportunity that we could not turn away. All I had to do was accept another patron join another society and in return, I stood to gain access to unheard of levels of power and influence. How could I say no?" He dragged a shaking fist across his mouth. "At first, I was intoxicated with everything. Marcus was so convincing and he had been so helpful as we had struggled to set ourselves up after gaining our freedom." Restitutus looked down at his hands, flexing his fingers and turning them over to see the veins roll under his skin as he moved them. Hermione could see that he was still trembling involuntarily.

He looked back up at the two women. "Severus' potion gave me the power of the gods! I could do *incredible* things, Marcella." He held a shaking hand up in front of him and then balled it into a fist. "It wasn't until I'd drunk the potion a few times that I knew it was all *wrong*, but by then, it was too late." His shoulders sagged, he leaned forward and covered his face with his hands.

Hermione looked at Restitutus' black robes. Of course she recognised them now. Her breath caught *how could Marcella not see...?*

"You were in the cave," she stated abruptly. "You knew that Marcella had been taken captive... that I was there too. Why didn't you do anything to help us?"

Restitutus looked away. He was still shaking slightly. "I couldn't do anything to help. It was horrible," he mumbled, obviously embarrassed.

"Is Conviva involved?" Marcella asked sharply.

Restitutus shook his head. "Marcus knew that he would not want anything to do with it, so he didn't even talk to him about it." He laughed sharply but without any mirth. "Marcus knew that I was less... principled than my brother. I didn't tell him." Restitutus laughed, a harsh and bitter sound. "So much for us being so alike! I thought it was something that I could do to support *him* for a change. Conviva always looked after me before we were freed and afterwards too." He looked hesitantly across at his sister-in-law.

"But why couldn't *you* tell Marcus that you weren't interested?" Hermione asked. She was still not prepared to let Restitutus off the hook she remembered fighting her way out of the cave past the monstrous dancers.

Restitutus' breath escaped him in an exasperated grunt. "Because the whole of Pompeiian society is a fucking *web of debt*, Hermione. You know that! Fiducius is my *patron*; I'm his *client*. He supports me; I support him. If he tells me to do something, I do it. No questions. No option. No escape." His chin lifted defensively. "Severus

understands. He was being dragged in too."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Do you know where Severus is, Restitutus?" she asked.

Restitutus' head dropped again.

"I think so," he whispered.

Hermione felt her heart begin to thump heavily in her chest. She felt the familiar sing of blood through her veins as she thought of Severus, and her heart clenched.

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Luna calmly turned to Harry and began to take off her jumper. Beside her, Ron was speaking quietly to Robert Granger, who was, in turn, talking into his mobile phone to his wife at their surgery.

"Are you crackers?" Harry asked his friend incredulously as she carefully laid her jumper on the bed and began to lever her feet out from her slip-on shoes.

"No, Harry. It makes perfect sense. You need to take Hermione to Hogwarts to try to wake her up, so someone has to take her place here for a while." Luna smiled dreamily at him. "It will be fine, Harry! I'll just have a nice lie down and go to sleep for a while. No one will notice. It was Ron's suggestion for a back up plan. Please pass me those spare hospital robes from inside the cupboard over there."

"But, Luna," spluttered Harry, "You don't look anything like Hermione. You've got the wrong..." *Where do I start? Hair? Height? Face?* "Erm... body..." he decided on, weakly. "There's no time to brew Polyjuice...."

Luna took the hospital robes he was offering to her. "Oh, don't worry Harry! If Robert stays here too, I'm sure that we will be able to maintain the illusion really well." She picked up the rosemary from beside Hermione's prone form and whispered a quiet spell. Harry watched as the plant morphed into a lush, curly wig, vaguely reminiscent of Hermione's hair, which Luna carefully tugged onto her head. Harry boggled at her.

"Turn around, please, everyone," she said quietly but firmly, "I am about to get changed."

The men all obligingly spun around.

"Alright, mate?" Ron's voice was almost cheerful.

Harry looked at him. Ever one for action rather than reflection, Harry could see that Ron was energised by the prospect of doing something for Hermione instead of sitting around.

"Robert's going to stay here, and Helen's going to join us at Hogwarts as soon as I can get Neville to go and fetch her from her work. Meanwhile, we need to move Hermione out of the room and down to the Apparition point in the Reception area. In order to do that, we have to Disillusion her so we can get past the Healers on this level. Remember Gringotts? Don't suppose you've got your cloak with you?" Ron was looking at him expectantly.

Harry gaped for a moment. He was having considerable difficulty catching up with what was going on.

"Don't worry, Harry. I'll Disillusion her. You can turn back around now," Luna said imperturbably and advanced on the comatose figure in the bed, holding her wand before her.

\*\*\*\*\*

"You have blood on your clothes, Restitutus," Marcella said quietly. She placed her hand carefully on his knee. Hermione could tell that Marcella was trying to calm her brother-in-law down.

Restitutus said nothing in return, still cradling his head in his hands. He was clearly in shock. His trembling increased.

Hermione herself was growing ever more aware of the passage of time. There had been no further earth tremors since the one before she had solved the puzzle of the portrait's runes.

The clock was ticking.

*I have to find Severus.*

*I have to find him.*

She forced herself to relax, to try to ease the empty ache in her belly. The cramp in her stomach was getting worse. If she shouted at the shaking man before her, he would retreat even further. She wished that Severus' Calming Draughts had survived Marcus' destruction of the lab.

"Restitutus, please tell us what happened to you," she urged again.

\*

"We went out into the city." Restitutus' voice was barely audible. "You saw w-what Sabazios turned us into before we left the cave." Hermione nodded. The men had transformed into giants, just as Dio Cassius had recorded in his account of the days leading up to the volcanic eruption.

"Go on," she prompted him.

"We walked out into the city, and the people... ran before us. We were like gods! I could feel the potion burning through my blood, pounding in my head. I felt that I could do anything just by my will alone. All around us would cower and obey!" Restitutus' eyes closed, and Hermione knew that he was remembering the heady rush of power that came with wielding magic. Then his eyes opened, and he looked at them again.

"But they weren't frightened," he continued shakily. "The stupid bastards thought it was a trick or that we were actors from the festival... part of the Vulcanalia celebrations." He coughed and wiped his hand across his mouth. Hermione saw the blood on his sleeve again, the dried crust of it on the heel of his hand.

"We reached the Forum, and Sabazios began to speak to the crowd... but..." Restitutus took a deep, shuddering breath. "There was a man who jeered at him, who called Sabazios nothing but a charlatan. He insulted the god. Sabazios didn't like it well, none of us did. He was not showing us the respect that we deserved. So... Sabazios picked him up... and I swear to the gods I didn't know what he was going to do, Marcella! he... ripped him apart."

Marcella gasped, putting her hand involuntarily to her mouth.

"What happened next?" Hermione asked grimly.

Restitutus wiped his cheek angrily with his hand. "Everyone started screaming and running around. Marcus and the others began to lash about themselves with whips made from fire in their hands. Sabazios was directing everyone like a dance. He was in my head. I couldn't think!" His eyes were wild and fierce as he appeared to picture the scene in his mind's eye.

"And you did nothing?" Hermione's voice sounded harsh in her ears.

"I couldn't stop it...." Restitutus held out his hands imploringly to the two women. "I would have been killed too! My brothers were possessed... We all were!"

Hermione wasn't interested in sympathising with the man. "What happened to Severus?" she asked bluntly.

Restitutus' hands fell empty to his knees. "He... He was there in the Forum. I think he tried to stop us. Marcus found him and knocked him senseless. I don't know what happened to him next. After... After what happened in the Forum, Sabazios led us into Apollo's Temple to rest. I waited until everyone around me had fallen asleep. Marcus was watching Severus and I slipped away out from the rear of the Temple sanctuary. If Severus is not here, he must still be in the Temple... if he's still alive."

Hermione's hand tightened on the handle of her wand. A strange, roaring emotion was coursing through her body, her head buzzing. Her hand flew to her chest as it gave a savage thrum.

"I need to find my brother. He'll know what to do." Restitutus whispered.

She stood up, looking down on the hunched form of the trembling man and his sister-in-law.

"Right," she said. "Come on, then."

Restitutus looked up at her with unfocused eyes. "W-what?"

"You want to find your brother; I'm going to find Severus." She was pleased that her voice remained relatively calm.

For a moment, Restitutus simply looked at her blankly. Then suddenly, he emitted a dry and mirthless bark of laughter.

"Did you not *hear* me, woman?" he asked, looking disbelievingly at Hermione and Marcella. "If Severus is alive, he is the captive of the *god*."

Hermione scowled at him and crossed her arms on her chest, raising her eyebrow deliberately. "And...?"

"*And*," Restitutus continued slowly, "you cannot possibly hope to survive that encounter, you foolish woman. You have no idea what he is capable of. He has power beyond your imagination. He has the power of Jove! You can't face Sabazios. He'll kill you in a moment!"

Hermione twirled her wand in her fingers and caused a shower of red sparks to shoot from its tip. Marcella reared backwards in surprise, her eyes wide and shocked. Restitutus jumped up from the bed, holding his hand out defensively in front of him.

"Want to bet?" Hermione asked resolutely. "Sit down, Restitutus. I need to tell you both a few things...."

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"This is crazy, Ron," Harry said under his breath as the two friends walked out into the corridor, a disillusioned Hermione levitating somewhere between them. Surreptitiously, Harry put out a hand to check that she was there. He felt her hand, clammy and cold.

"No, it's not," Ron whispered back. "We've just got to make sure she doesn't bump into anyone or anything on our way down. Once we get to Reception, we can just Apparate away."

Harry grunted and steered Hermione carefully past a rampant aspidistra in the main waiting area of level four and towards the magical lifts at the end of the corridor.

After twenty agonising seconds, the lift 'pinged', and the door opened. A small neatly dressed mediwitch came out of it and smiled sweetly at Ron. Harry looked into the magical elevator and saw, to his dismay, that there were another three occupants in the small metal space, all apparently visitors. They would never fit in the lift with Hermione as well. Harry shot an alarmed look at Ron.

Ron made a calming gesture with his hands. Then he flapped them unnecessarily in front of his face. He began to moan and whine and to make a revolting noise at the back of his throat. Harry thought he saw Ron's wand flash in his hand.

Suddenly, and with a very unpleasant retching sound, Ron began to vomit slugs. They landed with a wet squishing noise onto the floor of the lift.

"Urgh! Sorry... sorry," Ron mumbled, moving further towards the other occupants of the lift and heaving again.

Another stomach-sized collection of writhing invertebrates splashed onto the floor. Some of the slugs landed on one of the lift occupant's shoes. Ron staggered forward, his face twisted in anguish. With muted groans of distaste, the revolted wizards in the elevator edged past the, by now, theatrically moaning Ron and out to wait for the next lift.

Harry carefully drifted Hermione into the lift and followed her in.

Harry was impressed. "Brilliant, mate!"

"Thanks." Ron grinned, obviously flattered. He conjured a bucket. "I even know the counter-curse this time...."

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"You you're a-a...?" Restitutus repeated dumbly.

"Witch," Hermione supplied, walking resolutely through the sparsely populated street in front of the stumbling Pompeiians. A short visit to the House of the Vetii had found it to be empty but for a few cowed house slaves. Conviva had not come home that night.

Undeterred, Hermione decided that they should go to the Forum and hope to find Conviva there along with Snape.

"And the mountain..."

"Is going to explode in about," Hermione squinted up at the sun without breaking her stride, "three or four hours' time." She was just concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. The familiar ache in her chest was intensifying. *Find Severus. Find Severus.*

"And the city..."

"Everyone will die." Hermione shot a steady and meaningful look backwards at Marcella. As if to underline her words, a faint rumble sounded, and Hermione was sure that she could feel the ground shift slightly beneath her feet. She closed her eyes for a moment and prayed that Pliny's account of Vesuvius' eruption was correct; he had been clear that the initial explosion had occurred at noon on the day after the *Vulcanalia*.

"Die?" Marcella's voice was scratchy with fear. She clutched at Hermione's arm, slowing her progress.

Hermione reached across her chest and grabbed Marcella's hand, holding it firmly in her own and drawing the frightened woman closer to her side as she walked. She found that the action comforted her as well as, it seemed, her companion.

The city appeared to be even quieter this morning than yesterday. Hermione could see a difference to the level of traffic on the pavements. More shops were standing silent and unopened. Perhaps it was due to the festivities of the previous night, or perhaps, rather, due to the increasing numbers of people leaving the city like the family she had encountered the day before. She looked up again at the dark and brooding form of Vesuvius, just visible between the houses at the junction of the road they were crossing, and felt a shiver of dense expectation in the air.

Given Restitutus' account of the massacre in the Forum last night, Hermione was increasingly nervous as she approached the central square. Restitutus had described terrible injuries Sabazios' followers laying about them, killing and wounding many people.

They turned down a side street, which led to the main road into the Forum, and Hermione tensed. *You've seen death before*, she chided herself. *Focus.*

But her heart was beating uncontrollably.

As they walked hesitantly into the central space, Hermione stopped short with her companions and regarded the scene before her in shock.

\*

It was as if nothing at all had happened. People were milling about in the market square with stalls and sellers calling out their wares and the usual business of daily life being transacted in front of them. The sun's heat was increasing in intensity, blazing down into the open space.

Hermione waved her hand distractedly in front of her face the flies were *everywhere* this morning....

"I-I don't understand. There were dead bodies all around the Forum!" Restitutus' voice was frightened and defensive. "Why does it look so... *normal*?" He was trembling beside her. Marcella, too, had not let go of her arm. Hermione frowned and held out her hands beside her on either side to prevent them from moving forward. She looked around slowly, taking in the numbers of people and how they were moving about the Forum space.

Her magical senses were thrumming with... something....

It *wasn't* normal. There was something wrong. She narrowed her eyes, blurring her vision and focused within herself to try to pinpoint where the magical signature was originating from. She swept her vision past Eumachia's building (she never *had* found out what they building was for), past the sanctuary of the city's *slares*, the *Macellum*, the old and partially abandoned Temple of Jupiter, its red brick façade clearly visible through the broken marble that was partially covering it, around to and past the municipal office buildings, and finally to the marble colonnade which obscured the Temple of Apollo to her left.

As her eyes swept around the Forum, she began to feel scratches across her vision. There were areas of the open space in front of her that she did not want to dwell upon; her eyes wanted to slide past them and onto other more comfortable subjects. She took a deep breath once again and forced her eyes to sweep back around the Forum from left to right.

The sun continued to radiate off the baked floor of the market place, causing a shimmering haze to rise from the stones and gravel.

"There's something....," she began, her voice drifting into silence. Now that she was studying the ebb and flow of the human movement across the space, she could see there were areas of the space before her that the citizens were not stepping into. She watched a distracted businessman, his head buried in a written ledger, walking briskly from the *Comitium* on the eastern side of the Forum towards the *Basilica* on its western edge. Without any reason that Hermione could see, he broke his stride as he approached her and her companions, turned to the right and walked around in a wide loop to reach his goal, all the while giving no indication that he had been aware of his actions.

She could now see that other people in the Forum were skirting a wide space around the equestrian statue in front of the colonnade. Others were avoiding an area about ten feet square just in front of the Temple of Vespasian on the western side of the Forum. As she looked on, scanning the scene before her, she saw that, despite the numbers of people in the Forum, nobody was approaching the Temple of Apollo.

The flies buzzed insistently around her, and she raised her hand once again to swipe at them. The heat haze in front of her shimmered.

She froze. A fresh dose of adrenaline coursed through her body.

*Not a heat haze*, she realised with horrified understanding, *a Disillusion Charm.... Oh, gods...*

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Within the Temple of Apollo, strung up between two pillars at the top of the staircase, facing the entrance to the inner enclosed sanctuary, Severus heard a dry, slithering noise in front of him.

His partially healed shoulder and collarbone were sending waves of agony through his nervous system, and he was struggling to breathe properly due to the awkward way he was having to kneel off balance and with his torso pitched forward and his head down.

The ropes that bound him dug cruelly into his forearms and wrists. His hands were numb.

The slithering grew closer, and Severus forced himself to stay still and outwardly relaxed. He had limited power and resources. He had no wand, and he was weakened.

"Sssssssss...." The sibilant sound sent a thrill of fear through him. The memories of another life pushed in on his awareness. He thought he had left the memory of Riddle behind him. Cracking open his left eye, Severus watched as the bloated and pale figure of Sabazios moved into his peripheral vision. Gone was the golden godly figure that the god's glamour charm had projected the statuesque model of human perfection. In its place was an amalgam of human and snake, fat and rolling as he walked. Sabazios moved somewhat awkwardly, his gait compromised by the serpents that wound their way around his body in and out of the layers of clothing that he was wearing. About him, a faint web of golden filigree strands wove and danced. *A shield?* Severus thought.

Sabazios regarded the stricken wizard before him quizzically, his head tipped onto one side as the god moved more clearly into Severus' view. Snape averted his eyes, keeping them open only a tiny fraction in an attempt to convince the god that he was still unconscious. Snape felt Sabazios' magical regard, watchful and intense. The god did not trust him, was not sure of him, did not know the depth of the threat that Snape posed... and yet... He was still alive. Severus wondered why.

Without moving his head, he shot a quick, furtive glance from behind his fringe at the brass sundial that was fixed to one of the columns to the left of the Temple's entrance portico. The dial was shining in the morning sunshine, reading somewhere between the ninth and tenth hour of the day. Only a few hours to go before the mountain would explode. Only a few hours to distract Sabazios' attention and keep him in the city.

"Ssssoo pleasant to be well fed...." Sabazios appeared to stretch and luxuriate before him, basking like a lizard in the heat of the morning sun. The god revolved slowly before him, and Severus caught scattered glimpses through the golden glow, which surrounded the god, of a ravaged, pale body, areas of scale clearly visible intertwined with human skin. Streaks of dried blood marked areas of flesh and clothing particularly at the hem of his robe.

Snape flicked his eyes away, revolted.

"I am... *disappointed* in you, Sssseverus," Sabazios' whispered voice was laced with threat. "Why did you not join your brothers in asserting our majessty before the human creaturesss last night? Even more disssturbing, why did you try to prevent my... assscendancy... with your little sssshow of petty magic?"



Severus did not respond. He was conscious that his heart was racing, and he sought to calm himself, to prepare himself for whatever was to come.

Sabazios responded to Severus' silence with another rasping noise in his throat and moved closer.

"Ssseverus... *What are you?*" Sabazios whispered, but Snape dimly heard the strange harmonics behind it that were associated with Imperio. He gritted his teeth, resisting the need to answer Sabazios' question, and kept his eyes looking downwards at the golden Time-Turner and glass perfume vial that were entwined together around his neck. Entwined and together. Safe and protected. Together. Joined.

*Christ, Hermione...* His breath caught in his throat. Marcus had said that he knew where she was. He prayed that Marcus had been lying again... that she had got away. She was so intelligent; surely, she would have been able to find a way. Clever girl. Lovely, beautiful, *clever* girl...

He wished....

He *wanted*....

Sabazios moved closer. "I can *feel* you, potions man," the god insisted. "You are not like these people here. You feel... different. Not whole. Out of your place." Severus felt the god's nails rake upwards over the raised ridges of the scars on his neck. "But unlike me, you have remained... human. So *pretty*... I so miss my human form... it was a necessary sacrifice to attain my powers. How did you do it? *How did you do it?*" Severus felt a long hooked fingernail curl under his chin and force his face upwards. He kept his eyes shut against the threat of Legilimency, but he began to feel the unpleasant sensation of the god's consciousness trying to force its way into his mind.

"I think that you have cheated death like me," Sabazios pressed. There was a hunger in his voice.

Severus' breath caught in his throat. He schooled himself to be still, to Occlude, to hold fast.

"I can make you tell me, although it will hurt you," Sabazios crooned, his voice soft and compelling.

Nothing. Silence. Severus could feel Sabazios' irritation growing. The claw-like nails that cupped his face began to dig in to his cheeks. The hissing of Sabazios' familiars, twined around the god's distended body, sounded louder in his ears.

Severus took a deep breath and waited in silence, knowing what was to come and hoping that, in his weakened state, he would be able to endure it.

"*Crucio.*"

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Outside the Temple, in the Forum, Hermione grabbed her stomach and doubled over in agony.

## Chapter 23

*Chapter 24 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

This chapter is dedicated, with love, to R.

A/N: Thanks and praise to JKR for allowing me to put her characters into some truly terrible places, to beaeweasley2 and Clairvoyant for helping me to do it, and to my readers and reviewers who tell me what they think of it.

Here we go....

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### Chapter 23: Apocalypse

"Hermione!" Harry shouted, catching hold of her arm and instinctively throwing his weight atop her on the levitating gurney. She was fitting, her body twisting and shaking, her legs pulling up to her chest as she writhed.

"Bloody hell!" Ron grunted, throwing a worried look at the lift door as they descended to the ground floor level. Hermione was still invisible, but Harry was not. The sight of his friend hovering in mid-air and holding down a threshing and invisible form would certainly have drawn attention.

"Do we go back up?" Harry asked Ron urgently, his body still flattening Hermione's. One of her knees caught him a glancing blow on the side of his head. "Ow! What do you think?"

The lift 'pinged' softly, and the door began to slide open. Ron quickly stabbed his finger on the 'Doors Open' button. Obliging, the doors slid back into place. He looked at Harry. Harry looked back.

As quickly as it had begun, Hermione's fit ended. Harry lay across the now-still body of his friend, panting with the effort it had cost him to subdue her.

"Is she okay?" he gasped at Ron. Ron's eyebrows raised clearly he had no way of telling. "*Finite Incantatem*," Harry ordered, and Hermione's body shivered into view.

"She looks okay, well....," Harry said helplessly after a few seconds.

They both looked at her for another moment. She was breathing, but her face, once pale, was now flushed. She did not move.

The lift door pinged once again.

Ron's face was set, his lips thinned. "It's now or never mate," he said to Harry. "We push her out and Apparate with her straight to Hogwarts. You do it. I hate Side-Along, remember?"

Harry nodded and took hold of Hermione's arm. He hoped that they were doing the right thing.

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As Hermione reeled, clutching hard at her chest, Marcella and Restitutus grabbed her on either side. Her body twisted and contracted in the vicious cramp that had caught her in its grip. As the waves of discomfort grabbed at her, she felt Restitutus lower her to the kerb. Marcella kept hold of her left wrist, petting and rubbing it. Hermione screwed her eyes shut and concentrated on panting out her breaths, surprised and frightened by the sudden onset of the pain. It was a cruel exaggeration of the odd-reaching sensation she had been feeling for days now that sense of loss that, she had realised earlier, came with not having Severus near to her. She wondered at their apparent connection, not knowing what it meant.

She had to find him. *Fast.*

After a few moments, she was relieved to feel the constriction in her chest begin to dissipate and leave trembling aftershocks behind. Her breathing eased, and she was able to straighten up. She looked upwards into Marcella's worried face and forced a smile. Her chest still hurt, but the discomfort was manageable now.

Restitutus pulled her to her feet. She rubbed at her chest. Her heart was still racing, but she had restored a certain degree of equilibrium. Nobody else in the busy market place had seemed to notice them. Restitutus' eyes were wide and staring. His face had lost its colour. Marcella, too, was looking at her with frightened incomprehension.

"I'm okay," she tried to reassure her companions. "Just a funny turn, I hope. Come on; I think I know where Severus is. We have to get to him."

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"This pain is unnessssssary, potions man. All you need to do is tell me your sssecrets, and it can ssstop ssso easily...." Sabazios leaned towards Snape once more, the god's face mere inches from the panting and sweating man before him. Severus' damaged shoulder, arm, and chest were full of fire from the twisting and wrenching that the curse was engendering. In amongst the desperate, crushing pain of the Cruciatus, Severus gritted his teeth together as hard as he could and wondered whether his previously injured shoulder and arm were still usable.

"Finite."

A secession of pain.

Snape collapsed against the ropes that held him.

"How did you cheat death and ssstay ssso beautiful, mmmm?" Severus heard the rasp of his stubble as Sabazios' nails caressed his cheekbone, followed by the unpleasant sensation of a snake's head rubbing against his cheek. *One of Sabazios' familiars*, he thought, revolted. He flinched, still keeping his eyes shut, trying to clear his mind.

"Issss it a ssspell?" Sabazios urged. "How did you do it?"

Severus shifted his body again, trying to ease his injured shoulder and arm, his body still sagging between the taut ropes that held his arms out to either side. Sabazios' hands continued to roam over his head, face, and neck, probing and curious. Severus tried to concentrate. *Think, damn you, Severus!* he told himself furiously.

"Is there another potion you can make?" the god continued. "Sssomething else that your clever fingers can do, perhapsss?"

Snape remembered Marcus' words of an hour previously: "*He will awaken soon and want to talk with you. After that, I think you will probably be dead.*"

*Say something. Keep his interest. Talk!*

Snape coughed and ran his tongue over his lips to try to moisten them. "*Perhaps,*" he managed in a dry whisper.

Abruptly, he felt the constriction on his wrists fail, and he collapsed hard onto the marble floor of the Temple's portico, his forehead slapping against the cool stone. Pain flared at his temple as he hit the floor, but it was soon dwarfed by the hot agony from his hands as the circulation began to return to them. He screwed up his eyes against the burning sensation and whimpered softly as he pulled his fingers into his chest, trying to flex them as the feeling came back.

But he was free of the ropes. Relief coursed through him, and he felt a stab of hope flare in his chest. Perhaps he could survive... take advantage... find Hermione... escape the volcano.

*Perhaps I can actually win this time.*

The thought was improbably optimistic, and he became almost lightheaded with it. He considered the other times in his past when he had been shackled by poor decisions and damned by bad choices. Here and now, in *this* place, things were more simple. Do the right thing. Have courage. Find your advantage and take it. Sabazios had miscalculated in freeing him. He could use that miscalculation and exploit Sabazios' desire for more information as how Severus had supposedly survived death....

This bizarre feeling of confidence and optimism grew within him as he lay, taking deep gasping breaths of recovery, on the marble floor slabs of the Temple. He was surprised by the emotion, but it seemed to give him strength, and he grasped at it, feeling stronger within himself as he did so.

He could hear Sabazios moving in front of him, the rasp of the god's mutated, reptilian body on the floor. *What to say...?* he thought to himself. *Come on, think, damn you! How did you keep Riddle at bay? You need time. You need to buy yourself time. You need to make time....*

He shuffled his legs underneath his body and slowly raised himself to his knees. Keeping his head bowed, he moved his hands out beside him, palms open and upward.

He allowed his breath to exhale in an apparent sign of defeat and acceptance, ducking his head and keeping his eyes downcast, hoping to all that was holy that he could maintain the illusion that he could defeat mortality and, therefore, keep Sabazios with him for a few more hours.

"My Lord," he began, carefully modulating the tone of his speech to the right level of long-remembered and loathed subservience. It was important to show the right level of reluctance, the right level of *possibility*, if the lie were to be believed.

"I will do what you wish.... I will create a potion that will put a stopper in death."

Sabazios made a satisfied noise in his throat, clapping his hands together. His familiars, entwined about him, hissed their approval.

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"Hermione, what do we do now? Where is Conviva?" Marcella's voice was rough with anxiety. Hermione could sense her panic even as she continued to scan the Forum

in front of her, trying to formulate a plan. Beside her, on her other side, Restitutus hovered uncertainly, shooting worried looks across the Forum to the north towards Vesuvius.

Restitutus had said that Sabazios was in the Temple of Apollo. She could not remember the design of the building in enough detail, try as she might. Her mind filled with various temple sanctuary floor plans a large paved courtyard filled with small altars, religious statues, and votive basins, a raised dais at the northern end of the courtyard supporting the temple itself, a huge building reached by a central flight of stairs with rows of columns surrounding a central *cella* the windowless, hidden inner sanctuary which housed the most important element of the Temple complex the high altar. To the left or right of the temple building, in the cloisters surrounding the sanctuary courtyard, would be housed side rooms for the priests and storage and other bureaucratic offices.

She had a vague recollection that the Temple of Apollo was an amalgam of Greek and Roman design, but she just couldn't remember exactly where things were. She cursed her memory, hating the fact that she was insufficiently prepared to launch a rescue and worrying that she would mess any such attempt up. It had always been Ron or Harry who had made the dramatic gesture, who had gone haring off on the next mad adventure. She was the back-up, the *thinker*, the person who made them stop and wait and consider their actions....

Marcella grabbed at her hand again, shaking Hermione out of her thoughts. With a scowl, she rounded on the older woman, but before she could say anything, Restitutus shouted, "Brother!" and the two women spun around to see a battered and bruised Conviva wandering out of the building of Eumachia, blinking into the sunlight.

Marcella screamed and joined Restitutus in running straight for her husband.

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Harry and Ron manoeuvred Hermione's comatose body carefully, under Poppy Pomfrey's stern direction, into the Headmaster's office. It was no easy job to guide an unconscious body up the spiral stone staircase, and Harry was perspiring freely by the time they had levitated Hermione into place. Septima had insisted that she needed to be in close proximity to the portrait so that they could monitor the effect of the experiment she would be conducting on Hermione's body directly.

Poppy had set up an impromptu medical centre in Filius' main room. In addition to the hospital cot that had been placed in the room, Harry noticed an additional bookcase filled with jars, pots, and bottles.

Under the irascible direction of the redoubtable matron, Harry carefully levitated Hermione's body from the hospital gurney and to the bed, watching his friend's face all the time for any sign of movement. Poppy bustled forward as Hermione settled, hovering over her and running her wand across her body while muttering diagnostic spells.

"So now what?" asked Ron, casting an expectant look at Septima Vector, who was standing next to Filius and watching Poppy fuss over Hermione's still body.

The tall American witch frowned, clearly uncomfortable. "Umm," she began, "I'm down the rabbit hole here, gentlemen," she said. "I deal in statistical possibilities, not practical solutions."

Poppy made a quietly disparaging noise from Hermione's bed, her back to them.

"No matter, no matter!" Filius clapped his hands together, "I'm sure that whatever you suggest will be a good idea, Septima. Your ideas have brought us this far, after all...."

Ron shared a look with Harry and rolled his eyes at Filius' behaviour. Harry rolled his eyes in return and shrugged, grinning.

"Weeeeeeell," Septima spoke and rubbed her jaw with a well-manicured finger, "I guess we start by taking some blood and seeing if that will activate the portrait...."

"Right... right," Filius agreed readily. "Poppy, if you would be so kind...?"

"I would feel better if she could be in our sick bay," Pomfrey grumbled, readying her wand and a small glass vial in preparation. "And don't think I am happy that the *boys...*" she glanced at Harry and Ron, "*kidnapped* her from St Mungo's to bring her here, Headmaster."

Harry felt a deep flush creep across his face and neck. It was amazing how easily Poppy could still reduce him to acting like an incoherent teenager. Beside him, he heard Ron shuffle his feet and knew that she had had the same effect on him. He wondered how long it would be until their deception was discovered and the Aurors would arrive.

He hoped that it had been worth it.

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"What in Hades happened to you, brother?" Restitutus asked.

Conviva's forehead was marred by a tremendous, swollen bruise, and he was a little wobbly on his feet. Marcella had him in a great hug, her arms wrapped tightly around him, her head buried in his shoulder.

"Me? What the hell happened to *you*?" He hugged his wife back, kissing the top of her head as she cried into his *tunica*. "*You* were supposed to be on the boat for Salernum! Where are the children?"

"The children are fine. They are on their way," Hermione reassured him quickly. "Have you seen Severus? Do you know how he is?"

"Severus was running about, trying to find *you*! Holy hells, but I've never seen him so bothered about anything." Conviva turned his attention to Restitutus. "I went to our meeting last night, brother, but *you didn't turn up*. I stayed in the bar until I was thrown out, and then I came over here to the Forum. There was a hell of a row happening ahead of me, although I didn't see anything of what it was because I got hit in the head by some drunkard who was running out of here screaming rubbish about giants and magic.... I woke up a few hours later thank Mercury no one had robbed me so I came in to the Forum to get some breakfast." He looked down again at his sobbing wife, then back at his brother. "Restitutus, what *is going on*?"

Restitutus' head dropped, and he took his brother's arm. "Brother, I..." he began wretchedly.

Before he could say anything further, a low rumbling noise sounded once again around them, and the ground began to shift beneath their feet. Other citizens around the Forum began to mill about as the tremor shook the ground and shouts of alarm filled the air. This tremor seemed to be more extreme than other recent shocks, rivalling the one that had ended the Vetti's dinner party a few days' ago. Hermione felt her heart begin to race again and the familiar, faintly nauseating, sensation of adrenaline rushing once more through her body.

Before the ground could stabilise again, however, there came the sound of a thunderous, rending explosion from the direction of the volcano that drove any other sensation from her body or thought from her head.

\*

Time...

... stopped

\*

And began again.

\*

*Too early!*

Hermione cried out in alarm as she looked towards the northwest and saw, to her horror, a plume of black smoke shooting up towards the sky above the town's houses. As she looked on frozen in fear, shock, and panic she saw the mass of black, spuming smoke and debris form a giant mushroom cloud above the ravaged summit of the volcano, like a twisting and blackened version of the foliage of the local umbrella pines. The ground shook with elemental power. Hermione watched in horrified, terrified fascination as the smoke boiled upwards, higher and higher. She had seen a recording of the eruption of Mount St Helen's in 1980 as part of her orientation visit to the Vesuvius Observatory, but being physically close to such an explosive eruption was another experience altogether. Thousands of tonnes of superheated rocks, dust and debris were shooting into the sky, creating a giant tower that clawed ever upwards towards the troposphere. Within the black heart of the mass, Hermione could see flashes of lightning bolts as the super-charged dust particles within the volcanic eruption column collided.

It was as if the mouth of Hell had opened and all its demons had been released.

The sky began to darken.

The effect of the explosive eruption was immediate. People started to shout and scream. Market stall holders began to grab their goods together and stuff them back into the baskets and holdalls beneath their tables. People began to move quickly from the Forum, calling out to each other. Many were running eastwards in the direction of the docks.

"The volcano! The volcano!" Marcella shouted frantically, grabbing at Conviva's chest. Hermione watched the plume of smoke rise, her heart hammering in her chest, her body frozen in place.

"Is it happening?" Restitutus' voice was high with panic. "The volcano is erupting? The apocalypse?"

"Apocalypse?" Conviva looked between Hermione and his family, shaking his head rather stupidly. He still looked concussed from the night before. "Volcano? What?"

The sun was now obscured by the dark cloud above, and small sharp rocks and stones began to rain down on the flagstones on the ground around them. Marcella cried out and recoiled as one hot, jagged pumice stone landed near to her. About them, a silent rain of ash flakes began to fall, dusting the ground. Very few people remained in the Forum now: some had fallen to their knees, their arms outstretched in prayer, their heads covered with their cloaks, and others were wailing and screaming in impotent horror, unable to move, fixated on the devastating image before them as the cloud of ash continued to grow and expand and blot out the sun.

Hermione knew, with a horrible certainty, that the three Pompeians in front of her, clutching onto each other as the world about them convulsed and burned, would not be able to escape by themselves now. She cursed her assumption that she had known exactly what the future held. *The main eruption was supposed to happen at twelve noon!* she raged in her head. *Bloody Pliny! Bloody, sentimental, inaccurate, fucking Pliny!*

Her desire to find Severus had blinded her to the needs of the Muggles in front of her. She had her skill, strength, and magical powers, the spells she could cast, the curses she could throw; they had nothing but their own skins.

She had to save them. All of them. It was too late for the boats and conventional methods of escape. Hermione knew that she had some time, a matter of hours (if Pliny was to be believed), before the column of ash collapsed and the city would be engulfed fatally by a series of pyroclastic flows. Time was running through her fingers if she was to put into practice her plans for their escape.

More pumice stones began to fall among the ash flakes. Hermione cast a quick Protego, covering all four of them with a shield to protect them from the superheated falling stones, and then she spun around and grabbed folds of Restitutus' *tunica*.

"We have to get Severus!" she shouted, pulling him behind her as she began to run across the emptying space towards the Temple of Apollo. After a few seconds, she could hear Conviva and Marcella following behind.

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At the sound of the volcanic explosion, the Temple shook, and Severus stumbled and lurched forward where he stood.

Sabazios recoiled at the noise from outside the building, hissing in alarm, his eyes widening, and the slits within the irises clearly evident. The god pressed himself back against the great gold-encrusted doors of the *cella* the inner Temple sanctuary. The doors opened slightly inwards under the weight of his body.

It was impossible to see above the Temple in the direction of the volcano, but Snape knew instinctively what had happened. The column of superheated gases and molten lava had finally built up sufficient pressure beneath the mountain's peak to cause the final explosion, which had blown the top off the volcano and begun the catastrophic eruption, which would lead to the death of everything and everyone within the city walls. The extraordinary vibrations he was feeling was that of the eruption column being ejected upwards from the shattered crater. Snape knew that the explosion he was experiencing would eject millions of tonnes of volcanic material into the atmosphere before later collapsing into a series of pyroclastic flows that would devastate the city and surrounding areas.

It had happened earlier than he had thought it would, from his dim memories of Pliny's account, but Snape experienced a sudden energy as he realised that the time had come for him to confront Sabazios and prevent him from escaping Pompeii, dominating the Empire, and spreading his foul influence to the rest of the Roman world. He just had to hang on until the pyroclastic flows began. He was not sure how long that would take.

Sabazios looked about him as the ground continued to shake and the thunderous noise of the mighty eruption continued. There was panic in the god's body language as he looked about him and tried to understand what was happening. The sky had darkened and thick flakes of ash had begun to fall around them.

"Brothers!" Sabazios called into the *cella* to his supporters within, his voice filled with the harmonics of compulsion. The Temple continued to shake, and some of the plasterwork on its walls began to fall away from the brickwork and smash onto the floor. Sabazios reared upwards, balancing on his prehensile tail, clearly preparing to flee. Severus felt a build up of power within the creature before him.

It was now or never.

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*Severus. Oh, gods!*

She could feel the thumping of her heart as she stumbled forwards towards the entrance to the Temple sanctuary in the Via Marina, almost dragging her companions with her.

She could sense a powerful magical event occurring within the Temple.

As she ran towards the entrance of the walled precinct of the sanctuary, a wave of nausea swept over her she really ~~didn't~~ <sup>didn't</sup> want to go in that direction.... Every sense in her body was calling to her to move away. She gritted her teeth and forged onwards, knowing that the Repulsion Spell that had been placed on the area would fade after she had crossed through its barriers.

Marcella reared back, clearly also feeling the unpleasant sensation radiating from the building.

"What... what is it, Hermione?" she shouted above the terrifying, roaring noise of the volcano.

"Someone has put a spell on the building trying to make us not go in there!" Hermione bellowed back in Marcella's ear. "Can't you see that nobody else is going near it? We have to keep moving!" She yanked Marcella's arm again and pulled her forwards towards the imposing columns that surrounded the Temple of Apollo.

Beside her, she saw Restitut'us' long robes stirring up wafts of ash flakes from the floor of the Forum as he walked and pulled his brother with him. Conviva was stumbling in the increasing darkness, casting frequent looks up at the shattered volcano; he was clearly finding it impossible to tear his attention away from the horror unfolding above their heads.

Hermione moved towards the Temple entrance, opposite to the entrance of the Basilica, feeling a slick sensation of relief pass over her as they passed through the revulsion wards. She readied herself, trying to push all her doubts and anxieties to the back of her mind, and she hefted her wand lightly in her hand. It had been a long time since she had prepared to battle enemies, and truth be told, she was strangely energised and excited by the prospect.

As she crept around the corner, flattening herself on the nearest pillar, she could hear the sounds of a scuffle happening in the entrance to the Temple. She heard male voices shouting among the noise of magical surges and discharges.

She risked a look around the pillar and was shocked at what she saw.

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Poppy sighed and straightened up, rubbing her lower back reflexively as she did so. "No change," she reported flatly.

"It didn't work." Harry fought to keep the disappointment out of his voice as they all looked at Hermione's unmoving form. He turned away from Hermione and looked again at the portrait, his hand still raised to it with a smear of Hermione's blood on his fingertips.

"Wait!" Harry practically shouted, "Look! Something's changing!"

The portrait was indeed moving, the tiny tessellating squares that made up the picture before them were shifting and altering, the image growing darker and blurring as the tesserae changed. He felt a swift surge of elation. *Perhaps they'd done it...!*

"What is it? Shift out of the way mate no-one else can see!"

"Yes, move out of the way, Harry!"

Harry moved sideways just as the image began to stabilise.

"Oh, bloody hell," said Ron succinctly.

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Snape cast a silent Protego on himself and launched himself at Sabazios, bearing him to the ground. With no wand to focus his magical energies through, he was left with using his body, something he was normally loath to do because it wasted so much magical energy. He preferred using his power in a more refined and focused manner. Duelling without a wand was practically impossible, so he decided to adopt a more directly physical approach. Pouring as much energy into his core as he could muster from his depleted stores, he held on, refusing to allow Sabazios to settle for long enough to Apparate, hoping that his reinforcement of the wards, which Sabazios had originally set around the city, would hold.

It was unorthodox but it was, at least for the time being, effective.

Sabazios shrieked, and Severus felt a bolt of energy sweep through him as the god fought to cast him aside. He gritted his teeth.

When he had been about seven years old, he had put his fingers on an exposed wire coming out of his mother's electric kettle. The sensation of Sabazios' Expulso was not unlike that unpleasant electrical shock.

Quickly, he sent a pulse of energy back into Sabazios' engorged flesh, feeling the god's body stiffen in response. Severus could feel the thrashing of Sabazios' tail as the god fought for purchase in order to throw him off.

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From the entrance to the Temple's deserted courtyard, Hermione could see the twin figures of Snape and Sabazios locked together just inside the entrance to the main Temple building. Energy snapped and crackled about them as they spun around behind the entrance pillars to the central chamber, a swirling vortex of bright light in the darkness of the ash fall and the subdued lighting of the Temple flares. The vortex whirled and writhed, sometimes on the ground, sometimes writhing into the air, as Sabazios tried to throw Snape off. They smashed into a column on the portico, causing the stone to fracture from the force of the impact.

Above the Temple, the volcanic cloud roiled and burned. The ash fall was getting heavier.

"What in fucking Hades is *that*?" Conviva's voice was astonished as he watched the fight.

"Hades is right, big brother!" Restitut'us shouted back, his voice barely heard over the din of the volcanic eruption and the magical fight happening in front of them. He grabbed Hermione roughly by the arm. "We can't do anything here! We've got to get to the harbour, get to safety!"

Hermione shook her arm free and rounded on him. "You can't it's too late for that! Your only hope of escape is to stick with me.... And I'm going in there to help Severus! Come ON!" Not caring to see if they followed, she took off across the courtyard, dodging between the various statues, small altars, and votive basins that were scattered throughout the paved space. As she ran, she held her wand held high, trying to think how she could direct any curses at Sabazios without hitting Snape.

She slipped and skidded across the polished travertine flagstones of the Temple precinct, covering the distance in a few moments. She ran up the steps to the Temple entrance and then took aim and fired a quick hex at Sabazios' back as he twirled around. As her curse hit home, both cried out, and Snape's hold on Sabazios broke, the god throwing him unceremoniously into a nearby pillar. He bounced off it and fell in an ungainly jumble of arms and legs, down the steps of the Temple's dais to the floor of the courtyard. Sabazios wheeled about, his face contorting into a furious grimace. The snakes that writhed about him reared up. Hermione stumbled backwards, focusing her intent and sending a Stinging Hex at Sabazios. It hit him square in his face and sent him reeling backwards on the portico, screaming with rage, and clawing at his skin. Hermione ran to Snape, who was breathing in great gasps at the foot of the steps. Behind her, she heard the sounds of running feet.

"Severus!" she cried, running her hands along his face, neck, and shoulders, checking for injuries. "Oh Christ! I'm sorry are you okay? I thought I'd only hit *him* and then you..."

A stinging bolt of energy hit one of the courtyard sculpture's plinths above their heads and blasted a chunk of sculpted stone out it, showering them with debris. Someone screamed ... *Was that Marcella? No time to look!* She ducked, thankful that she hadn't cancelled the Protego shield above her head, which was now protecting them from the falling shards of stone as well as the ash and pumice from the volcano. She turned and sent another hex up at Sabazios, this time a spell that surrounded the god in a web of crackling energy that pinned him to the floor of the portico. She watched for a second as the god scrabbled ineffectually at the magical bonds and screamed his frustration and anger before turning her attention back to Severus.

"Are you alright? Gods, you look dreadful! Are you conscious? Can you talk?" she babbled, checking his pulse at his neck, putting her hand on his chest to feel his heartbeat, cupping his cheek in her hand. His skin was burning hot to the touch, but it seemed to cool under her hands, her fingers spreading like a balm across his skin. "Oh, Merlin, Severus! I've hurt you again! I'm so, so sorry, I..."

She stopped abruptly as she felt his fingers against her lips. "Granger," he said weakly, but evenly. "Are you trying to kill me? Get off me, woman, and let me up!" He was glaring at her, but Hermione could only gasp and grin at him like an idiot.

He was being rude so he was feeling better. She felt like bursting into tears.

Before either of them could say anything further, she became aware of the scabble of boots on the floor further inside the Temple, and a group of Sabazios' supporters emerged from the *cella*. The men were wide eyed with terror, both at the rending noise of the eruption above their heads and at the scene that faced them. They stood swaying and fearful, calling out to Sabazios for direction.

A moment later, the energy web of her spell surrounding Sabazios seemed to implode and dissipate. Sabazios was free, but Hermione noted he was not moving. He appeared to be concentrating on something. Beneath her fingers, she could feel Snape tense, his body thrumming with suppressed energy. After a few heartbeats, the thin golden shield around the god strengthened and became more opaque, shimmering in the light from the votive cauldron fires in the portico.

"Ssssomething is keeping me here! Is it you, potions man? Releassse me! I command you!"

Hermione stood up slowly, her wand outstretched still, its tip wavering slightly as it pointed at Sabazios. Beside her, Snape reached up his hand, and she clasped it, pulling him to his feet. His fingers remained entwined within hers. Snape's brow was furrowed in concentration. She could feel magical energy crackle through his skin.

About five breathless seconds passed before Snape, with a wrenching shout, appeared to pull away from something, and Sabazios also recoiled. The god rocked backwards, then sent a series of energy flashes at them, which Hermione barely had the chance to parry. She pulled Snape into the limited protection of a low altar to their left and shot off another series of Stunning Hexes to try to keep the god at bay. Beside her, Severus was breathing heavily.

"Are you okay?" she asked again worriedly, glancing at him. His skin looked stretched across his features, his cheeks sunken, and his eyes unnaturally bright in the lightning flashes from the volcanic cloud. He was shaking from exertion.

"Got... to keep... him here," he muttered and coughed roughly. She darted a look quickly around the side of the altar, then dodged back again. Snape was still slumped on the ground. She was shocked to see how thin he appeared. Through his ripped *tunica* she could also see the remnants of the bruises from his recently healed shoulder and collarbone.

She crouched down beside him once more. "Are you okay?" she asked again, fighting a rising tide of panic.

She was almost relieved to see him scowl. "Will you stop bloody well asking me that, woman?" he retorted, although his voice lacked its usual power. "Of course I'm not 'okay'! Where's my bloody wand? Why did you Stupify me? Why aren't you miles away from here by now?"

Her exasperated reply was cut short by another Stinging Hex from Sabazios that narrowly missed them but blew the arm and most of the head off a votive statue of Mercury behind them instead. Reflexively, they ducked down to avoid the flying fragments of stone despite her shield.

"You have ssstrengthened the wardsss around the city," Sabazios hissed, his voice magically amplified, echoing eerily around the Temple's precinct. Peering quickly around the edge of the altar again, Hermione saw Sabazios' head cocked on one side. "We can't have that, potionsss man. Oh, no."

Sabazios held up one hand, its fingers blackened and clawed from the magical energy he was expending, and pointed at the roof of the Temple portico. With a shouted word of command, a huge blast of energy tore through the ceiling, and a ragged hole appeared in the roof, raining bricks and shattered roof tiles down. A heavy flurry of ash flakes and pumice stone began to cascade onto the porch. With a flick of his hand, Sabazios sent the fallen bricks and tiles towards Severus and Hermione, his face further contorted with savage intent. Hermione's shield buckled underneath the weight of the debris, and she cried out in alarm, ducking instinctively away and closing her eyes, waiting for the rain of broken masonry to hit.

Suddenly, she felt her shield strengthen and looked to see Severus crouching beside her, his face a mask of concentration and his hands out beside him, reinforcing her protection. His magic flowed through her for a moment, an echo of their previous connection, and Hermione was almost overcome with the feelings that it brought.

She closed her eyes to savour the sensation before snapping them open again and, bolstered by his support, sending more curses flying towards Sabazios. At her side, Snape seemed to draw his energy into himself once more before sending a barrage of the rubble, which had bounced off their shield from the collapsed roof, hurtling towards the raging god. Sabazios blocked both assaults, diverting the roof debris harmlessly to crash on the floor to his right and absorbing the energy of her attack within his golden casing.

Snape and Hermione fell back again against each other behind the low altar.

"This is hopeless," Snape muttered. Hermione nodded, sucking in breaths and trying to calm and steady her magical energies. "We can't get through his shield," she agreed. "He blocks everything. The bigger and heavier the object, the more easily he appears to be able to defend himself."

Just as she spoke, another piece of ballistic debris struck their hiding place, exploding on impact. Hermione cringed out of the way of the shattering stone. She looked about her, searching for inspiration. Her eyes fell on the broken arm of the statue of Mercury that had been destroyed moments earlier. In among the fragments of the arm and the ash flakes on the floor, she could see the edge of a sharp piece of twisted metal. It was the remnant of Mercury's caduceus, the staff that had been held in the god's hand. It was about eight inches in length, a wrought-iron spike wound about by the images of two serpents. Hermione grabbed it quickly and hefted it in her hands. It was not unlike a simple dagger.

She turned to Snape, her eyes wide open. "When I was in the cavern, I saw him drinking the potion through his concealment charms," she said breathlessly. "They didn't falter or change." Snape frowned, not understanding. "A slow blade might penetrate the shield," she pressed on, holding the caduceus up in front of him. Wordlessly, he plucked the heavy object from her fingers and curled his own hand around it. He looked like he was trying to think of something to say.

Before he could speak, however, Sabazios sent another huge lump of stone towards them, hitting their shelter and causing the brick and marble stone of the altar to shudder with the impact. She retaliated without thinking, diving around the edge of the altar to send a quick Blasting Hex pouring out of her wand towards the Temple's portico, only to see it lap harmlessly at the god's feet.

Sabazios' laughter resounded once more around the courtyard, echoed by the dull roaring of Vesuvius. She stared across the precinct towards Sabazios, locking her eyes with his for a moment.

Hermione could see that the skies were darkening further and the ash fall seemed to be increasing to a thick rain of grey-white flakes. She could feel the rumbling of the ground beneath the thin sandals on her feet, could picture the molten lava within the magma chamber. The lightning flashes from the static energy in the eruption column lent an otherworldly atmosphere to their confrontation. She wondered if the first pyroclastic flow was imminent, now that she knew that Pliny's account could not be trusted, and the image of the dead Pompeiians from the Pompeiian museum sprang unbidden into her mind. A question formed in her mind lazily: *what isss a "pyroclastic flow"?*

And suddenly, she realised that Sabazios had been inside her head. He had seen her thoughts and knew about the threat that Vesuvius posed. She watched in numb horror as the god looked about him to his men, many of whom were still huddled in terror in the open doorway to the *cella*.

*He knows.... Oh, sweet Merlin, he knows!* was all her mind kept repeating.

"I tire of this sssport. Bring him to me I want him!"

Rather than obeying the god, however, those men that remained about half a dozen began to scatter and run in fear down the steps towards them. Sabazios frowned and pushed both hands outwards. Hermione readied her wand again, prepared to defend herself and Severus from them, but she did not need to. With a scream of affronted rage, Sabazios swept his hand in a vicious slash, and his men fell to the floor, lifeless. Hermione recoiled in shock at the cavalier way with which Sabazios had destroyed his own supporters.

Sabazios hunched his shoulders and seemed to concentrate before flinging his hands wide again and sending a wave of flames out from his body. The flames did not reach Hermione and Severus, washing instead over the bodies of his dead followers. Confused, Hermione looked at Sabazios. *Why did he miss?* She shared a look with Severus, whose eyes were as wide as her own, although his lips were pursed and his brow knotted as if he had a good idea about what had just happened. Severus jerked his head, silently telling her to look again at the dead bodies of Sabazios' men.

Hermione, her heart thumping a loud tattoo in her breast, turned to follow his direction. Slowly, and with unnatural grace, Sabazios' dead men rose up and began to advance towards them.

*Inferii!*

## Chapter 24

*Chapter 25 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: This chapter is really a continuation of the last one. (Expect lots of swearing and fighting, a moment of high passion, and a gratuitous Indiana Jones reference.) As always, I own nothing here... and beaweasley2 and Clairvoyant and nagandsev are magnificent.

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### Chapter 24: Apocalypse... continued

Hermione felt Severus' hand fall on her back as she quailed. She shot a look at Sabazios, who stood at the top of the steps to the Temple portico above them. His mouth was open, tongue lolling out, and teeth showing as he concentrated on the actions of his Inferi, thoughts of his own escape, for the time being anyway, apparently lost.

The nearest Inferius was less than ten feet away, head bent at an unnatural angle as it shuffled forwards, its lifeless eyes glowing with an inhuman flame. Thick ash flakes were covering its head and shoulders. Far above its head, the giant cloud of black ash and volcanic debris roiled and expanded, lit occasionally by bursts of volcanic lightning.

Suddenly, she felt Severus grab her hand in a firm grip and pull her backwards, away from the slowly advancing creatures and behind the shelter of a large statue's plinth. As he yanked her around the back of the stone structure, she practically fell atop a small huddled group of Pompeiians sheltering from the hot ash underneath a *palla*.

Hermione looked down into the wide and terrified eyes of Marcella, Conviva, and Restitutus. She said nothing, but great tear tracks marked Marcella's ash-spattered face as she lowered her *palla* now that they were all sheltered beneath Hermione's shield.

"Vulcan is angry," Conviva said in a broken voice. He was sitting with his back to the stone plinth, legs pulled up to his chest. His brother was squatting next to him, his hand on his Conviva's knees. "He is punishing us for our lack of piety."

"Courage, brother," Restitutus urged in a low tone. He looked up at Severus, adding, "It's not Vulcan." Conviva raised his eyes to Severus, who nodded tersely in agreement, then stretched his back experimentally. Hermione heard a few clicks and pops as the vertebrae realigned. Snape put his hands on his hips and frowned.

Restitutus struggled to his feet and stood in front of Severus. "What do we do now, Severus?" he asked.

Behind them, she could see the Inferi begin to spread out in a wide arch and continue their slow progress towards them. A quick look around the plinth confirmed that Sabazios was still poised at the top of the staircase to the Temple and watching the advance of his creatures with total concentration. She spun back to Severus.

"Severus?" she prompted.

Severus did not answer. He looked shocked at the sudden appearance of his Pompeiian friends before him.

"Severus?" Conviva joined his younger brother.

Still, Snape did not answer. He looked at both men... then Marcella... then Hermione. Hermione saw his larynx bob up and down as he clenched his jaw. He darted another look around the plinth at the slowly approaching Inferi, then looked back at his companions.

The volcano's volume seemed to increase as he stared at her, and the ash continued to fall. Already, she could see about four inches of ash and pumice stones coating the statues, basins, and empty plinths in the courtyard.

Stiffening her resolve in the face of Snape's apparent inner conflict, Hermione peeked around the block of stone that was sheltering them and shot a hex at the nearest Inferius. The hex hit its mark, causing it to stagger backwards. After a brief pause, however, the creature stabilised itself and resumed its steady advance. Furrowing her brow, she locked eyes again with Snape, stiffened her resolve, then ducked back around the plinth and shouted, "*Sectumsempra!*"

A bolt of red energy sped from her wand and, once more, stuck home.

Large wounds appeared through the clothing of the advancing Inferius. The rips in the zombie's flesh gaped obscenely, some so deep that Hermione could see, with horror, the flash of white bone through them.

But the Inferi did not stop, and now more of them were drawing closer.

Sabazios laughed again and sent a further questing bolt of energy towards their hiding place. Hermione recoiled as the bolt took a sizeable chunk of stone out of the plinth they were crouching behind. She sent a returning series of hexes back at the Inferi, although none of the curses she hurled did any more than impede them for a few moments. Panting with the effort of the magic she was expending, as well as her desperation at their predicament, she turned back to Severus, her chest heaving.

Snape regarded her with something like sorrow.

"Hermione...", Severus said as she looked at him, shaking with fear and adrenaline. He sighed, and she felt the faint puff of breath on her cheek as he did so. He reached behind his head, and her eyes widened as she saw him bring forth the small engraved perfume vial from around his neck. "I believe that *this*... is yours," he said, staring intently into her eyes. Slowly, he reached forward, the glass vial dangling on its silver chain in his hands, and looped it once again about her neck, his fingers following the chain down to the vial as it settled between her breasts once again. She watched him do it she *let* him do it, closing her eyes in acceptance, as she placed her hand shakily on top of his. He smiled gently at her, and her heart throbbed deeply in response.

Snape's arms moved around her, pulling her tightly to him, burying his face in her hair.

Then he stepped back, pushing her away.

"It is time," he said. "You should go. Now."

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"Will I fucking *'go now'*?" she threw back at him angrily, her hand tightening on her wand and her eyes wild. "Do you think I'd run just because I'm frightened? You need me." As if to underline her point, she sent a hex straight at the nearest Inferius, only to see it absorbed by the figure largely without effort. The Inferi were less than a few feet away from them now.

Sabazios laughed at her abortive efforts, a high-pitched sound filled with exultant arrogance. He flicked his hands once again, and the Inferi jolted forwards at a faster rate. "Hurry, my children!" he called. "Bring him to me!"

Snape closed his eyes. It always came down to this. He could see it now. He could feel Sabazios' interest in him. The god was still intrigued by his apparent ability to cheat death, his offer to provide the god with that same power, as if Sabazios was not quite the invincible force he claimed to be.

He looked once more at Hermione, tried to lose himself for a moment in the beauty of her, her gorgeous eyes, her bravery, her protection*fuck it, her soul* and summoned up his courage....

*There is no other way.*

He scowled fiercely, affecting some of his irascible swagger. Taking her arm, he shook her roughly. "You need to fight Dark Magic with Dark Magic," he said flatly, "and you don't have it in you, girl." He tried with all he had to make her see the truth in his words.

"Then fight it with me!" she shouted at him, her face distraught.

"There is no bloody *time*!" he countered quickly, gesturing upwards at the broiling eruption column still spewing millions of tonnes of superheated ash, fire, and rock upwards into the atmosphere. "How long do we have before the first pyroclastic flow? Sabazios wants *me* he will kill you *and them* in a *heartbeat*." As if to illustrate his point, a further energy blast from Sabazios took more out of the stone sheltering them.

"Get them away from here!" he shouted, gesturing at Marcella and her family.

"I'm not leaving you!" she screamed, angry now.

"You were not meant to be here!" he bellowed. "I should never have... I didn't know... Get out of here! Leave me!" He shook her again.

"I know how to activate the portrait!" she shouted, her fingers clutching his arms, nails digging into his flesh as if she sought to anchor herself *within* him. "We can all get away!" she urged. "Blood opens the portal! We'll just run the volcano will finish him off!"

"What about the wards?" he argued back, his face set, even though his eyes burned. "I need to stay to keep them strong. If I don't, he'll get away and we will see another Dark Lord rise! *Hermione!...*" *Why won't she listen to me?* He fought to pour certainty into his voice the Inferi were getting closer. "For fuck's sake, it is what it is, girl! I was not meant to survive this."

*There is no other way.*

Hermione was crying hard now, still shaking her head stubbornly, even as she saw the truth in his argument.

The Inferi were within a few steps of them, Marcella screamed as one reached out a burned hand to grasp at them.

With a Dark curse on his lips, Snape slashed savagely at the creature and saw, with satisfaction, the thing burst into flames and fly backwards into two of its fellows.

He turned to look at Hermione again, his emotions a wild mix of loathing and desperation.

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She looked at him then, and from there into the eyes of the frightened Pompeiians beside him, and had a moment of pure, clear inspiration.

"Put your hands on me!" she shouted to the Pompeiians. "DO IT, NOW!"

She felt shaking hands grasp her arms.

She looked once more into Severus' eyes, trying to put every ounce of her feelings for him into that look. He stared back frankly, openly, his emotions for once naked on his face.

"Hermione..." he began. More Inferi were approaching, arms outstretched, mouths gaping, flesh burning. Behind and above them, the volcanic eruption thundered and raged, spewing destruction into the darkening sky.

She closed her eyes, visualising her destination.

Then she concentrated, turning into nothing, and Apparated away.



\*\*\*\*\*

"Oh, bloody hell," said Ron succinctly. "What's that all about, then?"

"*Thank you*, Mr Weasley. I wonder what that means, Septima..." Filius voiced the question in the forefront of Harry's mind.

The portrait had darkened. The assembled staff could see that Snape and Hermione were now inexplicably in each other's arms as the volcano behind them had exploded into a maelstrom of destruction. Around them, the city was in a state of chaos. Buildings were shattered, walls destroyed, the countryside blackened and covered in burning ash.

The runes surrounding the mosaic portrait had also shifted and changed.

"Why on earth is she hugging *Snape*?" muttered Ron. Ginny rolled her eyes and squeezed Harry's hand.

"I don't think that is the critical point here, Ron," admonished Harry quietly, still trying to remember Septima's lesson from yesterday. He wondered hopelessly what the new arrangement could mean.

Septima rifled through her notes, quill in hand.

"Well... I think we are reaching a crisis point," she hazarded.

"For Hermione, too," Poppy added tensely, her wand flashing over Hermione's prone form. "Her heart is racing, her breathing rate has increased, and her temperature is up." She looked up at Filius. "I told you she should have stayed at St Mungo's."

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus was alone once again, and the courtyard was suddenly strangely quiet.

As Hermione had left with the Pompeians, so her shield had blinked out of existence. Immediately, the heavy rain of hot ash and pumice began to rain on him, the fall producing a strange, deadening effect on the noises from the erupting crater above their heads.

Truth be told, he was a little surprised that she had capitulated so easily.

But then again, he told himself, he was glad. By his reckoning (albeit one twisted by desperation, lack of time, and a peculiar and increasing sense of *déjà vu*), the Pompeians and she had had no chance of survival with him; they had a slim chance without him, particularly if Hermione could Apparate them out of the city or find some way of activating the portrait once he and Sabazios were... no longer a factor.

He closed his eyes once more to remember, fleetingly, the smell of Hermione's hair from their final embrace and the look in her eyes before she Disapparated, before he allowed himself to sink deeply within and gather his recovering powers.

Around him, he was aware of the advancing Inferi, as well as the subtle *hiss, pop* of the pumice and lapilli from the erupting volcano hitting the ground and surrounding statuary. He was also aware of the renewed strength of his magic, throbbing gently through his veins. Once more, he wished that he still had his wand that would increase the range and intensity of the spells that he would be able to cast. But he couldn't have taken hers from her, as she would not have been able to Apparate without it.

*No matter.*

The last time he had found himself facing his death, Voldemort and his bloody snake had surprised him. This time, he would choose the manner of his own death... And it wouldn't be on a dirty floor, scrabbling about in his own fluids. He had to do enough to keep Sabazios interested, to prevent him from leaving until the volcano could do its work.

Slowly, he allowed a wolfish smile to spread over his face. He shoved the broken metal caduceus spike into his belt and flexed his fingers, feeling the magic coursing through his veins.

Then he stepped out from behind the plinth to face Sabazios, conscious also of the advancing Inferi.

"Sabazios!" he taunted, allowing as much derision as possible to infuse his voice. "If you want me... come and get me!"

\*\*\*

Hermione exploded out of her Apparition to Snape's bathroom with a hoarse cry. Beside her, Marcella, Conviva, and Restitutus collapsed on the damaged floor.

*No time! No time!*

"*Stay here!*" she shouted at them. "You'll be safe for the time being so long as you stay underground."

She spun about, readying herself to immediately Apparate once again.

"Wait!"

The Pompeians were still lying on the cracked mosaic floor, gasping for breath there had been no time to warn them about the airlessness of Apparition. Hermione quavered for a moment and met the frightened eyes of Marcella. She locked her gaze with the older woman for a moment. A second passed... two.

"Stay underground," Hermione repeated. "No matter what you hear outside. Stay here, if you want to live to see your children again."

Marcella's chest rose and fell as she stared at Hermione. "Severus is very lucky," she said.

Hermione scowled. "Perhaps," she said and Apparated again.

\*\*\*\*\*

The sharp crack of Apparition made everyone in the room jump.

Filius spun around his fast reflexes surprising Harry. The duelling master had already levelled his wand at the intruder and moved across to place himself in front of the other wizards in the room by the time Harry had seen who the intruder was.

Before the silent tableau, the Hogwarts house-elf who had just appeared in the room wrung its ears.

Filius relaxed. "Yes, Ibby?" he said kindly to the worried creature.

Ibby shifted from foot to foot.

"There is *Aurors* at the Main Entrance Gates, Headmaster," he reported.

Ron groaned. "I thought we'd have more time," he said to Harry, who nodded, tightening his lips.

"I suppose Luna's disguise wasn't all that impressive," Harry agreed. *Understatement of the year*, he added wryly to himself. He squared his shoulders and set his jaw. "It's alright, Filius. I take responsibility for all of this. It was my idea to... well... kidnap her, I suppose..." Beside him, Poppy made a tutting noise, still bent over Hermione, casting cooling charms over her as she monitored her vital signs.

Filius smiled at Harry. "Please settle down, Mr Potter," he said. "Let us wait and see what our esteemed visitors require of us first before assuming the worst! Ibby, please allow our guests to come up to the castle and make them comfortable in one of the reception rooms. In the meantime, have arrangements been made to escort Hermione's mother to the castle?"

"Yes, Headmaster," the elf replied, straightening slightly. "The Doctor-Mrs-Granger is being brought here by elves immediately."

Flitwick smiled. "Excellent! Thank you, Ibby. You may go."

The elf nodded and Disapparated, leaving a tense silence in its wake.

All eyes turned to the portrait.

\*\*\*\*\*

Snape spun quickly back behind the plinth, breathing heavily.

It was as if his senses were on fire.

The key to wielding Dark Magic successfully was intent, focus, and, above all, *control*. Snape knew that if he allowed it to take over his body completely, then it would not be possible to direct his actions efficiently hence many of the overindulgence of his fellow Death Eaters in the so-called 'revels' under Voldemort.

He breathed deeply, in and out, in and out, regulating his body's automatic response to the overwhelming sensations rushing within. It had been a long time since he had allowed this feeling to sweep through him. He didn't have a wand to focus his energies, and so the amount of energy he needed to regulate the effect of the Darkness was far higher than normal. He rode the emotions and the rush of energy, his eyes closed temporarily in a sort of rapture. It was exhilarating, elemental, and intoxicating.

Around him, the ash and pumice stones from the eruption swirled and fell, hot and thick in the atmosphere. He shot a quick glance at the eruption column, boiling and deadly above their heads. It was getting much darker now in the courtyard. The flashes of lightning from the mountain lit the sky periodically, but it seemed as if night were falling quickly in the city as the eruption cloud was blown southwards by the prevailing wind. When would the first pyroclastic flow come? How long did he have? It would not do for Sabazios to see it coming....

As the questions raced through his mind, Snape continued to allow his power to flow greedily into his core, steeling his body to control the overwhelming sensation of dominance that flowed through him.

He allowed himself one moment of savage regret that he had never had the opportunity to fight Voldemort like this, but then shoved that emotion out of the way and gave himself over to the madness of battle.

Without thinking any further, he spun around, unleashing a violent Confringo Calcritro, which set on fire the nearest three Inferi. Snape watched with satisfaction as the creatures fell back in flames. Sabazios sent a blasting curse at the stone plinth, causing it to break apart. Snape ducked, then dipped his knees and leapt into the air, screaming, "*Expulso!*" at the top of his lungs and directing all of his energy at Sabazios' golden shield. Sharp fragments of the exploding marble plinth cut into his legs as he flew up and away from his hiding place.

Sabazios cried out in surprise and alarm as Snape shot into the air before him. The god reeled back under the assault of Snape's magic, but recovered quickly, sending another bolt of energy at the now-airborne wizard, who dodged it and swerved to the ground behind another votive statue while panting heavily.

*Fuck!* Snape gasped as he hit the ash-covered paving slabs, rolling to his side as his shoulder impacted on the ground, hard. Without thinking further, he twisted sideways and magically grabbed at a large votive basin and hurled it, spinning it towards the god at the foot of the Temple's stairs. Sabazios saw it coming and deflected it into a nearby statue, which exploded on contact and showered the god with a cloud of rubble, but left him essentially unharmed.

Snape snarled, pushing a further curse towards the golden god, this time a Dark variant of the standard smothering curse. Tendrils of red flames enveloped Sabazios' shield, wrapping the god in its grip and squeezing tightly. For a moment, it looked as if the hex was working, and Snape paused, his lungs burning with exertion. *Good... good*, he thought, catching his breath and trying to see what was happening through the swirling ash and darkness of the courtyard. Another Inferius was slowly approaching him from the left, and he carefully aimed and sent another burst of Confringo Calcritro to set it alight, feeling a bright and vicious thrill as he watched it burn.

He felt the god break away from his smothering curse before he saw it. Instinctively, Snape threw himself sideways as Sabazios flailed at him magically, his curse like a giant whip, wrapping itself around Snape's stray leg and sending a lick of fire curling up his limb.

Severus screamed at the pain and sent a Relashio down his own body, shaking his leg fiercely to dislodge Sabazios' curse. He scrambled sideways, throwing a poorly directed Confringo at the final two Inferi as they moved towards him. Sabazios saw Snape's fire curse strike one of his creatures, and he snarled, quickly lifting the flaming body up in the air and accelerating it towards Snape, hitting the wizard hard with the burning body. Snape pulled and twisted to the side, shucking off the flailing Inferius as it began to reduce to ashes.

Severus spun to his side again and dived behind another statue, feeling it blast apart and scrabbling out of the way, then flung himself out of the way and into the air to avoid Sabazios' next curse.

Immediately, he crashed to earth again, unable to sustain the flight. He lay for a few moments, feeling the rasp of the volcanic ash and pumice on his cheek as he tried to recover from the impact.

"Where are you, little wizard?" Sabazios' voice had a sing song quality to it. "You cannot hide from me forever..." Another savage lash of the curse whip landed close to where Severus was lying, spurring him to his feet once again. Chest burning, from the ash in his lungs as well as the magical and physical depletion he was experiencing, Severus dashed behind another low pillar to the side of the courtyard.

He was running on pure adrenaline and knew that he could not possibly last.

Snape flattened himself to the back of the pillar and drew in heaving gasps of air, choking a little as flakes of ash from the volcano were sucked into his mouth. He rubbed his hand roughly through his hair, which was thick with grey cinders. He needed to *think, dammit!* He couldn't keep this up. Fly or fight to do both would exhaust his magical energy too quickly to last very long.

The noise from the volcano seemed to increase as he stood still, and Snape spared a moment to look around the pillar up at the eruption column still boiling into the sky. It was now fully dark in the courtyard and across the city.

Sabazios snapped his whip once more across the courtyard, destroying another statue and basin. There were not many statues in the courtyard that were still untouched

by the fight.

"Why do you ssstill fight me, Ssseverusss?" Sabazios' voice took on a wheedling tone. "You know that you cannot ssstand againsst me and live."

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione grasped her wand tightly in her hand and concentrated fiercely. The dull roar of the volcano could still be heard, even where she was standing. Her heart was stuttering wildly in her chest, and her head was spinning a little from the effects of the Apparition, but she forced herself to stand still.

The cold pricked her skin, and she felt gooseflesh rise on her arms.

The atmosphere was dank, and it was pitch dark, but she dared not cast a Lumos until she was more confident of her location.

If she had achieved her *specific* destination, she was okay. If not, there was little that she could do to save herself.

Slowly, she allowed herself to exhale, and the muscles of her back and shoulders began to relax.

A movement beside her in the darkness caused her to stiffen.

A low, rumbling growl froze her spine utterly.

*Oh, shit.*

\*\*\*\*\*

"Are they changing again?"

"How is she? She looks even more flushed than before. Is she still breathing?"

"What does that mean...? Septima...?"

\*\*\*\*\*

"Come, come, Ssseverusss... Thisss is ssso wasssteful of both of our energiesss." Sabazios' voice was well modulated. "I know that you are tired, potionssss man. I can feel your exhausstion."

Another questing flick from Sabazios' flame whipped towards him, wrapping about the pillar he was propped against, forcing him to stagger forwards to avoid it. His mind was in a whirl. Was it his imagination, or did the rending and grumbling noises from the volcano sound different? Another nervous look at the eruption column was inconclusive. The lightning flashes from the volcano were almost constant now, bathing the courtyard in a harsh, flashing glare. As he stared across the sacred space towards the Temple, he could see Sabazios too, directing a querying look up at the sky. If Sabazios took fright, it would be even harder to force him to stay.

The breath froze in Snape's chest. He had to stop Sabazios from getting away.

Gathering his energy, reaching into himself for his last reserves of strength, Severus launched himself off the ground towards Sabazios, relying on speed and surprise to knock the god off its feet.

\*\*\*\*\*

"... Septima?" Harry looked despairingly at Vector as the runes shifted and changed once more. The scene in the portrait did not alter.

Septima leafed quickly through her notes, searching for the signifiers that she had identified from her research into the Book of Thoth. "Umm.... It looks as if... Another variable has been introduced into the matrix," she concluded eventually, but her finger continued to trace down the neatly written script of her notes in front of her, lips moving silently as she translated the hieroglyphics as quickly as she dared.

"I *still* don't understand why she's hugging him," Ron whispered again to Harry, his face set in a mulish scowl.

"Ron!" Ginny said, exasperated, letting go of Harry's hand to dig a finger into her brother's shoulder.

"Ow!" Ron protested, recoiling and rubbing his shoulder. "*What?*"

"Stop trying to control her!" Ginny hissed furiously. "You did it when you two were together, and you're even doing it now to her *picture*, for Merlin's sake!"

Ron's face darkened. "That's utter rubbish," he spat. "I'm not trying to control her... That's not *her* in there, Ginny! I'm just... why does she look like she's hugging that dead... git... when she could be, you know, here... or something."

"Articulate as ever, *Ronald*," said Ginny waspishly.

Harry frowned. "You know how I feel about Snape, Ron."

Now it was Ron's turn to roll his eyes. "Oh please! Get a *grip*, Harry. Just because he fancied your mum did not give him the excuse to be a complete bastard to us all when we were kids. All this 'he died to protect us all' crap has been going on for far too long. I had to listen to Hermione drone on and on about it for..."

"*When* you have quite *finished*, Mr Weasley, *and you two as well!*" Poppy's raised voice broke into the argument and silenced them. The mediwitch was still running her wand as a diagnostic tool over Hermione's head, chest, and stomach. Hermione was still and serene again on the narrow bed, although Harry could see small beads of sweat beginning to form on his friend's lip and forehead. He looked again at the portrait as Ron stood huffing beside him, casting resentful glares at his younger sister, twin spots of irritated ire burning in his cheeks.

The scene fascinated Harry. He had not seen the portrait since that first day when the mosaic had appeared in place of the painted portrait of his old Potions professor. Then, the Roman city in the picture had been laid out in fresh detail behind the two figures, the colours a combination of rich terracotta, pale stone, and the green of lush vegetation. Now the colours that dominated the scene were dark smudgy greys and blacks, the red, white, and orange spikes of lightning illuminating the broiling ash cloud that was enveloping the city.

Snape and Hermione were now drawn in harsh details, their skin tones darkened and obscured by the swirling mass of ash and falling stones around them. They were not looking at each other, Hermione being enfolded in Snape's arms, her head ducked into the space between his shoulder and his chest. Harry could see his friend's fingers clutched into the folds of Snape's dark clothing and, in turn, Snape laying his cheek against the top of her head and wrapping his arms around her as if shielding her from the falling ash. Harry felt strange looking at the image. Snape's body language was protective, *tender* almost; Hermione's pose was also very unlike the brittle defensiveness that Harry had come to see in her in recent years. She looked relaxed and calm, her eyes closed as she nuzzled into his shoulder.

"What does it... mean...?" He was surprised to hear his own voice whisper the question. Ginny clasped his hand tightly again and shook her head.

There was a faint, rustling noise as Vector, sitting on Filius' floral sofa on the opposite side of the room, checked her calculations and tried to see what the new runic patterns indicated.

Quietly, Poppy cast another Cooling Charm over Hermione, her warm voice muted in the silent office.

Ron stood silently beside Harry and Ginny, still staring at Hermione's face.

\*\*\*\*\*

Snape's body hit Sabazios with considerable force. Pouring all his energies into the lift, Severus wrapped his arms around Sabazios and levitated him upwards, towards the huge bronze doors at the entrance to the Temple's inner sanctum, the *cella*.

Surprised, Sabazios wriggled in his grip but found himself held tight by Snape and born into the dark chamber in the heart of the Temple. With a wordless incantation, Snape ordered the great metal covered doors of the *cella* to slam shut and lock.

Snape landed awkwardly, partly atop Sabazios, and was surprised to see the god's golden shield flicker and dissipate, plunging the windowless room into darkness. Far from trying to push Severus away, Sabazios's arms, now freed from the protective shield, grasped hold of Snape's body and tried to twist him onto his back. The god hissed, and his snake familiars began to twine themselves about Severus' arms and neck as Sabazios fought to smother Snape.

The noise from the volcano dimmed somewhat since they had arrived in the *cella*, and now the space was resonating with Sabazios' hissing and Snape's rasping breaths as the wizard tried to recover.

"What isss happening to the mountain, potionsss man?" Sabazios asked, writhing against Snape, trying to gain the uppermost position.

Snape's vision was clouding, and the snake which had circled his neck was squeezing with a frightening intensity. He tried to work the fingers of his left hand between the elastic body of the reptile and his throat. Meanwhile, his right hand scrabbled ineffectually at his waist, trying to pull the twisted caduceus from his belt so that he could use it to stab the writhing body underneath him.

Sabazios' face was near to his ear. "Hmmmmm? What is occurring? I can sense your fear.... Isss Vulcan truly angry? How far will his rage extend? Tell me!"

Snape could barely breathe, although the snake around his neck had relaxed its grip slightly. He tried to gulp air, to force oxygen back into his lungs.

"Nothing," he managed, surprising himself by the sound of his ravaged vocal chords.

Sabazios renewed his grip on the twisting wizard beneath him. "I do not believe you, Ssseverusss," he hissed. "Your mind is full of fear... but also *expectation*."

There was a further pause, during which Severus felt the presence of the god inside his head. He fought with everything he had to keep Sabazios out. He tried to keep his consciousness clear, using all his mental energy to present a blank wall to Sabazios' advances. His vision was becoming clouded with blotches of light. He was gasping for breath as he fought to remain awake, to keep his fingers curled around the snake at his throat, his chest also now constricted by Sabazios' great tail. Still, he fought to keep his mind steady and Sabazios out of his consciousness. He concentrated on his emotions, drenching Sabazios with amorphous sensations to put him off from finding the answers the god was searching for. Hate... fear... horror... expectation... lust... *oh, gods... love... love...*

Sabazios made a disparaging noise, and suddenly the pressure on Severus' mind lifted, and he sagged in Sabazios' arms with immediate relief.

There was no respite.

The god immediately increased the pressure of his grip on Severus, wrapped his fingers in the wizard's hair and wrenched Severus' head backwards, exposing his throat.

"I think that I should take what I want from you, Ssseverusss," the god hissed in his ear.

"I ssshall feed on your powers, as I have done before... and then move on from this little provincial town. There are certainly other pleasurable cities to visit. I wonder how much further I can extend my powers? I think I will move on to Rome... I have always wanted to visit Rome, even as a child...." The god's voice was laced with threat and wistful with intent.

Snape moaned, pulling and writhing, but *weakly* now in the god's grip. He knew he could not last much longer. He could hear a rushing sound in his ears and understood that he was hearing the sluggish rush of blood coming through his neck into his brain. The vibrant blotches of colour in his perception returned and began to spread across his field of vision. He heard the hissing of snakes once more in his ears.

Snakes.

"*Always fucking snakes*," he whispered as he faded towards unconsciousness. He expected to feel the pressure of Sabazios' teeth on his neck at any moment.

He tried to gasp out a few more breaths, but the constriction on his neck was unrelenting.

He tried to remember the way that light had caught on the amber flecks in her eyes.

He tried to remember the feel of her body in his arms.

He tried to lock his grip on Sabazios, as if he could anchor the god to the ground with his lifeless body.

*Ahhh, damn*, he thought eloquently and passed out.

The last thing he thought he heard, before the blackness claimed him, was the crack of Apparition.

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A/N 2: To those of you who have been following the events in this story with one eye on the text books, I am going to play havoc with the timing of the volcanic explosion and resultant pyroclastic flows as far as current archaeological speculation goes. For an excellent academic account of the last days of Pompeii, I can recommend the brilliant *Pompeii* by Mary Beard, or the even more visceral *Pompeii: The Living City* by Butterworth and Laurence.

# Chapter 25

Chapter 26 of 32

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: JKR is wonderful. So are beaweasely2, Clairvoyant and nagandsev. I own nothing and make no money from this. Thank you also to everyone who reviews - I hope that you enjoy this chapter, despite the character death warning it carries ("drops it and runs")....

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 25

"Where's she going? She's moving away from him!" Ron exclaimed excitedly. Hermione was separating from Severus, moving towards the edge of the frame. Her expression was hard to read because the image was very dark, but her body language was tense, her arm and hand held outstretched as they parted. For his part, Snape stood apart from her in the frame again, scowling and fierce.

"Hermione?" Poppy shook Hermione's shoulders gently. "Hermione?"

"Is she waking up? Did it work?" Harry felt hope blossoming in his chest. He shot a look across the room at Vector, who shifted her attention from the complex calculations scrawled over the parchment leaves in front of her.

"Hermione?" asked Poppy again, more insistently this time.

There was no response. Harry watched as Hermione's chest continued to rise and fall.

Harry ran his hand again through his hair, frustrated.

He turned his attention back to the portrait. Snape had seemed to withdraw further into the mosaic image, moving backwards towards the impressive Roman building in the background of the picture. The volcano was still belching smoke and fire, and the mosaic sky was almost completely black. A thick rain of ash was still falling, obscuring the figures before them.

There was a faint noise from Hermione's bed. Harry turned to see what was happening.

Poppy was running her wand over Hermione's body once more, her lips unconsciously moving as she muttered a non-verbal diagnostic spell. Pale blue numbers and symbols shimmered in the air above her chest. She frowned as she scanned through them quickly. "She's fighting something," Poppy muttered distractedly, almost to herself. "An infection? These numbers seem to indicate..."

"What's he doing *now*?" Ron said abruptly, and Harry's attention was drawn once more to the portrait. Ron was hunched forward, peering intently at the image. "He's... Is he *fading*?" he asked.

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus Snape remembered vaguely that he should be unhappy about dying.

It bothered him a bit that he could not think very clearly, but after a while, he found that it really did not matter. His body was awash with soothing sensations. Sabazios' hands about his throat had become a gentle pressure supporting his head; the magical exhaustion weakening his limbs was now a comforting lassitude. He felt like he was floating in the Black Lake, falling deeper and deeper into the depths. Images of his twin lives, this one here in the Roman world and his previous wretched existence, shimmered before him. Rather than tormenting him, the images soothed him: he saw Lily's smile as she had found magic for the first time with him, Marcella and her family laughing at some risqué joke that Restitutus had told, grateful parents from Slytherin House, respectful of their dour Housemaster, Dumbledore's tired trust in him as he had proffered the golden Refectio Potion that would delay Gaunt's curse from spreading, Hermione's face as they had parted.

He took a breath, idly surprised that he was still capable of doing so. It hurt a bit. His mouth felt rusty and dry. He moved his tongue about his mouth, swallowed dryly and unclosed his eyes.

Nothing.

Was he disappointed?

Darkness.

He felt his breath condense in the air in front of him and realised that his upper lip was wet and cold.

He tried to lift his head, only to experience an immediate sensation of crippling nausea, a sickening twist in his reality, and a painful constriction in his chest.

He let his head fall backwards to the stone behind him. Immediately, the pain gentled, and he became calm again.

He allowed his eyelids to fall shut again and drifted back to the peaceful sensation of fading into nothingness.

\*\*\*\*\*

...*Oh, shit.*

Hermione froze, the light from her wand illuminating the rough brick cell.

Beside her, a few paces to the left, the Manticore growled again, and she felt the wash of its rank breath on her sweat-slicked skin. She turned her head to the side and saw it less than a few feet away from her, crouched on the harsh grit of the floor, sniffing the air. She held her breath and watched, terrified, as the animal moved its scarred face from side to side. Even though she knew it was blind, she still experienced a moment of irrational panic, as it appeared to look straight at her.

The idea had come to her as she remembered Snape's curses bouncing uselessly off Sabazios' magical shield, as impervious as the charmed skin of the creature poised next to her in the darkened cell. But Snape had been able to stab the beast at close range, and Hermione had remembered the Manticore's tail with its cruel, sharp tip. It was a ridiculously desperate idea, but perhaps it might give her the edge she needed to save him.

Trying to calm herself, she took a deep breath and visualised the spell that she hoped to cast. Spells had no impact on the flesh of a Manticore, but she had reasoned perhaps the creatures could be *contained* by a spell instead. She had seen it done before and hoped fervently that she could recreate the sphere that Voldemort had used to protect and transport his familiar, Nagini.

The Manticore growled again, and with a shivering sensation, Hermione felt the hairs rise on her arms and the nape of her neck.

Her mind fought to put the Latin words together.

*Capio*, she thought, *'to capture'.... sphaera, 'a sphere'.... 'light'... 'light'... What's the bloody word for 'light'? Lumos... lux is the noun... what's the bloody adjective? Lucis! Okay....*

The Manticore took a tentative step forward, and Hermione raised her wand. She would speak the words of the spell rather than try to cast it non-verbally. That would give her the maximum opportunity to concentrate on the *intent* she needed behind it, to focus her determination like the white-hot flame of a welding torch.

However, the noise of her speech would give the creature all it needed to attack her, so if this didn't work, she'd only have moments to Apparate away again. She dithered for a moment, but a sudden image of Severus facing Sabazios and his Inferi alone among the shattered remnants of their battleground outside the Temple pushed her onwards. She had to try. She had to make it work.

She pictured what she was trying to achieve, keeping the image firmly fixed in her mind's eye, and pronounced the words of the new spell. "*Capere in Sphaera Lucis!*" she ordered, flicking her wand in what she hoped was the approximate motion to indicate the dimensions of the Manticore.

Hearing her words, the Manticore snarled and leapt but just before Hermione could react by falling backwards to Apparate to safety, a watery like substance erupted from her wand and swept around the pouncing animal, encasing it in a rolling sphere of light. Silently, she levitated the sphere before her, staring numbly at the furious creature within, which was clawing and stabbing at the magical walls of its new prison.

Hermione swiped her wand hand over her forehead, pushing her hair back and out of her eyes.

Now to effect Side-Along-Apparition without physically touching the animal, take it to Sabazios, save Severus, and get back to the portrait.

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Bathed in the light of the late afternoon, Filius Flitwick was stirring a cup of tea in maddening circles.

He was sitting on a low settle, his feet barely touching the floor. Before him, the other occupants of the room were watching him in frustrated silence. The small entrance chamber was one of the least used rooms in the ground floor of the castle. The room was dominated by a stone fireplace, the mantel supported by twin pillars carved into the shape of rampant seahorses. Rich green and red tapestries hung on the walls, and a series of high windows allowed the late evening sun to enter, its twin beams of light slanting onto the stone floor.

Filius continued to stir his tea, wondering how long he could prevent Mr Finch-Fletchley and his younger colleague from reclaiming Hermione's body.

He tapped his spoon twice on the side of his teacup and returned it to the saucer carefully. "Now, gentlemen," he said calmly. "How can I be of service to you?"

"Professor Flitwick." Finch-Fletchley was much as Flitwick remembered. Age had weathered the boy he had known somewhat, thickening his frame and whitening his hair prematurely at the temples, but much remained of the young Hufflepuff that Finch-Fletchley had once been. The casual arrogance that his wealthy Muggle upbringing had lent him was still evident as he clicked his tongue and rocked forwards and backwards on the balls of his feet. He gave the impression of a stiffly held junior officer in the Household Cavalry.

"Headmaster," he began. "I wonder if you are aware of the whereabouts of Doctor Hermione Granger? We have been led to believe that Mr Harry Potter and Mr Ronald Weasley have abducted her from St Mungo's and brought her here to take part in an unsanctioned ritual..."

"...A *Dark* ritual," the younger Auror at Finch-Fletchley's side interjected urgently.

"Abercrombie..." The long-suffering tone that Finch-Fletchley adopted indicated that the younger man's outburst was not an isolated occurrence.

Finch-Fletchley cleared his throat unnecessarily and rocked backwards again, clasping his hands behind his back. "We are concerned about the nature of the ritual that Messers Potter and Weasley are intending to perform on Doctor Granger," he began again pompously. "Reports from St. Mungo's have suggested that the ritual invokes Blood Magic, something outlawed by the Ministry of Magic's Decree Against the Use of Dark Ceremonies and Procedures. I'm sure that you would wish to help the Aurors with our enquiries.... The safety of our citizens is our primary concern."

"Quite so, quite so," agreed Flitwick earnestly and then took a sip of tea, rolling the sweet liquid around his mouth. "We are always anxious to provide all aid where and whenever necessary," he added.

There was a long silence.

Filius took another sip of tea.

Finch-Fletchley cleared his throat again pointedly and raised his eyebrows as if inviting further comment.

"I do apologise, Auror Finch-Fletchley," said Filius. "Did you wish me to say something further?"

Before either Auror could reply, there was a loud noise from the entrance hall outside the room, and the door to the entrance chamber was flung open to admit a fast moving woman in a long grey coat holding a golfing umbrella firmly in her grip. Her face was set in a resolute grimace, and her hair was disarrayed. Three Hogwarts' house-elves scuttled in behind her, their arms outstretched as if preparing to catch her should she fall.

Filius jumped to his feet, banishing his half-consumed cup of tea as he did so to prevent the hot liquid from splashing over him.

"Doctor Granger!" he exclaimed. "How lovely to see you again! I trust that the elves brought you here without mishap?" The three elves bowed low, acknowledging Filius' comment. Helen Granger did not say anything in response, but looked pointedly at the two other men in the room.

Filius clapped his hands together. "Please forgive my rudeness! Doctor Granger, may I introduce Aurors Finch-Fletchley and Abercrombie. Justin was in Hermione's year at school, as I'm sure you remember! Euan Abercrombie was in Gryffindor, although he is four years Hermione's junior in the House...."

"I remember very little from those times, Professor." Helen Granger's voice was brusque and businesslike. Nevertheless, Filius detected a hint of irritation in her clipped tones. *Of course*, he chided himself, *Hermione's Obliviate*... It was a beautifully constructed series of Memory Charms, which not only removed her parents' memories of their daughter, but also implanted a strong compulsion to emigrate.

"Professor Flitwick. Gentlemen." Helen Granger's voice brought him abruptly back from his reverie. Hermione's mother regarded the wizards with a steely glare. "My husband has been arrested by the wizarding police force, and my comatose daughter is missing." Helen Granger held her umbrella tightly in her right hand, as one might hold a spear. "Your elves have brought me here, Professor," she continued. "And now I would like some answers."

She spiked the umbrella's sharp tip into the rug beneath her feet for emphasis.

"Where. Is. My. Daughter?"

\*\*\*\*\*

*You have to touch it to Apparate with it.*

*You have to touch it to Apparate with it.*

*You have to touch it to Apparate with it.*

The phrase reverberated inside her head again and again.

The Manticore writhed and screamed silently within its enchanted cage, its tail thrashing against the confines of the energy sphere, its teeth snapping, its claws raking the walls of the magic that held it at bay. Flecks of foaming spittle ran down the sides of the luminescent orb.

*You have to touch it to Apparate with it.*

She racked her brains for a solution, her chest throbbing and frustrated tears running down her cheeks. She swiped at them angrily with her wand hand. *Don't be an idiot!* she told herself furiously, *you're no good to him being a dunderhead! Think!*

As she did so, her forearm grazed over the potion phial lying against her breastbone. It seemed to throb in response to her touch.

Find me.

Had she thought that?

Hermione grabbed the potion bottle in her free hand.

Again, she felt the sense of... recognition... from the thing.

Find me.

And she suddenly knew what to do *so simple!*

With all her might, she focused on Snape. Something flared beneath her hands, and the potion phial burned in her grip. Her chest gave a triumphant surge in recognition. She thought of the blood within the little bottle, dried and desiccated, but still present. She thought of the blood on Snape's face and shoulders, his dear face, his fierce expression....

"*Portus*," she whispered, touching her wand tip to the potion bottle and watching it burn brightly for a moment with a blue glow.

She held the potion bottle by its chain and swung it towards the glowing magical sphere. As it struck the edge of the cage, she grasped the bottle itself with her other hand and held on.

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"Can't we just Obliviate her?"

"Do be sensible, Abercrombie she's Hermione's *mother!* How far do you want to take this?" Finch-Fletchley asked in a bored, but authoritative, tone. Abercrombie was very keen, but his naturally bullish character frequently got in the way of actually seeing the bigger picture.

Flitwick was leading the way up the great staircases towards his office with Dr Granger in his wake stomping upstairs behind him. The two Aurors were following about twenty paces to the rear.

"But... but... She's a Muggle! She shouldn't be here!" Abercrombie spluttered, clutching on to the side of the stone staircase as it suddenly swung out from underneath them.

Finch-Fletchley looked up as he felt the staircase move. He could see Flitwick locked in deep conversation with Mrs Granger, standing about three steps higher on the staircase above them, both arms and hands waving enthusiastically in the air as he rode the lurching stairs effortlessly.

"Oh, do wake up, you stupid sod," Finch-Fletchley snapped irritably. "How long do you think that Flitwick would have delayed before taking us to her without mummy Granger turning up? Believe me, she has saved us a huge amount of time. If there's one thing I have learned in this job, it's to take your opportunities when you are offered them."

The staircases gave another lurch as they settled into place, causing Abercrombie and Finch-Fletchley to rock alarmingly over the banister.

Flitwick and Dr Granger strolled easily onto the landing and strode off along the top corridor. Scrambling, the two Aurors gave chase, but before they could reach the top, there was a low rumbling noise as the stone staircase disconnected itself once more, and the two Aurors tried helplessly to scramble up the last few remaining steps as the stone staircase began to swing away.

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"I couldn't see anyone on the streets." Conviva gratefully took a generous slug of water from the goblet his wife offered him as he sank onto the wooden bench in Severus' bathroom. Marcella was sitting on the floor in front of him, and his brother was perching uncomfortably on the lip of Severus' bath. The wall sconces were alight, but the trembling of the ground beneath them was causing the lamps to send flickering shadows onto the painted walls of the barrel-vaulted room. He coughed and patted his tunic once more, dislodging more ash flakes from the thin woollen material as he did so. The ash whitened his hair, and his face was streaked grey with dirt and debris. He drank deeply again, feeling the soothing water slip down his gullet, washing away the harsh, gritty taste in his mouth and throat.

"They must be sheltering like us," Marcella suggested.

"Or they have already got away," Restitutus offered snidely. "We need to *go*, brother! There must be a boat that we can hire... or horses. I have gold look!" He held up his bulging leather purse, the indentation from coins clearly evident through the supple leather.

"NO! Hermione told us to wait here!" Marcella argued, her hand on Conviva's arm.

"Brother, there is not much time! From what the witch told me, the mountain will soon start to bury us alive! She spoke about flows of burning air – air that scorches whatever it touches! I say she's dead already – we have to look to ourselves for our own salvation!" Restitutus was practically shouting in the close atmosphere of the bathroom.

Conviva closed his eyes and leaned back onto the cool wall behind him. He was so tired! He had walked out into the streets, tripping and skidding in the slippery ash covering the uneven pavements. He had not encountered anyone. From inside Stephanos' fullery, he had heard the donkey that was used to power the machinery inside the workshop crying piteously. He had shouted for anyone, but there had been no response. The ash had been falling thickly, and he had been forced to cover his head with the rough wool of his cloak to prevent it from getting into his mouth and up his nose as he breathed. He had gone as far as his own home, noting with a savage sense of loss and anger that the remaining household slaves had long fled, taking much of his portable wealth with him. He had found a few coins still in the bottom of his great money chest, but pretty much everything else had been looted or stolen.

He had not much more than the clothes on his back and whatever his brother still had in his purse. He knew that they could not get far in the maelstrom of swirling, choking ash that filled the air outside. At least here inside, the air was breathable, and the atmosphere cool. Marcella clutched again at his hand. He opened his eyes and looked down into her beautiful green gaze, feeling his heart swell with affection at her loyalty. He swallowed one more gulp of water and placed the goblet down on the bench beside him.

"We stay here," he said shortly, smiling at Marcella's relieved response and Restitutus' snort of frustration. "We stay here," he repeated. "And wait for the girl with magic to return." His smile flickered briefly as he thought of the horrific conditions outside. *If she returns*, he added grimly to himself.

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Hermione arrived at her destination in almost-darkness.

She stifled a cry as she stumbled to the floor, barking her knees on the stone floor of the Temple's inner sanctum. For a terrifying moment, she thought that the Portkey had failed. She had thought she would arrive back in the Temple of Apollo's precinct – the courtyard littered with votive statues and altars outside the Temple building itself.

The dim, starry light from the cage that encircled the Manticore shed a cold radiance on the scene before her, and she quickly made out the hunched figure of Sabazios facing away from her and leaning closer and closer across the prone body of the man within his grip. The roaring from the exploding volcano was barely audible from outside the walls of the *cella*, and the light from Sabazios' shield illuminated the immediate area with a sickly yellow glow. All the god's attention was focused on the man beneath it. Hermione watched with horror as Sabazios' familiars, entwined about the mutated form of the god, seemed to be joining Sabazios in wrapping themselves about...

"SEVERUS!" she bellowed.

The god jerked backwards in shock at her voice, rearing up on his great tail, hands in the air, head twisting around to see the cause of the interruption. As it moved, Snape's lifeless body dropped to the stone floor with a dull, hollow sound.

"*Finite Incantatem! Oppugno!*" Hermione screeched, gesturing with her wand in a savage motion.

At once, the Manticore was released from his enchanted sphere and thrown violently across the room. It hit Sabazios full in the chest, screaming in fury at its recent hunger and captivity.

Sabazios was born backwards, away from Snape's body, towards the back wall of the *cella*, his fingers scrabbling ineffectually on the harsh, matted fur of the animal's pelt. The Manticore bellowed, a harsh trumpeting sound, and Hermione saw the muscles bunching on the back of its neck and shoulders as it dipped its head to feast. The snakes surrounding Sabazios were twining frantically around the Manticore's body.

Hermione heard Sabazios scream, but she could not spare the writhing bodies at the rear of the *cella* too much attention as she was running and skidding across the floor of the room towards Severus' still body.

*Oh, God – Severus! Oh, no! No, no, no, no, no, no, no...*

She half-fell, half-slid to the ground beside him, cradling his body in her arms, searching frantically for signs of life.

She hardly heard the frenzied, desperate sounds of the fight between Sabazios and the Manticore or the roar of the volcano outside.

Blood was running down the side of Snape's face, and his head lolled to one side. He looked truly *terrible*. Hermione had read about magical exhaustion, but even after everything she had witnessed during the war, she had never seen it.

He looked like he had lost half of his body weight. His skin was pulled taught over the harsh bones of his face, and it had taken on a dreadful pallor. She ran her hand over his face, head, and shoulder, desperate for any sign of life at all.

Ahead of her, the Manticore shrieked, its voice a harsh, twisted harmonic that seemed to centre itself somewhere on her spine. Hermione glanced up, her wand raised defensively.

Sabazios was pouring energy into the Manticore, raking his hands and feet along the belly of the animal. His familiars were also striking at the Manticore with their fangs, sinking them through the thick pelt and driving venom into the Manticore's flesh. In turn, Hermione could see viscous black liquid spurting from Sabazios' neck and upper body as the god flailed about under the Manticore's teeth. She shuddered and swept her attention back to Severus.

Her shaking fingers found his jaw, and she nearly fainted with relief as she detected a faint pulse still beating in his neck.

*Oh, thank God!*

She convulsed with emotion, grabbing him to her chest, kissing his forehead, his cheeks, sobbing and laughing with relief. As she pulled away, she saw his eyelids begin to flutter. He was waking up.

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"It's fucking cold in here," muttered Restitutus, folding his arms about himself.

Neither Conviva nor Marcella responded immediately. They still sat together: Conviva on the bench to Restitutus' left leaning against the wall of the bath chamber, his eyes closed; Marcella on the floor at his feet, her head resting against Conviva's thigh, her arm wrapped around his brother's leg. Conviva was stroking his fingers quietly through her tousled hair.

Restitutus shivered again, rubbing his hands on his upper arms roughly. The action was jittery and nervous. The noise from the volcano was an ever-present reminder of their desperate predicament, and even the quieter atmosphere of the bathroom, with its eerie lighting and the grinning fractured skeleton on the floor, bothered him immensely.

"I hate this house," Restitutus said suddenly, rising to his feet and scuffing some of the broken tiles on the floor with the toe of his sandal.



Conviva cracked open an eye to watch him, then sighed. "Calm down, brother," he said. He shifted slightly on the stone bench to ease his position. "It's just a picture."

Restitutus ran his hand through his hair, rubbing at his scalp in frustration. "I know," he snapped. "I just don't like it. This..." he indicated the grinning figure "...upsets me. It reminds me of what we found here when we first looked around the place with Severus."

Conviva grunted in agreement, but shrugged. "It was nothing... an old man's superstition... witchcraft and magic to frighten children! Nasica was mad. Severus kept this because he has a strange sense of humour."

"It was blasphemy," countered Restitutus. He kicked at the raised, yet broken, mosaic floor again.

At that, Marcella opened her eyes fully and sat up. "What do you mean? What are you two talking about? Who is Nasica?" she asked her brother-in-law.

The two men shared a guilty look between them. "It's nothing, dearest," Conviva soothed, trying to stroke her hair again. "Barbarian superstitions, nothing more. Myths and monsters. The man who lived here was mad."

Marcella pulled away, shooting a look of irritation at her husband. "Don't lie to me, Conviva," she said baldly, staring hard at Restitutus. "I've had enough of lies and deceit to last a lifetime. Monsters and ghosts are real; I've seen them."

"This is hardly the occasion, woman," Restitutus snapped, but his brother shook his head and held up his hand, appealing for calm as Marcella bridled before him.

"We have time to tell the tale, Restitutus," he said placatingly, shifting his weight once more on the hard stone of the bathroom bench. Restitutus sat back down on the edge of the bath and glowered at his brother. Conviva turned back to his wife. "When Severus was looking for a place to live, Marcus suggested that we bring him here," he began to explain. "The house was partially destroyed by the earthquake of 52, but with some repairs here and there, it was possible to see how one could make a good house here." He paused, as if searching for words. "The old man who had lived here had fled. Gone to Egypt or somewhere in Persia, some said. Either way, the neighbours were glad to see the back of him. The same for his son - he couldn't wait to sell the place to us for next to nothing."

"Why?" Marcella asked in a small voice.

Conviva shrugged and looked away. Restitutus, too, dropped his eyes to the floor. He seemed uncomfortable.

"The old man was mad," Conviva repeated. "Everyone around here was! His neighbours said that he kept a giant snake here and that he talked to it. They said that he used spells and witchcraft to fuse himself with the creature." He snorted derisively, releasing a fine mist of ash powder from his clothes into the air as he did so. He waved his hand to dispel it.

"Go on," said Marcella quietly.

"Marcus had heard about the man who lived here; an Aedile hears about anything unusual that happens in the city. He told us about the old man when he learned that Severus had come to us here and that he had survived his injuries, thanks to your care." He squeezed her hand. "When Severus needed a place of his own as his business grew, Marcus suggested that we show him this house, broken down as it was. He was highly amused by the idea and *very persuasive*." Conviva's face twisted into a grimace at the memory of Marcus' *persuasion*. He cleared his throat. "It would cost money to repair of course, but Marcus thought it would have properties that Severus would approve of...." Conviva looked thoughtfully at the remnants of the broken mosaic floor before him.

"What else?" Marcella asked, her voice edgy and tense.

Conviva shifted in his place again. "Well, there's nothing more to say, dearest," he said soothingly.

But Restitutus laughed - a harsh, dry sound. "There bloody *is* more to say!" Restitutus' jaw jutted out aggressively at his older brother. "Tell her what we found here... about the sacrificial animals, the bones, and the blood. Blood everywhere, as if he were trying to bleed out his own body and take on something else...."

Marcella gasped.

"And there was more," Restitutus continued, warming to his theme. "There were strange implements and machines - don't you remember, Conviva? Like that golden thing that Severus carried around his neck. Wheels that spun within themselves without seeming to need any power to move, perverted visions of the universe - barbarian gods and their uncivilised..."

Abruptly, there was no more time for talking as the floor began to rumble and the room began to shake. Dust swirled up from the floor, and Conviva jerked upright on his stone bench, slapping his hands uselessly against the cool bricks of the wall behind him. Marcella screamed and clutched onto his legs for support, and Restitutus covered his head with his hands, slid from the bath's edge onto the mosaic floor, pulled his knees up to his chest and waited for death to claim them all....

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"*Hermione...*" Snape's voice was a ghost of its former glory, but it was heaven to her ears. Hermione pulled him into a sitting position and clutched him to her heart.

"Severus. Oh, Severus," was all that she could think to say as she buried her face in the side of his neck and revelled in their embrace. Slowly, she felt trembling arms come around her and hug her back, and a crazed snort of laughter escaped her like a sob.

"Stupid... woman," he whispered in her ear. "Why did you come back?"

She sniffed and pulled away from him to stare into his ravaged features. "Would *you* have left *me* for good?" she challenged him, then darted a look upwards at the fighting creatures at the end of the darkened room. Sabazios' shield was stuttering, its brightness reduced to a sickly glare under the onslaught of the furious animal.

Snape pulled at her arm. "Sabazios... what about Sabazios?" he hissed.

The Manticore suddenly emitted a shrieking noise, and both it and Sabazios crashed to the floor in a tangle of flailing limbs. She watched as Sabazios and its familiars wrapped themselves around the twisting, bucking animal, trying to squeeze the life out of it. It seemed to be working - the Manticore's movements were becoming increasingly hesitant and jerky.

"He's busy," she replied curtly. "Come on," she added, grabbing him roughly under the armpits and heaving him further upright. "We are leaving."

Snape grimaced as he struggled to his feet and leaned heavily on her. She swayed under his weight. Even though he was painfully thin and wasted, he was still too heavy for her to carry him.

Snape twisted around to see what was happening for himself, and she felt his bony fingers dig into her shoulder.

She looked again and realised with horror that Sabazios was sluggishly trying to disentangle himself from the twitching limbs of the Manticore.

"Finish them," Snape croaked, sagging against her again. She had to strain her ears to hear him over the noise of the volcano and the furious creatures. "Use your wand... Use Fiendfyre...."

Hermione panicked, but he gripped her shoulder even more painfully. "Do it!" His voice was cracked and desperate.

Sabazios was on his feet now, turning slowly towards them. The noise from the volcano appeared to be increasing. *Just Apparate!* she thought to herself frantically, watching Sabazios slowly, slowly unfurl himself to its fullest height. His shield flickered still, and she could see deep tears and gashes in his flesh, the black blood pooling at his feet, staining his skin and the remnants of his clothing. His great tail coiled and shifted about him. She began to back away, half-supporting, half-dragging Snape with her.

"But... but... I can't control it!" she babbled. "Gregory Goyle damn near destroyed Hogwarts with Fiendfyre! It took *months* of reconstruction to repair..."

"Granger!" Snape's voice was a hoarse shout. "Remember where and when you are! Cast the fucking spell, woman!"

Sabazios had begun to advance on them, dragging his injured body forwards, fire burning in his inhuman eyes.

"Witch!" the god spat, his voice magically amplified. "You tried to kill me!" Blood was flowing in surges from the largest of the wounds in Sabazios' belly, pulsing out of the god as it moved. Hermione recoiled in disgust as she saw his intestines beginning to spill out from the gash, hanging obscenely down the dead grey scales on his belly.

Slowly, Hermione's sluggish thoughts began to catch up with the logical element of her brain. *Why is he bleeding at all?* she wondered. *Do gods, bleed? Aren't they creatures of the supernatural? What on earth is happening here...?*

As if in a dream, she watched Sabazios raise his arm and point his outstretched claws in their direction.

"GRANGER! Brenna Illa Eldinn! Cast the fucking spell, or we are all *dead* and the rest of the world probably too!" Snape's fractured voice ripped through her, and he shook her shoulders with desperate roughness.

She cried out at his coarse handling, but raised her wand, drawing on her magical core and forcing her intent through the focal point of her wand *Brenna Illa Eldinn!* she bellowed, her voice sounding strangely thick in her own ears.

At once, she felt a great pulsing power uncoil within her. The magical fire flowed through her body and from her wand, forcing itself through her as if her body were a conduit. She shook with the power of it. It was intoxicating, thrilling, frightening. Dimly, she could feel Snape's hand gripping her shoulders, anchoring her to reality.

The fire was white hot, burning with a terrifying intensity that lit the *cella* brightly, sending dancing shadows across the walls, ceiling and floor. She could not look at it without half-closing her eyes. She could feel it. It filled her with elation and a savage sense of her own power. She gloried in it. This was power! This was supremacy! Her eyes narrowed further as she stared at Sabazios before her, surrounded and engulfed by the storm of her own creation. The Fiendfyre danced and contorted, curling and twining around the figure of the monster before her. How *dare* he stand against her? How *dare* he try to kill her? How *dare* he hurt those whom she loved?

Sabazios screamed an inhuman sound of pain, frustration and despair. She watched, glorying in the sensation as the god began to undulate and thrash against the impact of the cursed fire. She saw him recoil away from the flames, trying to escape them by rising on his tail almost as high as the ceiling itself, but his body was on fire. Now the god was burning, *burning*, and Hermione laughed, sending the fires hotter and higher and wider and fiercer than they had been before.

The energy exploded out from her. She was panting with the effort of keeping any sort of control and direction over it now; it was taking over, questing tendrils of fire spreading even more widely around the room. The Manticore's body was consumed and burning. The flames licked up the walls of the room, destroying everything in their path, every decoration and design the carefully drawn paintings of Apollo and Mercury on the walls of the inner sanctum scouring the images of these petty *human* gods clean from the walls, leaving a blackened signature behind. The magical fire flowed from her wand in great gouts, washing over the dying creature before her, bathing him with a torrent of devouring fury until Sabazios was seared into nothing but a blackened wreckage of twisted destruction. She felt a fierce sense of satisfaction as she watched the blazing pyre before her obliterate the false god. Slowly, however, as the flames consumed the body, she began to be aware of the wider scene before her.

The fire was growing and spreading, pouring out from her in an uncontrollable torrent, and Hermione grew frightened. She could not find a way to control the power now; it had become too strong. She could not stop this now! How could she banish this power?

"*Enough!*" She felt Snape in her mind. "*Klárað Galdur!*"

Abruptly, the flame stopped flowing out of her, and she staggered with relief, barely remaining standing. Had she said the incantation? Or had it been the man in her arms, sagging against her?

But there was no time to think. She had only stopped the fire from erupting from her wand the Fiendfyre that she had summoned already remained, growing and feeding on the fuel in the *cella*. The heat was unbelievable; the noise of the flames was deafening... Even the floor beneath them felt as if it were shaking. They had only moments before the conflagration turned towards them. The hairs on her eyelids and eyebrows began to crisp under its intensity.

Time to leave.

She tightened her grip on the man she had come to save.

*Destination, determination, deliberation*, she thought savagely and turned into nothingness.

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A/N2: (I hope that none of you thought that I was actually going to kill off someone we cared about...? Okay, it was a bit evil of me to tease like that. Sorry. \*Wiggles eyebrows\*. ) I follow convention by utilising Latin for most of my spells, but I was keen to mark out the Dark Fiendfyre spell by using a different linguistic root. I chose Icelandic for my incantation, as it has a similarity to Old Norse. Apologies to any Icelanders out there I hope that I got the translations right. "Brenna Illa Eldin," should translate as, "Burn, evil flame!". "Klárað Galdur!" (I am hoping) is a good enough translation for: "Complete the magic!"....

## Chapter 26

*Chapter 27 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: Canon characters are not mine and I make no money from this. Thanks and praise to beawesley2, Clairvoyant, and nagandsev for their help and support in writing.

Well... Sabazios is dead... and now all they have to do is get away... simple, right?

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## Chapter 26

Hermione Apparated Snape into a swirling mass of choking ash. The atmosphere was thick with it, making it hard to tell exactly what was around them. The noise was deafening, a rending roar that reverberated in her chest.

The ash and pumice stones from the volcano had formed a hot, thick blanket that covered the ground at her feet, and as Hermione stumbled forwards, trying to get her balance, she hissed in pain at the shock of the hot material on her bare legs.

Beside her, Severus slumped roughly into her side, and she wrapped her arms around him, trying to prop him up and keep him out of the ash while working out where on earth they were. He was barely conscious. The sky was almost completely dark, aside from the angry flashes of volcanic lightening from Vesuvius overhead. It was an eerie, frightening world that confused and disorientated her. In her rush to escape the Fiendfyre in the Temple, she had thought of his *peristyle* garden rather than the security of the underground bathroom or laboratory, remembering how she had sat in the garden so many times before. *Idiot!* she berated herself soundly and felt a wash of exhaustion slipping over her. Conjuring and controlling the Fiendfyre had taken a lot of her energy. She needed to rest, and she still wasn't entirely sure where they were her surroundings looked so alien and hideous.

She spun around awkwardly, still bearing most of Severus' weight, and slowly, through the bitter fumes and swirling ash flakes, she began to make out the steps upwards to the summer dining room, the covered walkway towards the *atrium* at the front of the house, and on her left, the doorway leading downwards to his laboratory and bath chamber. She noted with relief that it was, indeed, Snape's house, but the garden was covered in a thick layer of the grey-white substance, the plants bowed down under its weight as they would have done had they been under snowfall. Above them, the roofs were close to buckling under the immense pressure of the fallen detritus from the volcano. Her mind spun with calculations. *How long do we have? Can that roof hold out?* She looked again at the staircase that led up to the summer dining room the location of the portrait that would get them home. Her instinct was to get straight up there, ready to activate the portal to escape this world of destruction but then she remembered the Pompeiians whom she had told to wait for her in the underground chambers of the house.

"Marcella!" she bellowed. "Conviva! Can you hear me?" She knew, as soon as she shouted, that her voice could not possibly carry through the maelstrom of the eruption.

Abruptly, the ground began to tremble violently, causing her to lose her footing entirely and stumble awkwardly to her knees with Snape still locked in her arms. Her breath caught in her throat *the volcano! Oh, Merlin! How long has it been erupting now?* She tried to remember what Bernardo had told her all those months ago in modern Italy about the progression of the eruption. Panic seized her. How long would it take for the Plinian eruption column to collapse into the devastating series of pyroclastic flows which would devastate and bury the city, killing everything that remained behind? *When did the pyroclastic flows begin?* she thought to herself frantically. Not even the strongest Shield Charm could withstand the impact of a pyroclastic surge. *The surges came at night*, she remembered suddenly. But then, the account had been wrong so far the eruption started earlier than everyone had thought. *If I get out of this*, she thought suddenly and absurdly, *I'm writing an accurate account of the eruption!* She cast a frantic look up at the sky, finding it impossible to tell whether the sky was dark due to the ash cloud and pumice fall, or for normal, natural reasons.

The ground was still shaking, and now she began to hear heavier sounds of impact as larger stones fell about her. She realised that she needed to get into the cover of the downstairs' rooms if they were going to survive. Belatedly, she cast a flickering Shield Charm over both of them, noting again that her magic was less assured than usual. How long had it been since she had eaten? The volcano bellowed and roared again. In her ears, the pitch was rising. Her heart was yammering in her chest, and she grew light-headed with panic. Was this a pyroclastic surge? She would never see it coming! To have come this far without survival was unthinkable. Could she get him to the portrait in the *triclinium*? Could they escape in time?

Then she thought again of the Pompeiians waiting, terrified, in Severus' bath chamber with its sturdy barrel-vaulted ceiling and the warded and protected walls, and she made her decision. Severus needed time to recover his senses. He needed food and water, and she had access to what remained of his medicinal potions in his laboratory....

"Can you stand up?" she shouted in Severus' ear above the clamour of the eruption. "We need to get undercover!"

She felt him nodding his head against her shoulder and struggling to stand upright, fighting his magical depletion and physical exhaustion. She sighed with relief but found her mouth full of bitter ash. Coughing and spitting out the sharp bits of dust and pulverised stone, she half-carried, half-dragged the shattered man towards the steps, their feet scuffing up clouds of hot grey cinders as they walked.

She paused at the top of the stairs heading downwards, steadying herself on the door jamb, and cast a quick evaluative look at him. Snape swayed on his feet and scowled at her, his hand still gripping her shoulder for support. There was no way he would safely make it down the steep steps on his own.

"Stand still!" she shouted to make herself heard, casting a wordless Mobilicorpus on him in order to float him down the stairs, thinking all the while that he'd never forgive her for this indignity.

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Harry and Ron spun around as they heard the grinding sound of the stone gargoyle and the patter of quickly moving footsteps into the Headmaster's office. Filius was almost out of breath when he arrived at Hermione's bedside, and Helen Granger was moving with real authority by his side. Harry felt an immediate sense of relief washing over him, although his heart was still thumping hard in his chest.

"Ronald!" Helen's voice was taught, and her body filled with tension as she clasped Ron in a quick embrace. Harry saw his friend's face twist into a ghost of sorrow as Helen squeezed him tight, and he remembered that Hermione had left *him* and not the other way around. Unconsciously, he reached out for Ginny's hand and gave it a squeeze.

Ginny smiled sadly at her husband, acknowledging his emotions as she squeezed his hand back.

Letting go of Ron, Helen crouched by her daughter's bedside, worriedly looking at Hermione's pale face, running her hand over her forehead to check her temperature.

Harry saw Helen shoot a look at Poppy and cock an expressive eyebrow at the Healer. "What is the situation?" she asked, one medical professional to another.

Poppy's face was serious. "She seems to be fighting something internally. It's a sort of magical coma. She is relatively stable, although I am concerned that her energy is draining, and I cannot find the source of the drain. Of course," Poppy added, with a further arch look towards Harry, "I'm not happy that she was brought here in the first place."

Helen's lips pursed. "It was our decision," she countered, and Harry could tell that there was an edge of worry in her voice. "The doctor in the hospital appeared to have no idea what to do and gave her a poison." Helen shot a quick look at Harry, then returned her gaze to Hermione's still and wan face. "Harry had a good idea, and I think that you have just as good a chance of solving this riddle as any," she finished quietly. "You helped my daughter so many times before when she was a pupil here."

Harry blushed and looked away, feeling another sick pang of fear in his gut. It was *his* fault that Hermione was lying there, looking so pale and motionless in the dappled

light of the late afternoon. "Septima thinks it's something to do with the runes around the portrait," he explained, glancing across at the Arithmancy mistress for confirmation.

Vector nodded warily, her hand frozen on the parchment calculations that she was making. She cleared her throat. "Yes," she agreed. "They are the key, I believe, but I need *time*. I've just gotta figure out how they function so we can activate them and bring her home. I thought I had it," she added, "but..." She spread her hands wide to indicate her frustration.

Helen nodded at Septima, but then turned to stare again at her daughter's face, and Harry saw her knuckles whiten as she gripped Hermione's hand harder. "She always was a fighter," Helen said. "Come on, love...."

"Where are the Aurors?" Ron asked Filius nervously as he flicked a quick look in the direction of the entrance to the office. "You were going to meet them, but...?"

Filius' face assumed a look of almost Dumbledorian innocence. "Ahh, yes, Mr Weasley. I am afraid that they have been rather diverted by the castle. It's the staircases, you see. Since the war ended, they really have taken on a life of their own. I am afraid that the two young gentlemen may be lost for some time...."

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They laid him carefully back down on the same trestle table in the laboratory, pausing only for a moment to remove the broken metal shard of the *caduceus* that was still tucked into his belt. Snape was breathing shallowly, his eyes shut. By the time that Hermione had carefully made her way with the levitated man down the stone steps to the underground area of Snape's house, the earth tremors had abated, and the three Pompeiians had rushed out of the bathroom suite to greet them. They looked terrified and filthy, but Hermione had fallen into Marcella's arms in relief that they were still all alive.

With the heavy wooden door closed and warded shut, it was surprisingly quiet in the darkened room. The volcano could still be heard and felt, but it was more of a dull reverberation.

The magical sconces filled the room with their cool green light. Shadows played around them as they gathered about Severus' thin frame.

"Is he alright?" Marcella asked, reaching forward to cup Severus' cheek in her hand.

His eyelashes fluttered at her touch, and Hermione batted Marcella's hand away, feeling an irrational sense of jealousy at the softly intimate expression on the other woman's face.

She scowled. "Of course he's not 'alright'," she snapped sharply. "He fought Sabazios on his own, and it nearly killed him."

"He fought Sabazios?" Restitutus' eyes were wide with disbelief and respect. "What...?"

"We killed him," Hermione said flatly. She remembered her feelings of elation and triumph as she had wielded the Fiendfyre and destroyed the creature, and then her sick sense of guilt as the incantation had ended when her emotions had returned to normal. She placed her hand gently on Snape's chest, feeling it rise and fall as he drew in breaths. Her own heart seemed to contract in response to the heartbeat underneath her fingertips, and for the first time, she wondered at this odd sensation. Her hand fluttered to the place between her breasts where the Horcrux lay on its silver chain, and she grasped the little glass perfume phial.

Severus opened his eyes this time at her touch. She leaned over him.

"Stop fussing, woman," he managed to say in a whisper to Hermione. He swivelled his attention to the Pompeiians standing around his bed. "I'll be fine...." His eyes closed again, and he seemed to sag slightly against the pillow, still breathing.

At the frightened look on Marcella's face, Hermione softened her expression. "He's suffering from magical depletion," she explained. "The magic used up his normal energy reserves, and then it began to eat into his physical body." She ran her hand possessively once more over his chest. "That's why he looks so..."

"Lifeless?" Conviva supplied. Hermione twisted around to scowl at Severus' friend, but seeing Conviva's gaunt-eyed look of worry, she did not rebuke him.

"As he says, he'll be fine," Hermione said defensively. "He just needs to rest and eat and drink something." She slipped her hand under Snape's head and brought the rough goblet of water to his lips. Snape drank from her shaking hand and settled back on the cushions. He coughed weakly.

Hermione looked at Marcella. "Have we got any food left?" she asked.

Marcella shook her head. "I think we ate it all this morning, or last night...." She looked around at the pots and containers on the shelves. "Perhaps there is something here that we can eat...?"

Hermione nodded. "There might be something that we can use.... I can make a Strengthening Solution.... I think I saw some dried salamander blood somewhere...." She stood up and walked over to the shelving, looking for what she needed.

A loud exclamation of disgust caused her to spin around.

"I *hate* to interrupt this fascinating discussion about nutrition, but *what about the fucking mountain?*" Restitutus voice was rough. "In case you have all forgotten, we are about to be buried alive! How can we get away, Hermione? Can't you just invoke that magic again and take us away from the city, far from the volcano? It doesn't matter how strong or weak Severus is, if we are all going to be buried alive by the wrath of Vulcan!"

"Restitutus..." Marcella began, but the rest of her words caught in her throat as she stared in horror over Hermione's shoulder into the darkness in the far reaches of the laboratory.

"I think that my friend Restitutus is right, *dearest* Marcella," said a slow drawing voice. "We are *all* looking for a way out of this predicament."

And Marcus Fiducius stepped out of the shadows, twirling Snape's wand in his long fingers.

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"Abercrombie, *will* you stop fussing?" Justin Finch-Fletchley paused for a moment and pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. They had been walking for almost an hour, along corridors that seemed to be interconnected in a sort of Möbius Strip that had sent them back to the beginning of their explorations just as they had been convinced that they had found their way to the Headmaster's office. Justin sighed, *Escher*. It was like being inside an Escher drawing. Directional spells seemed to have no effect within the charmed walls of the castle.

"We should call the Ministry for back-up," Abercrombie was saying as they stomped along yet another dusty corridor.

Finch-Fletchly laid a light hand on his younger colleague's arm and paused alongside a cobweb-covered suite of armour. "And become the laughing stock of the Auror Office? Defeated by a *school building*? I think *not*, Auror Abercrombie." There had to be a logical solution to the situation.

"The Headmaster's Office. Point me." Finch-Fletchley instructed his wand once more.

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"I'm sure that you have a plan for getting away from here, Hermione." Fiducius' voice oozed urbane charm. "After all," he continued, "you were able to escape from our little play area beneath the mountain, my dear, were you not?"

Hermione instinctively moved in front of Snape, blocking his body from Fiducius' view. Her mind was clouded with fear and exhaustion. *He has Severus' wand! Where did he get it? Can he use it?* Her hand crept towards her own wand in the pocket of her *tunica*.

Fiducius came closer, more fully into the light of a nearby sconce, and Hermione gasped involuntarily.

The *Aedile*'s features were ravaged, eyes hanging in a dead skin, bloodshot and bulbous. A thin dribble of silver potion glistened on his stubbled and filthy chin. His clothes were bloodstained and grimy with ash and dirt and ripped in places. He still moved with a sinuous grace, but his head twitched, and his hands were trembling.

Fiducius noticed Hermione's attention on the wand in his hands, and he smiled mirthlessly. "Oh, *this*?" he asked, tapping the wand tip lightly on his fingers and giggling at the small sparkle of magic that the birch wand produced. "One of my men brought it to me," he explained. "They found it in the Manticore's cell when they went to feed the creature. Of course, it killed and ate one of them as they retrieved it, but no matter...." Fiducius smiled again. "They were only *slaves*, after all...."

Hermione's hand ghosted over the handle of her own wand, and she readied herself to draw it and cast a non-verbal Disarming Charm. Fiducius grew closer to her, and she took an involuntary step backwards until her legs bumped up against the trestle bed. There was no sound or movement from Severus. Beside her, Marcella cringed and whimpered.

"*Aedile*," Restitutus held up his hands in supplication, trying to smile. "It is good to see you again, brother..."

"*Don't* presume to call me your equal, freedman!" the *Aedile* spat, gesturing with the wand in a slashing motion. A shot of yellow fire shot towards Restitutus, striking the side of his head. Restitutus cried out and fell to the floor, clutching his face.

Marcella screamed, shrinking back towards her husband, and Hermione moved quickly, pulling her wand out from her *tunica* but Fiducius was faster. She found herself staring at the twitching tip of Snape's wand with her arm only half-raised.

"Drop it, witch," the *Aedile* spat, his eyes burning. "You are all mine now, and you will do as I please."

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"The portrait's moved," Ginny said suddenly.

"Yeah." Ron's voice was surly. "She's back with *him* again."

Vector's head snapped up from her calculations. "Have the runes shifted?" she asked, picking up her sheaf of notes and moving closer to the mosaic.

Harry and Helen broke away from their quiet conversation about Robert and Luna's arrest and the likely outcome of it to see that the figures in the darkened picture were once more intertwined. Snape was on his knees, his head buried in Hermione's belly, while Hermione had her arms wrapped about his shoulders as if shielding him from something.

"Interesting....," said Filius, moving closer to the portrait.

"Very," agreed Vector, coming alongside him, her notes in her hand. She looked intently at the edges of the mosaic, then back to her notes once more.

"It's like she's protecting him," offered Ginny, squinting hard at the dark intertwined figures.

"Urgh," said Ron disparagingly.

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Hermione closed her eyes as she felt the tip of Snape's wand dig in to the soft skin underneath her jaw.

Fiducius was close to her, as close as he had been when he had attacked her at the Vettii's party. He tucked her surrendered wand into his belt and patted it lightly with satisfaction. "Now that we have moved past the usual pleasantries, it is time to *go*, don't you think, Doctor Granger?" he asked.

Hermione wrinkled her nose in barely concealed distaste. She could smell him, the sickly stench of the potion mixed with sweat and urine. Her head twitched slightly as she stole a glance at Snape's still form. There was no sign of movement from him.

To their left, Restitutus moaned again, his hand still clutching his bloodied head as he rocked in pain on the floor.

With a snort of disgust, Fiducius turned his attention to Snape. Hermione watched his eyes roving over Severus' body, taking in the starved body, the paper-thin flesh marred by bruising, burns and other wounds. His *tunica* was filthy, ripped and torn in places, and like everyone else in the room, Snape was covered with a fine grey dust from the volcanic ash.

Hermione saw the glint of gold about Snape's neck at the same time as Fiducius. She started forward in alarm as Fiducius slowly used the wand tip to lift up the thin golden chain that held the ancient Time-Turner. At her reaction, Fiducius cocked his eyebrow and narrowed his eyes.

"I've seen this before," he said. "What is it, witch?"

"Don't..." Hermione held up her hand. "It's nothing. Just a-a... necklace... a silly talisman. Please..."

Fiducius sneered at her coldly. "Then, I think I'll keep it." With an abrupt motion, he snapped the chain around Snape's neck and held the Time-Turner up in the light from the sconces, watching the fused sands in the tiny glass vial as the Time-Turner twisted in the air. With another flourish, he tucked it into the pouch at his belt.

Restitutus whimpered again.

Fiducius spun around and gestured abruptly with the wand. "I tire of his snivelling. See to him," he ordered Marcella and Conviva curtly.

They stumbled to comply.

The wand was quickly replaced under Hermione's chin.

"After all," the *Aedile* added with another unpleasant smile, "it's only an ear...."

Hermione stared in dumb horror at the man before her as his words sank in to her mind.

"Well?" the *Aedile* asked. "I know that you have some sort of plan to escape, or you would never have come back here." He stepped closer. "I need you, little witch," he hissed. "*You* can brew my potion. *You* can maintain my powers. I can still feel the magic in my veins, curling through me, filling me up, completing me. I *will not* be without it.

Where you go, I go."

The distant noise from the volcano and the vibration in the room seemed to alter a little as he spoke; the flames in the magical sconces burned a little brighter.

Hermione said nothing. She felt numb. For hours, it seemed that she had been running on adrenaline and nerve, and she was losing heart. She closed her eyes wretchedly. Behind her, Snape was silent and still, and she was desperately worried about him. Her hand moved blindly behind her to brush against his arm. His skin felt cool to the touch, and he did not respond. *He's not dead, he's not dead!* she thought to herself fiercely. She pushed herself to think more clearly, to adapt the hasty plan that she had formed in her mind when the eruption had begun and the Pompeiians had become trapped in the city without a hope of conventional escape. She felt the wand tip jab once more into the soft flesh of her neck, and she opened her eyes.

"I can get us out of here," she said, thinking quickly to formulate a plan. "But we can't go alone." She jerked her head a little in the direction of the huddled Pompeiians. "I need their help to do it."

Fiducius' lips curled back in a contemptuous snarl, but Hermione pressed on quickly. "I need their memories of their estate in Salernum. It is out of the volcano's reach. I can create an object that can allow us to travel there, away from the eruption, to safety. You said yourself that you have not travelled very widely - never far enough away from Pompeii. Your aunt's villa at Oplontis will soon be buried under the ash cloud too." She didn't mention that Oplontis had been abandoned, that no bodies had been found there, indicating that the people had had time to escape. She fixed Fiducius with what she hoped was her most sincere expression and waited.

Fiducius considered her words for a moment, his breath hot on her cheek. Then he nodded and stepped backwards. "Do it now," he ordered.

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"They have shifted again," Vector confirmed. "Another signifier has entered the algorithm. I wonder..."

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Hermione tried to settle her mind. Her recent experience of Legilimency with Severus would be helpful, she knew, but never since modifying her parents' memories back after the war had she invaded the minds of Muggles. Of the three wide-eyed and frantic Pompeiians, she knew that her best chance lay with Conviva, who seemed the most emotionally stable of the three. Heightened emotions would cloud Conviva's memories and make her task harder to perform. She needed him to remain calm for a little while longer.

"I need an object," she began. "Something that I can transform into a Portkey; one that is big enough for us all to touch. May I?" she asked, turning her back on Fiducius slowly to search for a suitable object.

Quickly, desperately, she searched Severus' face for any sign of consciousness. She allowed her fingers to brush, as if by accident, against his skin and her breath to fall on his chest to tell him that she was facing him. *Nothing*. She felt her spirits sag. Her hand rested on one of the small cushions on his bed to the left of his shoulder, and she grasped it.

However, just as she was about to turn away from Severus, she thought that she caught a slight movement of his right eyelid, as if he had cracked it open for a moment and then shut it again. The corner of his lip twitched.

He had winked at her. *He had winked at her! That bloody man!*

It took all her self-control not to react. Fiducius was behind her, and he was sure to kill Snape if he considered him a threat. Her heart began pumping wildly in her chest again, and she turned around to face the *Aedile* with renewed hope.

She took a deep breath. "I need my wand to cast the spell," she said evenly.

Fiducius looked at the pillow with scepticism and raised his stolen wand once again. "If you are playing a trick on me...", he began, the warning clear in his voice.

"No tricks," Hermione stated, her heart thumping erratically with the hope of it. "Now I need to look into Conviva's memory to be able to weave the magic."

A few more seconds passed, during which time the noise from the volcano seemed to grow a little more insistent and intense. Eventually, Fiducius drew her wand out from his belt. He hefted it in his hand lightly but then offered it to her. At the same time he moved his own wand so that it pointed directly at Severus' face.

"Any tricks, and I will destroy him," he said calmly.

Hermione took the wand. "Stand still, Conviva," she said, her voice trembling with fear and adrenaline. Clearing her own mind, she stared into the wide and frightened eyes of the merchant. "*Legilimens*," she ordered softly.

Immediately, she was in Conviva's thoughts. She saw the lush fields and citrus trees that characterised the region. She saw a fine estate, the slaves bustling in the fields, the children playing on the dusty ground, running about carefree and happy. A few moments more, and his memories settled to a large umbrella pine, its twisted trunk standing tall and proud against a backdrop of sheer cliffs and the azure blue sea of the gulf of Salernum. Here was the place that she needed. It was isolated, as far as she could tell, and it was, therefore, more likely that they would arrive safely at their destination. Focusing all her attention on that image, Hermione touched the cushion in her hand with her wand and uttered the incantation, "*Tempus Portus*."

The cushion glowed blue for a moment, causing Conviva to start backwards in shock, breaking their connection. He rocked on his feet, blinking rapidly.

Hermione turned to Fiducius. "We all need to hold on to the cushion, and then when I tap it once more with the wand, it will activate," she said.

Fiducius' face broke into another predatory smile. He leaned forward to pluck the cushion from Hermione's fingers

But it was just at that moment that the ceiling started to collapse.

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For a moment, Hermione remained rooted to the spot as the plasterwork and brick that made up the barrel-vaulted roof of the laboratory started to fall. Suddenly, the swirling maelstrom of the eruption was howling and screaming around the laboratory, ash and heavy rocks were falling into the room around them. The building began to shake again, and Hermione realised that Snape must have released the wards that were shoring up the integrity of the walls and roofs of his property.

*Why? What the fuck is he doing?* her mind gibbered as more of the ceiling caved in at the far end of the room. The shelves on the walls began to disgorge their contents onto the floor, and the sound of shattering glass and breaking pottery added to the noise of falling masonry and volcanic rock.

Fiducius reacted quickly. He grabbed Hermione by the arm, pulling her physically away from Snape and wrenching her wand out of her hand. "Get out!" the *Aedile* bellowed as he herded everyone standing towards the wooden door of the laboratory.

Hermione tried to pull out of his grip, rearing backwards to try to stay with Snape.

"We've got to take him too!" she shouted. "He'll die if we don't move him!"

Fiducius grabbed Hermione closer and levelled the stolen wand between her eyes. "Leave him!" he shouted above the noise of the tumult in the room. As she didn't move, he flicked the wand away and pointed it at Snape. "I owe him a painful death anyway. Leave him, or I'll finish him off now myself!"

"No!" Hermione screamed, trying to grab at the *Aedile*, but he roughly pushed her away from him towards the door. Restitutus, his head roughly bandaged with part of Marcella's stola, grabbed her and yanked the door open, pulling her through with him across the hallway. Hermione looked briefly up the stairway towards the courtyard and saw an orange glow and more ash pouring down the stairwell. The superheated rocks that Vesuvius was now sending forth were setting off fires among the wooden joists and balustrades of the buildings. Soon, there would be a firestorm like those that the Muggles endured during the bombing raids of World War II. All the oxygen in the atmosphere would be burned, and there would be no air left to breathe. As she faltered, Restitutus shouted something inaudible and bundled her in front of him into the bathroom.

"It's fine in here!" he shouted backwards at the others, who tumbled in behind them.

Hermione was sobbing, clutching the pillow to her chest, sprawled on the broken mosaic floor. Above them, there was a frightening rumble, and she realised that the upper layers of Snape's house were collapsing above them, just as the laboratory was being buried beneath tonnes of ash and superheated rock.

She knew that Snape, exhausted and depleted and without his wand to focus his magic, would be buried alive.

## Chapter 27

*Chapter 28 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

### Chapter 27

The ground shook underneath her, a juddering, wrenching sensation that seemed to echo in her chest. Her cheek was bruised and scratched by the broken mosaic tiles, ash, and sand from the floor that she was collapsed upon. She felt someone grab her shoulders roughly, and she shoved herself upwards off the floor violently, shrugging off the contact and spinning about on her knees, clutching the cushion-Portkey to herself.

"Hey, Hermione!" It was Restitutus, his head bandaged and bleeding, his eyes wide with fear and distress, standing between her and the open door to the bath suite.

Severus! He'll be trapped in the laboratory!

She stumbled to her feet, jaw set and anger lending her fresh energy. "Get out of my way, Restitutus," she warned, feeling her magic begin to pool in the pit of her belly.

He held his hands up imploringly in front of her and was just about to say something when Conviva and Marcella appeared in the doorway, and he backed into the room. Marcella was crying, holding on to her husband's right arm, and Conviva was walking strangely on the balls of his feet, his head and neck extended unnaturally. The reason for this became clear very quickly when Fiducius came into view over Conviva's shoulder, his face contorted in rage and desperation. He was jabbing Snape's wand cruelly into Conviva's throat, into the soft skin under the jaw line, while pushing him backwards into the room.

"Did you think you could hurt me, you pathetic sack of shit?" Fiducius spat at Conviva. His lips were pulled back from his yellowing teeth, the flickering light in the room illuminating the *Aedile*'s madness. "You can't fucking kill me, *slave*!" He jabbed the wand again, and Conviva cried out.

"What have you *done*?" shouted Hermione, taking a step forwards towards the *Aedile*.

Marcella spun around. "Conviva tried to bring Severus," she began, her voice high and shrill in her distress. "The roof was falling in, Conviva grabbed him, but..."

The crashing sound of falling masonry behind them and the increased noise from the volcano drowned out her words.

Hermione cast a frantic look at the doorway at the choking billow of ash and dust that was flowing into the room and knew, with a horrifying clarity, that he must be dead.

*Severus*, she thought.

*Severus*.

*Oh, God*.

*Gone*.

She stood stock still in the shaking room, the salt of her tears stinging the cuts on her cheek, her hands fisting impotently into the soft material of the Portkey in her arms. She could hear nothing see nothing. It was as if time were frozen into a tableau of hurt so all encompassing that she could not comprehend it.

Suddenly, she could smell the dank decay of the Shrieking Shack all those years ago, and she could see his dying form thrashing beneath her as she had fought to save him, her hands slick with his blood, yet roughened by the stiff wool of his robes... his skin clammy and cold as the life had left him before her despairing eyes.

*Then* she remembered the feel of his body beneath her fingers as she had washed him in the bath, the salt-sour taste of his lips and his tongue, the catch of his voice, and his tenderness even at the height of their passion... the feeling of completion that she had experienced in his arms.

*Invenient me, anima mea*, the words on that thrice-damned mosaic portrait all those days ago, on that hot day in modern Italy... words that had called to her, directed her.

*Find me, my soul*.

And she had found him; she had *saved him*... for nothing.

She felt rough hands shake her shoulders, but she could not respond. She was numb. And cold.

*Dead.*

*Gone.*

Someone was shouting in her face.

*Dead.*

*Gone.*

A stinging sensation on her cheek roused her. She felt her head snap back. Another slap.

"*For Hades' sake!* **Hermione!**" Restitutus was shouting at her, his face contorted with panic. Her vision swam into focus, and as her senses returned to her, she found herself back in the bathroom suite in ancient Pompeii.

"Is she with us again?" Another voice... lighter in tone, but sardonic and cruel.

She blinked. *Fiducius.*

"I I think so, my lord." Restitutus' voice wavered, and he stepped backwards.

"Good." Fiducius still had his wand trained on Conviva and Marcella, but he gestured with his other hand towards her. "Time to leave, witch. Come here."

The walls were shaking badly, as Snape's containment spells had failed, and Hermione wondered suddenly in a strange, calm part of her mind if the extra violence was due to a pyroclastic surge from the volcano. The surges killed by their heat and force but also because the worst ones created a firestorm so vicious that it sucked all the oxygen out of the air. They would all suffocate and die unless they used the Portkey that she had just created. Dully, she looked at Fiducius. She didn't care if he died, of course.... Her head turned towards the Pompeians, all now huddled on the floor, their arms around each other.

Severus had wanted her to save them.

He had sent her away to save them.

She *must* save them.

Fiducius made an exasperated sound in his throat and pushed Conviva backwards again with the wand at his throat so the man stumbled to the ground at his feet. With a cry, Marcella sank to her knees also.

He reached over and caught hold of Hermione's arm, pulling her to him.

"The magic, witch," he urged sharply, his fingers digging into her upper arm with a painful grip.

Hermione recoiled away from his touch. "We need them too," she said.

Fiducius laughed, flicking his wand at the group and drawing breath. With sudden insight, Hermione knocked his hand away so that the curse missed the cowering humans and hit the wall harmlessly instead.

"No!" she shouted quickly. "We need them!" She thought quickly and added, "W-without their memories, we cannot make the journey!"

Fiducius frowned at her, clearly not knowing whether to trust her or not. Hermione forced her face into an earnest expression, willing him to believe the lie she was spinning.

He scowled and then pointed at Conviva. "Him, then," he said shortly.

She shook her head, warming to her story. "The magic will not work properly without it we could end up lost forever in nothingness... or in Hades," she invented wildly. "We need all of them together to strengthen the *erm* bond."

Fiducius' face was set in a spiteful moue of disappointment, but he nodded his assent curtly.

A feeling of relief washed through her, and she relaxed her grip on the Portkey-cushion. "Right," she said. "We all have to touch the cushion, and then I say the incantation, and it will take us all away from here."

Fiducius nodded and reached out his free hand to take a hold, keeping the wand in his other hand trained carefully on her as he did so. Slowly, the Pompeians rose to their feet and placed their hands on the shabby little pillow.

Hermione took a deep breath. "I'm going to need my wand, Marcus," she said in a deliberately quiet voice. "I must use it to make the magic work."

The *Aedile* snorted and giggled mirthlessly. Then he sobered. "You must think I am a fool, little witch," he hissed back at her as the others looked on with shocked expressions. "Give you your wand? That would be signing my own death sentence!"

As he spoke, the walls seemed to shake more violently, causing them all to stumble. A crashing, rumbling noise filled the room. More choking ash and fume exploded into the room in rush of scorching heat. *A surge!* she thought in horror, *Fuck! Fuck!*

Marcella screamed again, and Fiducius cried out as the floor heaved underneath them. He caught hold of Hermione's hair with his wand hand and pulled her face closer to him.

"*Do it NOW!*" he shrieked at her, spittle flying from his lips.

Another roar sounded out from above them, accompanied by the sound of crashing masonry.

"*Alright!*" Hermione snapped. "No *time!* Touch the wand to the cushion, and I'll place my hand on the wand over yours. We'll do it that way." *And when we arrive in Salernum, she thought savagely, you'll be so disorientated that I'll be able to hit you with a curse so fucking strong, Aedile, you'll be fucking vaporised, you bastard.*

"Ready?" she asked.

Fiducius touched the wand to the Portkey, and she put her fingers lightly on Snape's wand, feeling a slight familiar tingle though her hand, as the wand seemed to recognise her. She closed her eyes in brief mourning before swallowing her grief and prepared to say...

The *Aedile* suddenly lurched forward, over the cushion, emitting a strange, dry coughing noise. In surprise, Hermione let go of the cushion even as her fingers continued to



touch the wand as she said, "...*Portus*."

The last thing she saw, before the light from the Portkey obscured her vision, was the end of the broken shaft of the metal wand of Mercury, now firmly embedded between the *Aedile's* shoulder blades, and the shocked faces of Marcella, Restitutus, and Conviva as the Pompeiians and Fiducius blurred out of existence before her.

The roaring of the volcanic surge abated. The room became strangely still. The surge had passed.

She blinked rapidly to clear her vision, still facing the now *open* doorway to the bathroom.

And saw.

*And saw...*

Severus Snape leaning heavily on the doorframe, a scowl twisting his thin, pale features.

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Justin Finch-Fletchley was having an exceptionally irritating day. "I said," he repeated loudly and slowly, "We need to see the Headmaster *immediately*. Please take us to him."

The thin young man in front of the Aurors, wearing old tweed and a slow expression, rubbed his bristled jaw with the back of one hand.

"The Headmaster?" he repeated carefully as he took his cap off to scratch his scalp, rolling the words around in his mouth as if trying them on for size. He looked around them at the otherwise deserted and darkened corridor. "What 'choo doin' down 'ere, then, if you're wantin' to see the Headmaster?" The man pronounced 'Headmaster' with an exaggerated "huh" sound at the start of the word that spoke of long hours' practice.

"Listen," Justin said with more than a hint of asperity, "Mr...?"

"Crib," the man replied. "Waldein Crib. Caretaker to the school since two years ago after uncle Argus passed on."

"Argus Filch was your uncle?" Abercrombie asked, much to Justin's annoyance.

Crib smiled, revealing a row of perfectly preserved white teeth, incongruous in his grimy whiskered face. "Oh no, sir," he corrected Abercrombie carefully. "Not my uncle. Not at all. Not my *actual* uncle."

"Really?" Abercrombie asked. "*Why...*"

"*Abercrombie!*" Finch-Fletchley interrupted loudly, placing his hand firmly on the younger man's chest and pushing him slightly backwards and beside him.

"Take. Me. To. The. Headmaster," said Justin in a tone that brooked no argument. "Or I will arrest you for perverting the course of justice."

His words did not have the effect he was hoping for.

The scrawny young man pulled himself up in outrage, crossing his arms defensively and jutting out his chin. "Now, look 'ere, sir," he said hotly, "I ain't no *pervert*. In fact, my aunt well, she's not 'zactly my aunt says that I'm perfectly normal. I've been seeing this lovely girl in the village, and we've a sort of understanding, see, so there's nothing..."

"Oh, for *Merlin's sake!*" exploded Justin, waving his wand in the air so that involuntary sparks flew from its tip.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione had no memory of how she crossed the room. She crashed into his body, wrapping her arms around his emaciated frame, weeping, crying, and laughing at the same time, overcome by his presence.

Slowly, she felt Snape's arms close about her. He was trembling, and she could hear his breath wheeze in his chest under her cheek.

"You're alive, you're alive....," she found herself repeating into his filthy *tunica*, burrowing herself into his arms.

"Stupid woman, why did you let go of the Portkey?" his voice was gravelly with emotion, rumbling against her face.

She laughed and hugged him tighter, revelling in the absurdly powerful sense of happiness that she was experiencing. Her chest thrummed with pleasure, and she was lightheaded with exhilaration. Her blood was singing through her veins, and she was... she felt... *whole*.

He held her tightly. She could feel his sharp chin jutting into her shoulder as his hands clutched at her. "Don't be angry with me," she said.

He seemed to clutch her tighter.

"Don't be angry," she repeated in a whisper.

"No," he whispered back. "I'm not. But I should be." His breath tickled her ear. "You have lost your only opportunity to escape. Our wands are gone, we're exhausted, and the eruption will only get worse."

She frowned and shook her head against his chest. "The portrait..."

His arms tightened even further around her. "The portrait is gone, Hermione," he told her. "You felt the surge come through. I believe that it has destroyed most of the upper floors of the house."

\*\*\*\*\*

An oppressive atmosphere had settled on the Headmaster's office.

Hermione remained still and cold beneath the light sheets on her impromptu bed. Helen, Filius, and Ginny were talking quietly at her side, their voices muted. Poppy hovered over her patient, casting charms and monitoring the results, her lips pursed and brow furrowed. Vector was sitting hunched over her papers on the Headmaster's desk, her lips moving slowly as she tried to decode the implications of the shifting runes.

Harry sighed and ran his fingers impotently through his hair again. He was at a loss. He had felt so sure that his idea about using Hermione's blood to prompt her return to consciousness would work since her blood had seemed to activate the portrait in some way.

Why hadn't it worked? He ground his teeth in frustration. He had clung onto Vector's explanation of the asymptote-lifeline-stuff and felt a flash of understanding and insight when he had thought of using her blood to make the portrait move. His fingers clutched into fists.

Beside him, on a long conjured settee near the entrance to the room, Ron fiddled inside his robes and pulled out the sheaf of papers that he had been studying in the hospital before they had taken Hermione. Harry watched him open the folded sheets up and begin to read them, his eyebrows drawn together over his freckled nose as he traced the complex, moving graphs and diagrams on the spelled parchment.

Harry rubbed his hand through his hair again. "What are you *doing*?" he asked, regretting the irritable tone of his voice as soon as he spoke. "Sorry, mate," he added quickly. "I'm just worried, you know."

"It's all right," Ron said with a shrug. "Me too. Thing is, I can't seem to help here, but I don't want to leave." He darted another look at Helen and her daughter, regret clearly etched on his features. Harry's chest twisted again as he saw Ron's worry. Gone completely now was the playboy Quidditch star of recent years.

He nudged his friend, seeking to distract him. "What are those diagrams for?"

Ron pursed his lips and shrugged again. "Got to learn 'em," he responded shortly. At Harry's confused expression, he drew in a breath and exhaled. "These lines show the opposition's attacking options with the Beaters and me positioned like *this* on our side..." He was pointing at the sheet before him, indicating where the attacking Chasers would be flying. "Or if we deliberately move our players *here*, or *here*," he indicated an alternative formation with his forefinger, "we can force them out of position and make them change their game. It's called "oppositional play" apparently...."

Harry could not think of anything to say in reply, and Ron returned his attention to the sheet.

\*\*\*\*\*

Slowly, they stumbled back into the bathroom and slid down the wall together, landing on the floor at the side of the room in an awkward tangle of limbs. Hermione found herself tucked under Severus' chin, her arm reaching around his chest and her legs over his.

The room had stopped shaking, and the noise from the volcano had reduced again to a dull rumble above their heads.

Hermione had never felt so worn out in her life. She could not remember when she had last eaten anything, and the adrenaline drain of the last few hours had taken a terrible toll. Even breathing in the dust-filled atmosphere of their subterranean shelter was difficult.

But she could feel his chest rise and fall, the thrum of his pulse, and the warmth of his embrace.

He felt so alive in her arms.

So *alive*....

She redoubled her hold on his torso, burrowing closer into his chest. "How did you survive it?" she asked shakily, her voice muffled by his *tunica*. "The roof was collapsing... the pyroclastic flow...?"

She felt him sigh, which quickly turned into a dry, exhausted cough. His head fell gently backwards onto the rough stucco of the wall behind them. "The strongest Protego Maxima I could manage and a Bubble-Head Charm," he said and coughed again. After a pause, he added wryly, "I also dived under the bed as soon as Fiducius drove Conviva and Marcella out of the laboratory."

Hermione smiled and nuzzled his chest once more. "Thank god," she whispered. "I was terrified that I had lost you again."

Snape seemed to stop breathing for a moment, and then she felt his left hand gently reach out and slide beneath the chain around her neck. Slowly, the tiny silver rings of the necklace ran through his fingers until the Daum perfume bottle emerged from the ripped neck of the torn and filthy *tunica* that she wore.

Hermione lifted her head from his chest and lost herself in his searching gaze.

"While you hold this, I don't think that I can be lost," he murmured before lowering his mouth tenderly to hers.

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Harry's eyes moved once more around the room, coming to rest on the portrait fixed to the wall of the study. It was hard to make out the detail in the image, he knew, because it was so dark, but...

He stared at it.

"Hey, look!" he shouted, his voice sounding loud in the small room.

Everyone apart from Ron looked up. Harry jumped to his feet and walked over to the portrait. Filius, who had been looking over Septima's notes with her, quickly joined him.

The scene had shifted again. Instead of a dark Pompeii, overshadowed by the volcano, Harry could see a small room, the walls whitewashed and plain. There were no windows, but the room was well lit by magical sconces on the walls. There was a huge marble bath at the rear of the space, but dominating the image before him was a mosaic floor its subject a great grinning skeleton. The skeleton held a wand in one claw-like hand; the other was clasped about a jug of some sort. It absorbed Harry's attention completely. He could see the detail of the design quite clearly and willed himself to try to understand the symbolism of the scene. Was the wand pointing towards something? What was the jug for? Was the skeleton symbolic of death or something else...? As he looked, he realised that the border surrounding the mosaic floor showed the same runes as those around the edge of the mosaic portrait itself, and he was just about to comment on it when Ginny jarred his arm beside him and uttered a low snort of amusement.

"It looks like they've found something to do while the volcano erupts," commented Helen Granger dryly.

With a start, Harry saw that Hermione and Snape, sitting against the wall at the far side of the room, were wrapped around one another and kissing passionately.

"Is she hugging him again?" asked Ron sourly from the couch, not lifting his head from the sheaf of Quidditch training notes in his hands.

Harry flushed hotly. "Erm....," he began. "Sort of...."

"They are not moving." Helen Granger's voice was thoughtful.

"*Thank goodness*," muttered Harry, fighting the blush that was causing his neck to itch.

"But I thought that was the *point* of wizarding portraits," Helen Granger insisted. "Hermione told me about the portrait of that horrible old man she carried around for a year in her bag when you were hunting Voldemort's Horcruxes. He moaned at her all the time, she said."

"Oh, that's *charming*," said a waspish voice from one of the smaller frames to the left of the mosaic picture. "Is it too much to expect to receive a little common courtesy, nowadays? *That's* what you get for allowing *Muggles* into the Headmaster's office. Change is *never* a good thing. Not in my day."

"Phineas....," admonished Filius softly. "She did not realise..."

"*Change*," interrupted Harry suddenly, spinning around and staring at Hermione's still form. "I wonder if... But she didn't... Oh, bloody hell, that's it. Ron!"

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It was impossible to tell how long they had been sitting, propped up against the wall in the underground bath chamber. He was sure that he had passed out for a while. When he had become aware of himself again, he noted with some relief that his head had finally stopped spinning and the dreadful faintness of his exhaustion had receded a little, despite the fact that he had become very stiff and uncomfortable with her weight resting against him. Carefully, he twisted his back slightly to ease the cramp in his lower back without taking his arms from around her.

As he shifted his position, she nuzzled his chest again and made a sound that was part-growl and part-whimper in her sleep. He tightened his arms around her gently and kissed the top of her head, and she made a small contented noise and seemed to grow heavy against him again.

*Idiot woman*, he thought as a powerful rush of affection for her swept through him. She had stayed with him... despite everything... Despite the hopelessness of the situation, she had chosen to face death with him.

He looked at the little perfume bottle nestled between her breasts. He could see a glimpse of her delicate skin beside the phial through the rip in her *tunica*. The sight of her chest rising and falling stirred him. Cautiously, gently, he stroked the little bottle with the fingers of his left hand, smiling a little in embarrassment when he did so as a fresh wash of protectiveness swept over him. He tried to analyse the feeling. The little bottle had felt *wrong* in his hands after she had discarded it; now a calming sense of contentment and satisfaction eased his mind and relaxed his body. He stroked it again, allowing his fingers to caress the soft skin beside it as well.

Horcruxes were supposed to represent the worst of Dark Magic magic born from selfishness, greed and acquisitive desire.... He shook his head slightly, his lips pursed. What if something *else* had happened? He wracked his memory, searching for an answer.

Albus had always insisted that blood magic, if augmented by the most powerful of emotions, could not be bettered. That belief was what had given the old man his confidence in Lily's son. Severus closed his eyes, allowing his head to rest backwards again against the wall of the bathroom. *Power that the Dark Lord knows not....* He remembered the words of that damned prophecy with a bitterness that still wounded him even now... How Dumbledore had grabbed at it and used it to arrange his bloody battleground. *What did the prophecy say again?*

Severus frowned, trying to recall more details from his earlier life. Many of his memories were opaque, pale phantasms of a remembered reality. He supposed that was because he had given so many of them to Lily's son. He fought to bring the memories forward, but they danced at the edge of his perception. A young girl with bright eyes and flame-red hair... an unhappy childhood and schooling... pleasure in knowing more than others, an acquisitive and selfish nature, his contempt for stupidity and his jealousy of fame. The prophecy that he had overheard and zealously retold to Voldemort... the horror that he felt at his unwitting betrayal of the girl he loved... a self-loathing so corrosive that it had washed him deeply in bitterness and cynicism, penetrating his very soul. Even his actions on Harry's behalf had not brought him peace.

His mind turned to his more recent past. Waking up improbably alive... healed and protected by another woman with glossy hair and green eyes who cared for him with loyalty and affection. The cheerful friendship of her husband and his quieter, more watchful brother... a friendship that didn't hurt him this time but, rather, brought him status and a sense of security and achievement. The support and regard of his servants and his care for them in turn... the simplicity of life in a warm and earthy society... a modest living in an unremarkable town... a chance to start afresh in a place where his poor decisions as a young man had not damned him. And, as he faced a new Dark Lord and his supporters, an opportunity to do the right thing and fight like a hero rather than a grubby role as a turncoat spy that ended in an ignominious death on a shitty floor in a broken-down, derelict cottage. He grunted, sourly amused by the irony of the situation. So much of what they had recently gone through reminded him of that earlier time. So much....

He shifted his torso slightly awkwardly and renewed his firm grip on the body in his arms, breathing in the scent of her, while the stupid fucking irony of their imminent deaths washed through him.

Hermione stirred again, and he shushed her, wondering at the tenderness in his heart for this extraordinary woman.

He thought of Dumbledore again. *What now, old man?* he asked wryly. *Will love save me this time?*

Severus tried to focus on something else, other than the spasms of muscle pain in his back, as he held her closely to him while she slept.

He had no intention of letting her go.

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"There was no need to be so rude, *Mister La-De-Daa Auror*," Waldein Crib muttered, moving maddeningly slowly along the corridor while levitating a bucket and mop before him as he walked. "If you'd *said* that this was urgent *Ministry* business before, then we'd all have knowed where we was, wouldn't we? Rather than asking a person about 'is personal life, what is personal to 'im and none of anyone else's *business*."

"But..." Abercrombie made to protest, but Justin shot him a venomous glance, and the younger man clearly thought better of it.

Crib paused at the bottom of one of the upper staircases, allowing the mop and bucket to gently settle on the floor beside him, and cocked an eyebrow at the frustrated Aurors.

"Up here?" Justin asked, regarding the young man with suspicion. "The Headmaster's office is at the top of the stairs?"

Crib nodded. "Oh, yes, sir," he said. "Just up these stairs... then left, right, along the corridor mind the Frolicking Fwooper statue, by the way, 'cos 'ee 'as an 'abit of gettin' in the way of visitors sometimes left again, along the next corridor, right at the Weasely Memorial Swamp, down that corridor, up the next one on your left... left, left, right, then left again... And then give the password to the gargoyle at the entrance to Headmaster Flitwick's office."

Crib looked expectantly at the silent Aurors. When they continued to say nothing, he shifted his weight from foot to foot uncertainly. "Would you like me to repeat that for you, or are you 'appy to carry on? Only, I've got four more corridors to sweep up before tea-time."

Slowly, Crib's eyes focused on the end of Justin Finch-Fletchley's wand tip. "Oh," he continued. "I'll I'll just carry on showin' you the way, then, shall I?"

"Yes, *please*," said Auror Finch-Fletchley calmly and deliberately.

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Hermione swam back to consciousness through a jumble of unsettling dreams. Her face was hot and damp with sweat against the rough cloth of his *tunica*. As she stirred, she felt his arms initially stiffen more securely about her, but then relax as he seemed to realise that she was waking up. For a few moments, she luxuriated in the pleasure of his proximity, that sense of calm security that had been so lacking in recent hours.

*Recent hours....*

*Oh, shit!*

Her memories of the previous few hours rushed back to her, and she pushed herself upright in sudden panic, away from his body, breaking the clasp of his hands about

her. "Severus! We've got to get out of here!" she urged, her heart beginning to hammer in her chest again. "Why did you let me sleep?"

"I was kissing you, and you passed out," he grumbled. "That can hurt a wizard's pride, you know...."

She blushed, but then recovered herself, casting a long look around the claustrophobic bathroom. He'd summed up the situation earlier. No wands so no Apparition or Portkey-creation possible no portrait, Snape's Time-Turner vanished along with Fiducius and their Pompeian friends, no hope of out-running, out-flying, or out-lasting the final surges from the volcano, as they were going to increase in intensity over time.

Was there *anything* they could use?

Her gaze passed over the stone bench on the other side of the room and the empty goblet lying on its side beside the bench on the floor.

The floor itself was broken and torn, the mosaic tiles split apart in the centre, bisecting the grinning skeleton design. Hermione's attention was drawn to the scrap of papyrus that she had seen before with Marcella, jutting out of the sandy base layer beneath the tiles.

"There must be a way out," she said stubbornly. They had survived so much; she refused to accept that they should just lie down and wait for the next surge to destroy them.

He shrugged, easing his back muscles, drawing his knees up, and resting his elbows upon them. "There's nothing we can do." His voice was gentle but flat, as if he were trying to repress his emotions. "There's no chance, Hermione. I thought that you had understood that by now. It's what I told you when you first saw the threat that Sabazios posed to the world. You should have taken your chance to get out when you had it."

Hermione shook her head and rubbed her face with one hand. The papyrus in the floor caught her attention again, and she lurched on awkward limbs over to it, plucking it from the floor and carefully unrolling the stiff material.

"What is that?" asked Snape, doubling over sharply as a fit of coughing seized him.

She looked at him in alarm as his paroxysm ended, then slowly dragged herself back until they were sitting side by side once more. She showed him the parchment.

"Hieroglyphics," he said.

"Hieratic script, I think, actually," she corrected him absently. "Pity your translation spell work doesn't work on Egyptian." She continued to scan the papyrus, trying to make sense of the images, the abstract signs and sigils that filled the paper.

He grunted and extended his hand, touching the paper with his fingers.

She stared at the writing; it seemed to shiver, fade and then resolve back into recognisable words.

"Non-verbal *and* wandless?" she asked, amused.

He flashed her a smug look, which was ruined by another coughing seizure. He slumped back against the wall of the bathroom, and she turned her attention back to the sheet.

She read down a few phrases. "Severus....," she began. "This is bizarre...." She dug him in the ribs to get his attention, and he opened one eye to look down at the papyrus.

Hermione pointed at the newly translated script before them. "It's from the Book of Thoth, one of the Egyptian Books of the Dead," she told him. "This part of the book is describing the judgement that a man is facing in the Hall of the Two Truths.... The man is talking to the god Thoth, trying to persuade him that he deserved to live, while his heart is being weighed against an image of the goddess Maat the embodiment of order, right, and truth. If the heart was found to be wanting, then the man could not survive. He would be eaten by the monstrous Devourer, and his existence ended."

She dropped the sheet of rolled papyrus to her lap and looked back at the broken mosaic floor in front of her. The fractured skeleton grinned back at her, its shattered form still and mocking, the wand in its grip pointing straight at them. "A journey to the underworld, to face your fears and have your worth judged by the gods," she mused. "If you are found wanting, you will be devoured... a dancing skeleton, the symbol of life, not death.... Oh, this is so *weird*.... Why would anyone bury something like this underneath their floor? What the *hell* does it *mean*?"

Beside her, Severus closed his eyes as he leaned his head against the wall. "I have no idea," he said sounding exhausted.

Hermione only half-heard him; something was hovering at the back of her mind, tickling her consciousness. There was a pattern to it a rationale. She tried to force her thoughts into order, but she could not make sense of the clues before her.

The atmosphere in the room was becoming warmer, and the air was still thick with dust and ash. She swiped her hand across her face, dashing tears of frustration from her cheeks. Beside her, Severus coughed weakly again.

Slowly, she pushed her hand into his and squeezed gently.

Whatever happened next, at least they were together.

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A/N: Okay... one hundred points to the House of your choice if you've worked out what is going on. Just so you know, the current score is 100 points for Gryffindor and 100 points for Slytherin....

## Chapter 28

*Chapter 29 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: My thanks to beawesley2 and Clairvoyant, my wonderful alpha and beta team, as well as to nagandsev for being a fantastic 'admin'. I own nothing that you recognise from the Harry Potter universe wish I did!

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## Chapter 28

They were sitting together again on the floor; Hermione curled up on his lap, her shoulder tucked under his arm, and her head rested on his shoulder. Snape's breathing was deep and slow. *Is he asleep?* She twisted around a little. He grunted and squeezed her closer to his body without opening his eyes. She snuggled closer, her fingers tracing idle patterns on his thigh. She felt his long fingers gently stroking her shoulder and upper arm in return.

The room was becoming hotter. She watched the dust motes swirl and eddy in the light of the sconces on the walls. The distant rumble of the volcano was a constant presence. Hermione knew that there were hours between the various pyroclastic flows that destroyed the city, but she had no means of knowing what time it was or how much time had passed since the last surge had blown through.

Her attention returned again to the old papyrus curled up in her lap. She had read it and reread it a hundred times, but to no avail. She took pride in her ability to decode hidden meanings, and she knew that there was something significant in what had been left hidden underneath the floor in Snape's bathroom.

A sudden memory came into her mind: Snape had told her about his house before when they had been walking through the city on their way to Marcella's party. The previous owner of the house, the man who had become obsessed by the idea of cheating death... What had Severus said to her about him? She shifted slightly in his embrace as she wracked her brains.

She pictured herself walking through the city with him, trying to keep up with his long, confident strides. Severus had spoken a little about him.... She tried to cudgel her sluggish mind into remembering.... The man had been rich, a successful merchant. He had become obsessed with becoming immortal... He'd invested thousands in hack cures and false magic... He had tried *Egyptian* enchantments.

She frowned at the carefully copied extract, her free hand tracing the flowing script with a cautious finger, the papyrus rough under her touch. She paused her motion on a symbol that she recognised from somewhere... Something was nagging just beyond her recall. A thought rose unbidden in her head. *What if he had not bought false magic but invested in the real thing?* Her mind was suddenly clear. *Had this man become Sabazios?* If so, he would not have been the first magical person who had used the Dark Arts to make himself more powerful. He could not have been a god after all, she had been able to kill him. All Sabazios' talk about children, his concern for his own safety, his ambitions to leave Pompeii and go to Rome, surely that was the ambition of a Roman, not a deity. Her head swam with the implications of her theory. It was possible. It was *possible*.

But just as soon as this extraordinary revelation swept through her, it was followed by the depressing realisation that, whether it was true or not, it really didn't matter.

Sabazios was dead, and whatever had mutated him or given him additional powers was not evident in the subterranean bathroom. There was nothing here that could help them to get away. Her eyes skimmed the room again, noting the stone bench, the old goblet on the floor underneath it, the neat stack of linen towels by the bath itself, and the sandy earth breaking through to the surface of the broken mosaic on the floor. Nothing. Nothing they could use. They were trapped with no means of escape.

Hot tears of frustration sprang to her eyes. Just when she had found him... just when they had found each other.

*This is so bloody unfair.*

She tossed the parchment away from her and watched it skitter across the mosaic and come to rest near its centre. She remembered her experience of using Fiendfyre and shuddered. It was not something that she could repeat again, even if she had the energy to try. She was terrified of being swept into the Dark. She remembered how the Fiendfyre had made her feel, how lost she had become in it. Whatever Sabazios had done to turn himself into the thing that he had become, it wasn't worth it. She would rather die as she was. No one could truly cheat death.

*Cheating death...* She looked down at the Horcrux around her neck, marvelling at the sense of calm and peace that it brought.

"What are you thinking about?" Severus asked softly.

She loved the way his voice rumbled in his chest. Lying cradled in his arms, she could *feel* him speak to her as well as hear it. Gently, she moved his hand to her breast again, encouraging him to touch the glass of his mother's old perfume phial. "This," she said simply.

He stroked the delicate ridges and patterns of the old bottle lightly, and she smiled as he did so.

"It's not evil, you know," she said, sounding more defensive than she'd meant to.

His fingers stilled, but then began to move carefully again. "No. I know." His voice sounded stilted and roughened and not just because of the ash in the air. "But I don't know what it is."

"When I wore Voldemort's Horcrux, it made me think terrible things."

"Yes."

"But this is different. I feel... connected to you somehow." She frowned, trying to puzzle it out. "I felt it even when I wasn't wearing it. Can you feel it, too?"

His fingers maintained their hypnotic rhythm. She flushed as she felt her body respond to his touch; the tiny hairs on her skin were rising and her breath becoming shorter in her chest. The room was becoming hotter, wasn't it?

"I'm sorry that I brought you to this place." His voice was a whisper and she could not see his expression. "I have condemned you to die here with me."

"Don't be," she whispered back. "I'm glad I came here."

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Harry fought to keep the excitement from breaking through his voice. "Change! It's all about *change*! Listen, everyone, I've got an idea." Nervously, he ran his fingers through his hair, as was his habit when thinking something through. There was an expectant silence, and Harry quailed for a moment under the regard of everyone in the room. Even Ron had looked up from his Quidditch diagrams.

Harry cleared his throat. His last idea had been a spectacular failure, so why did he feel so strongly that this one would work? His gaze lingered on Hermione for a moment, slowly taking in her comatose body, her pale face, her sunken cheeks, and her curiously lifeless hair. His heart clenched for a moment in his chest, then seemed to expand again as he took a deep breath and turned to look at Vector sitting behind the headmaster's desk.

"Okay, first of all, I think I know why the blood magic didn't work before, why it didn't have any effect on the runes in the portrait," he began. "I think... I think it was because *Hermione* didn't do it herself...because *she* didn't put her blood on the mosaic."

Vector was staring hard at him, brow furrowed as she sought to keep up with his reasoning.

"I'm sorry, what?" interrupted Helen Granger. "You took some of my daughter's *blood*...?"

Harry nodded. "Erm, yes.... Well... Anyway, I wiped it on the portrait, and nothing happened. But then, nothing should have happened *she* didn't change it! You need to have *intent* behind any spell, and Hermione is asleep, so it *couldn't* have worked!"

Harry's head was buzzing. *Is this how Hermione feels most of the time?* he wondered briefly to himself.

He turned around to face the portrait again, staring at the runes on the floor of the room where Snape and Hermione sat entwined with each other.

"Septima, do you remember our conversation in your rooms? You were talking about the Book of Thoth and how the portrait is a reflection of something that is happening somewhere else. Have you worked out *where* yet?"

The American Arithmancer blushed a little and frowned. She shook her head, casting an embarrassed look around the room. "The numbers just don't add up, Harry." Her deep Massachusetts drawl was thickened by tiredness. "They keep indicating that the point of origin is right *here*."

"*Here*?" Flitwick's voice was sharp, and he moved quickly to the desk, rising to his tiptoes to look over Vector's equations. Vector pushed the parchment closer to him so he could see more easily. For a moment, Flitwick scanned the figures, his finger running lightly down Vector's scrappy notation, nodding as he moved from line to line. When he reached the bottom of the page, he looked up at Harry. "Arithmancy isn't my field, Harry, but... I cannot find anything wrong with Septima's calculations," he said.

Vector rolled her eyes and pushed herself backwards in her chair. Harry noticed that her hands were trembling, and he wondered how long it had been since she had had a drink. "Well, where does that leave us?" she asked with a hint of asperity. "My calculations are correct, but that still leaves us without any answers. You said that you had an idea, Harry?"

"Right. Yes. Okay... That might help, actually." Harry looked again at Ron, who was still staring at him, the playbook still held loosely in his hand. "Right."

"Harry, what is it, love?" Ginny said, pressing closer to his side. Gratefully, he slipped his arm around her waist.

"Yeah, come on, mate!" Ron said encouragingly. "What's your idea?"

The atmosphere was tense with anticipation.

Harry opened his mouth to speak. "Right, then. Septima was telling me before about asymptotes," he began. At Helen and Poppy's blank faces, he struggled to explain again about how the lifelines in the runes surrounding the portraits were aligned so that they did not touch thereby, describing a lifeline that was not able to come to an end because the two strands were being forcibly kept apart.

Vector rolled her eyes a couple of times at Harry's simplified explanations, but she didn't intervene.

Harry paused for breath. None had shouted him down yet. Emboldened, he continued. "Look at the runes on the floor, Septima they are the same ones as before, aren't they?"

Vector nodded slowly, as if she were trying to catch up with his reasoning. Harry ploughed on, "Okay, well, I was thinking about something that Ron said a little while ago. He's learning ways to make the other side do what you want what did you call it, mate? 'Oppositional plays'? Well, if we can *change* the runes in the portrait to something that shows the lines in the equations *meeting*... then maybe it will force whatever is keeping Hermione prisoner to react to it because it'll feel uncomfortable or something... And it'll... do something... maybe release her or force her into waking up... or something..."

As Harry stumbled into silence, the others were continuing to watch him, as if they were waiting for more. After a few seconds, he felt Ginny squeeze his arm at the same time as Poppy emitted a quiet 'ffff' of irritation and went back to casting her diagnostic spells over Hermione's body.

"What's the matter?" asked Helen Granger sharply, looking from Flitwick's and Vector's skeptical expressions to Harry. "Isn't it worth a try?"

"How will transfiguring the *appearance* of the portrait change the *essence* of the thing behind it, whatever it is?" Poppy challenged as she read the latest diagnostic spells on Hermione's condition, which hung in shimmering runes over the unconscious woman's chest.

Filius, too, lifted his hands in a gesture of defeat. "Harry... Helen," he began sorrowfully, "Poppy's right. Look how many spells we tried to get the portrait off the walls, Harry. It was completely unaffected. What on Earth makes you think that we can transfigure it?"

"I think that Harry is right," Ginny said staunchly. "It can't hurt to try, anyway, can it?" She pulled out her wand from its sheath in her robes. Harry shot her a grateful smile. He would never get over how lucky he was to have her supporting him.

Vector, too, perhaps still smarting from Filius checking her calculations, began to nod her head in agreement. "It is worth a shot, Headmaster," she argued. "But it will take all of us to do it. The Arithmantic numbers indicate that considerable power is at play here. If I am right, then something right here is responsible for this whole situation, so we might just make something happen." She grabbed the piece of parchment she was working on, rose to her feet and walked over towards the painting, drawing her wand as she did so.

Harry looked at his best friend, and Ron was instantly on his feet, pulling his wand out from the inside of his robes. Ron's face was set in a stubborn cast. Harry drew his own wand and watched Filius and Poppy expectantly.

Filius was at his side quickly, his wand in hand.

Poppy emitted a disparaging noise through her teeth but banished the diagnostic numbers over Hermione's chest and pointed her wand at the portrait.

"Here," Vector said, flourishing her wand so that the parchment in her hand hovered before them all in clear view. "These are what the runes should look like if we are to resolve the asymptote."

Harry was so nervous his heart had begun to thump erratically in his chest, but his wand hand was strong and unerring as he pointed it at the picture before them. He stared at the symbols, trying to commit them to his memory so that he could picture them as he cast the spell. Beside him, the others were doing the same.

"Right," he said. "On the count of three, we all need to visualise these runes, and then we use *Mutare Signa Maxima*, right, Professor?" Harry shot a look at his old Charms professor for confirmation.

Flitwick smiled and nodded.

Harry ran his hand through his hair one more time and checked the image of the runes on the parchment.

"Okay," he said. "One... Two... Three..."

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Snape felt the change in the atmosphere before Hermione. For a moment, he was disorientated. The air in the room had become even thicker since they had last spoken. It was now hot in the claustrophobic bathroom, and he was sweating freely in his clothing. From above them, he could still hear the sound of the volcano, its dull elemental roar accompanied by a faint shivering in the ground, which he could feel throughout his torso. He had become so used to the dull rumble that it had lulled him into a sort of stupor.

He breathed in and out again, wondering what had stirred him from his daze. Experimentally, he flexed his arms a little and moved his neck, reaching into himself as he did so, to try and gauge whether his magical strength was returning.

He felt a little better, but without food and some medical help, he doubted whether he would be strong enough to move the collapsed stonework outside the door or to Apparate them out of there... certainly not far enough away from their subterranean hiding place for them to survive the volcano, anyway. *Fuck it*, he thought. *Fuck it all*. He probably had enough in him for a substantial wandless Stupefy curse so that she would be unconscious when the end finally came. He shut his eyes again.

*Until then...*

He was cradling her in his arms, breathing in the smell of her body and trying to commit to his memory all the sensations that wrapping his arms around her brought... when his skin began to prickle and he tasted something faintly metallic in his mouth, under his tongue.

*Magic!*

Immediately, his eyes snapped open, and his body tensed, ready to react.

A faint, thin blue mist had appeared over the broken mosaic on the floor. It swirled and danced over the image of the fractured, grinning skeleton. As Snape watched, he saw the mist gradually thicken and spread across the image on the mosaic to flow gently and surely over the surface of the shattered floor, its progress gentle and exploratory.

Severus scowled, his mind racing as fast as his exhausted state allowed. He knew Dark Magic well, having studied it for most of his life, and he was willing to stake his life on his instincts. This was not sorcery, nor *maleficium*. The signature from the odd mist had no taint that he would associate with Dark Magic. He watched it, fascinated by the strange phantasm, craning his neck carefully to follow the progress of the pale blue tendrils as they seemed to be exploring the fabric of the floor in front of them.

Gently, he shook Hermione in his arms. She stirred and grumbled in her sleep before reluctantly opening her eyes and, on seeing the blue vapour, starting awake in surprise against his chest.

"Shhhhh...", he whispered quietly in her ear. "It's alright, I think...."

Fingers of the mist reached around individual tiles, and as Snape watched, silently and utterly still, the *thetesserae* began to move, reforming and sealing the mosaic back on the newly levelled floor. As the individual tiles moved, the mist seemed to thicken again, and it obscured the image on the floor. Severus watched, entranced, as the magic swirled and eddied about them, caressing their limbs and filling him with an absurd sense of hope.

"What is it...?" Hermione breathed, her hands clutching at his chest and leg defensively as she watched the mist advance over their lower limbs.

"I don't know," he admitted honestly. "Can't you sense it?"

Hermione's head shook quickly under his chin. "I can't sense anything like that," she whispered. "I've never been any good at Divination...."

He snorted quietly, even though she had not been making a joke.

"I don't think it is Dark," he mused as the questing tendrils spread further across the room towards them. "It feels benign... almost... familiar..." His voice drifted into confusion and silence.

A finger of magic began to move tentatively towards Hermione's chest, and Severus reflexively tightened his grip on her as she shivered. Beguiled by the enchantment before them, Severus saw the mist lap about their bodies, climb slowly around them, then enter his mother's perfume bottle and set it glowing with a gentle blue flame. Hermione grabbed at the phial with a small cry of alarm, and Snape placed his hand over hers. The bottle was quite cool, but there was a slight tingle underneath his fingers.

The faint thrill under his hand spoke intriguingly to him of *metamorphmagic* enchantment.

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"Well...? Is it *working*?" Helen Granger could not see clearly through the wand light. She screwed up her eyes and fought the rising surge of worry that threatened to overwhelm her.

In front of her, she could see the outline of the six witches and wizards, their bodies tense and their wands drawn, emitting different coloured streams of magic as they chanted the incantation. Helen's breath caught. She had rarely witnessed magic. Hermione and Ron had always been very circumspect about using magic around their house in Melbourne. Ever since she and her husband had emerged from their fog of adjusted memories to find their daughter's face, anxious and contrite hovering over her, her vinewood wand poised over their heads.

It seemed that the room around the wizards had grown darker and warmer.

Helen moved to the right, trying to see past Poppy's shoulder to the portrait. The glow from the combined spells was almost blinding. As she moved to see, her eyes narrowed to try to filter out the glare, she knocked her knee against Hermione's makeshift bed. Immediately, she looked down at her daughter and cried out in alarm as she saw a blue glow emanating from her chest, just as it had done in that Naples' hospital a few days earlier.

Wrapped up in their spell casting, none of the wizards seemed to hear her initial cry of alarm. Fearing that if she disturbed them, the magic would be spoiled, Helen sat down abruptly on her chair by Hermione's bedside and grabbed her hand. Fumbling, she placed her other hand on her daughter's forehead. It was very hot to the touch. Her chest was rising and falling as before, but now her breath was coming more shallowly. Helen stared at the bluish glow that was emanating from the centre of her daughter's chest, and she suddenly realised that it was coming almost directly from the old antique perfume bottle that Hermione was so fond of and wore all the time.

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As gently as it had begun, the mist began to retreat. After her initial panic, she had accepted Severus' comment that the blue mist was benign and sat still as it had washed softly over her. It had felt cool and soothing on her overheated flesh, and as it retreated, she had felt an odd sense of loss.

She watched in quiet fascination as the vapour slowly retracted back into the mosaic, the mist gradually clearing, revealing the floor... remade.

"Severus!" Hermione scrambled off his lap and to her knees, staring at the design.

In place of the grinning skeleton, its hands clutching a jar and a wand, was a startling new image.

A portrait.

Of a dark haired man with a large aquiline nose and a baleful expression.

*But... but this is the portrait that I fell through from my dig!* She looked about her at the room, at its dimensions. *Is this the house I was excavating in modern times? But... but... there was no ceiling on that house - which means that ...!*

As she looked on, in mute amazement, she saw words appear under the image as the last of the blue mist dissipated.

"Invenisti, anima mea," it read. As she looked on in shock at the new image, she saw Snape's translation spell take effect, and the inscription rearranged itself into English.

"You have found my soul, " it read.

Her mind racing, she clutched her pendent in her hand and spun around to meet the equally flabbergasted stare of her companion as Snape pushed himself to his knees beside her.

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With a collective sigh, the fiery wand light in the headmaster's office died away.

"Did it work?" Ron said breathlessly.

"I bloody hope so! *Look* at her!" Helen's voice shook with emotion.

Harry twisted around at Helen's words, and his heart stuttered as he saw Hermione's body contorted and glowing. Almost as soon as he laid eyes on her, however, the light died and Hermione slumped backwards to the bed.

"Hey!" shouted Ginny. "What's happening!"

Harry turned around again and followed Ginny's outstretched finger to the mosaic portrait on the wall.

For a few moments, Harry couldn't see what she meant. He stared dumbly at the dark mosaic picture, blinking away the residual wand light and trying for a few seconds to work out what had changed.

What he saw, when his vision cleared, shocked him to the core.

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Hermione couldn't help it. She let out an almighty "Whoop!" of relief and excitement and grabbed him, bearing him to the ground with the force of her momentum.

She landed with enough impetus to crush the breath out of him, and for a moment, they both froze as she looked down on him, giddy with joy and grinning like an idiot.

"Severus!" she said breathlessly. "We can get home! We can *gethome!* That's the portrait I came through in the beginning!"

They both stared at each other as the implication of her words sank in.

*Home*, she thought. She stared down into his dark, turbulent eyes. He had not expected to survive this. He had told her so on many occasions. Now that had changed. Her heart swelled with the thought of it. As he lay beneath her, in the filthy dust and ash from the eruption, she was forcibly reminded of another time when he had lain on the ground beneath her, covered in dust and squalor....

*Well, this time*, she thought with a fierce joy, *there's going to be a different ending*

She dipped her head slightly, meaning to kiss him again

But suddenly, he sneezed violently, pushing himself up onto his elbows and dislodging her onto the floor beside him. He stood up and wafted the ash flakes in the air away from him, and then he held out his hand as she laughed and allowed him to haul her to her feet.

"Well? Don't just stand there, Granger come on!" he snapped roughly. "Can you open the portal or not? You told me that you had found a way!"

Hermione laughed again as he glowered at her, and then she sobered. Of course, he was right; they weren't safe yet. Who knew when the next pyroclastic surge would come through?

She looked him over speculatively.

"I need some blood," she said to him. "Are you bleeding anywhere?"

"Right now? No. So sorry to disappoint you," he answered her with a sardonic twist to his mouth.

"Never mind," she said distractedly, grabbing the old goblet off the floor and flourishing it at him. "We can use this!"

His eyebrows lifted as he watched her sweep up the metal cup from the floor and search for a rough or sharp edge on it. She became dimly aware that the sounds from the volcano were getting louder.

"We need to be bleeding. I grazed my hand when I fell up the steps, and the blood made the portrait move," she explained, chafing her hand against the base of the goblet.

"Granger," Severus said, his voice raised to be heard over the increasing rumble from outside.

"What?" she said distractedly, still trying to break the skin on her hand.

"Are you a witch or not?" he said in some exasperation.

She looked up. He stood facing her and holding his palm upwards. As she watched, a thin line of blood appeared on his palm. The ground beneath their feet had begun to tremble.

"Oh, yes. Sorry. I thought... But I was never particularly good at wandless magic, you see. There was no need to learn how to perfect it for my job. Harry learned how to do it, I think when he did his Auror training," she babbled, feeling silly. He rolled his eyes and held out his hand. Without a thought, she offered him her own hand and winced slightly as she felt a hot slicing sensation cut across her palm.

"What now?" he asked, almost shouting now over the sound of the eruption outside.

She shot a terrified look towards the door.

"Well, when the portrait moved before, I was thinking hard about getting home, and I had my cut hand on the face of it, so I suppose we just have to..."



"Less blather, more action!" Snape grabbed her roughly and pulled her to the floor, smudging her cut hand onto the mosaic next to his own. She became aware of the warmth radiating through the floor and how much it was now juddering under her hands. *The next surge!* she thought in a panic, *It's coming!*

"Home... home...," Snape was muttering.

*Oh, shit! Yes, home... home...!* she thought frantically, willing herself to think about her modern life. She pictured her family, her friends, and the hot heat from the sun in Italy.

She tasted the unmistakable metallic tang of magic in the air competing with the swirling heat of the ash and dust around her. *It's working!* she thought, *Home... home!* Her hands slowly began to sink into the mosaic.

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*Bloody hell, it's working!* The mosaic floor was melting, shifting. Severus felt himself begin to fall slowly forwards. He twisted his body around to look at Hermione, to share with her a smile of unrestrained hope and elation, when, with a rending bellow, the door of the bathroom exploded inwards.

*A surge!* he thought. *Fuck! A surge!*

Hermione was between him and the door, and to his horror, he saw her absorb most of the shock wave of the explosion. It picked her up and flung her past him across the room, sending her scudding along the rough floor until her body struck the side of the bath with a sickening crack, and she lay unmoving on the floor before the basin.

Snape shouted, trying to move towards her, to pull himself away from the mosaic that he was gradually being sucked into. But it was as if he were in quicksand; he could not wrench himself away. He sank further into the floor, jerking his body in vain, shouting spells and curses to try to get away but it was no use.

He felt his body turning and twisting about as he sank deeper into the portrait. He seemed to be falling through a tunnel feet first, its sheer walls moving swiftly past him as he fought for control over his wildly contorting body. Panic rose in him. He had to get out! It was all for nothing if he couldn't save her! She couldn't even do wandless magic! She would die without him and it was his fault she was there in the first place! His fingers scrambled for purchase on the *tesserae* around him, but they swept through the glass tiles as if they were as insubstantial as mist. He thrashed and twisted more violently, desperate to escape. His throat closed in terror, and he shouted out in fear and anger.

His last view of her, before darkness swept over him and he was swept further away from her, was of her small body, crumpled and alone in the maelstrom of the last pyroclastic flow.

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Harry felt as if his hair were standing on end.

Snape was gone from the portrait, and only Hermione remained in the darkened room, curled up on the floor, pieces of broken masonry and brick around and about her.

Everyone started talking at once.

"Where the hell has he gone?" Ron's voice was confused and strained with worry.

"What's happening, Harry?" Ginny asked. "Have we made it worse?"

"I'm not sure...," Filius began.

"What's...?" started Vector.

"*Potter!*" snorted Pomfrey disparagingly.

Harry spun about. "Poppy?" he asked, but the Matron already had her wand before her, casting diagnostic spells. She began counting out values as she worked.

"She's so still again," said Helen quietly.

"But where the hell *is* he, for Merlin's sake?" Ron repeated, staring at the portrait.

"Her temperature has risen, and her vital signs are falling." Poppy said tersely.

"Harry. He's not *there*," said Ron again.

"But the runes *have* shifted," Vector said. "The transfiguration was a success. Look, you can see the variables have modulated."

"Perhaps if we talked to the Ministry Aurors," suggested Filius, looking guiltily towards the entrance staircase.

"Harry!" Ron practically shouted, grabbing his arm and shaking him. "Can't you see? He's... Not... Bloody...*There*...!"

"I know that, mate! What the hell are you on about, Ron?" Harry barked back, stressed and frustrated.

Ron's face was flushed. "Harry, what if he isn't in *there* anymore because he's... *here*?"

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Severus awoke in darkness, cold and alone.

It was the darkness of his recent waking dreams, full of claustrophobic awareness, grit, and chill air. His heart thumped painfully in his chest. *Where the hell am I? How can I get back to Hermione?*

It appeared that he was lying down on some sort of hard surface. His body felt sluggish and unresponsive, as if he were immersed in some sort of liquid. Experimentally, he tried to lift his head and was shocked when his forehead connected harshly with a rough stone ceiling of some sort. He moved his arms to the side and quickly found that he could touch the walls of whatever was containing him. The action exhausted him, and he let his head fall backwards again onto the stone beneath him. He took some deep shuddering breaths and fought the wave of panic that threatened to overwhelm him.

He was trapped.

His hands fluttered back to his sides. As his right hand reached his thigh, his fingers ran across something that skittered almost out of his reach.

His wand! But... *How?* He had seen Fiducius disappear with it... blink out of existence....

His fingers scrabbled around it, and awkwardly, still fighting the mysterious and debilitating lassitude in his muscles, he brought the wand up to his chest. "*Lumos*," he whispered and was shocked at how thin and cracked his voice sounded.

The wand flickered and sputtered, and then a very thin and pale light emerged from its tip. Snape felt the pull of his magic as it was dragged from his core.

Blinking, his eyes adjusting slowly to the faint light, he saw a dark stone ceiling and, to his sides more stone, the tiny crystals within the black granite of the walls and ceiling sparkling as they reflected the wand light.

He knew then where he was, and the knowledge almost caused his heart to stop.

He was in a tomb.

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"What?" Harry said stupidly looking at his friend as if he had gone mad.

Ron's jaw was set stubbornly. "He's here, Harry I know it! It makes sense. If her body is here, but her mind, or whatever, is in that portrait... then I'm betting his was, too. But somehow, we've brought *him* back, Harry; that's why he's not in the portrait anymore."

Harry opened his mouth to argue, to tell his friend that he was barking mad, but Ron grabbed his arm and shook him. "Harry, trust me! Look at her! She's *dying*! What if I'm right? Snape might know how to get her back! We need to fetch *him* here to try to get *her* back.... Or at the very least," he added with a grumble, letting go of Harry's arm, "we should ask him what the hell he was doing trapping her in that portrait with him in the first place... or sticking his tongue down her throat."

Harry looked about him at the others in the room. They stared back at him with a mixture of expressions from sorrowful confusion to bafflement. "Well, if he's here... where the hell would he be?" Harry asked, still trying to come to terms with the situation.

Ron's eyebrows lifted. "Where do you *think*, Harry?" he replied, exasperated. "He'll be where we put him eleven years ago."

*In his tomb*, Harry thought with sudden insight. *Oh, Merlin.*

They were at the top of the staircase now, and Harry became aware of faint shouting noises from below.

*Shit!*

"It's the Aurors, Filius!" he said urgently. "I think they are at the bottom of the stairs!" He looked at Ron. "We can't go out this way."

Ron smiled like a shark. "No problem," he said and pulled a small glasses case out of his pocket. Harry watched as he opened it and pulled out a tiny broomstick. He shook it once in his hand, and his grin widened even further as it grew in his hand to a normal size.

"Come on," Ron said. "We'll take the more scenic route. Filius, do you mind if we open one of your windows?"

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Concentrating again, drawing on his waning magical powers, Severus cast another levitation spell.

The lid of the tomb raised itself a fraction of an inch, letting a sharp shard of light and a gust of fresh air flood into the coffin. The lid wavered as Snape willed it to fall to the side but he was exhausted, and his concentration slipped. The lid slammed down again, and he was plunged once more into darkness.

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Harry held on tightly to Ron as they flew from the tower window of the headmaster's office. The wind whipped his hair away from his face. The grounds of the castle sped past below them as Ron directed his broom with the practiced ease of a Quidditch professional, banking and swerving expertly as they approached the small island where Dumbledore's and Snape's tombs lay.

Ron brought his broom to a slewing halt by the side of the great granite coffin.

Harry climbed off and drew his wand gingerly, pointing it towards the lid.

He looked at Ron briefly, who also had his wand in his hand.

"Together?" he asked his friend. If they were wrong, this was going to be *horrible*.

Ron nodded. "Together, mate. Always."

Harry smiled, raised his wand and prepared to say the incantation.

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Dimly, she became aware again. She was lying on the gritty floor before the great stone bath, her cheek pressed into the ground. For a few moments, she was disorientated. Something was wrong... different.... It was another moment before she realised what it was.

The shaking and juddering in the room had ceased, and it was inexplicably quiet. *Why can't I hear Vesuvius?* she thought suddenly. *What the hell is happening?*

Hermione's eyes fluttered open as she heard a faint, but unmistakeable, chuckle.

"Ah, my dear girl. Very well done. Very well done indeed. I trust that you are well?"

On the floor before her she could see a pair of high heeled, purple, buckled boots.

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A/N2: Well, since the last chapter, Ravenclaw House has picked up 100 points, with Gryffindor storming along on 275 points but Slytherin is way out in front with 400 points. In addition, some people made suggestions that were certainly point-worthy but didn't nominate a House - so I'm going to allocate those points to Hufflepuff (just to balance things up and because I can). If you think you know what's going on, please let me know in a review. The winning House will be revealed next week, along with the penultimate chapter of this story.

# Chapter 29

Chapter 30 of 32

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: Thanks and praise go to the wonderful Jo Rowling, who created her world and who graciously allows us to use her characters for our own ends. This chapter took simply ages to come together (as some of you who are following the story have pointed out to me!). I am sorry for the delay. In recompense please find below the longest chapter in the story so far. It would not be here at all but for the sage advice and calm support of beaweasely2, nagandsev and Clairvoyant. Bless you ladies!

Oh, and by the way, Slytherin House is the victor in the 'guess-what's-going-on' poll, and though no-one actually guessed it completely, three of you came perilously close...! Thank you for all your support - it means a huge amount to me.

Sooo... Severus is alive but trapped in his tomb, Hermione is stuck in Pompeii as the eruption gets worse, the Aurors are getting closer, Ron has had a brilliant idea, and Harry is about to raise the dead....

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## Chapter 29

Harry Potter grimaced as he fought for control. The lid of the black granite tomb rose steadily from its seat and hovered in mid-air. He could feel the slick sweat of adrenaline pulsing through his body as Ron and he slowly directed the heavy lid to the side and gently lowered it to the ground. He looked up at Ron, whose face was now in shadow as the sun was beginning to set behind them, so it was hard to read his expression, but Harry saw him nod abruptly and gesture towards the granite coffin with his free hand.

Taking a deep breath, which was shaky with trepidation, Harry stepped onto the plinth that the main body of the sarcophagus rested on. He wasn't tall enough to simply look over the open casket. Pulling himself up with one hand on the sidewall, he looked into the darkness of the tomb.

The smell was the first thing that struck him. Harry realised with some relief that it wasn't the sweet and sickly smell of decomposition, but there was an air of neglect and mustiness that caused his nose to wrinkle in mild revulsion. The night was falling rapidly, and the interior of the tomb was in complete shadow. Harry brought his wand hand closer to the lip of the tomb in order to cast a non-verbal Lumos.

"Is he... gooey or something?" Ron asked from behind his shoulder.

Any reply that Harry could have made was cut short as he felt claw-like fingers grab at his face and neck. The fingers slipped down his chest as Harry recoiled instinctively away, but they quickly wound themselves into the front of his robes, and Harry's body was half-wrenched into the coffin.

He cried out in fright, recoiling violently backwards and away from what had caught him, his wand tip illuminating the frightful image below.

Severus Snape rose out of the darkness like a spectral harbinger of death.

The man's face was skeletal. Snape had always looked underfed and unhealthy before, but now the man's skin was stretched thinly over the bones on his face, lips pulled away from his bared and yellowing teeth as his eyes, impossibly huge in his shrunken features, stared up at him with a mixture of desperation and shock, blinking in the light of Harry's wand.

Snape opened his mouth to speak.

"Aaargh!" Harry exclaimed, pulling backwards, fighting to get away from the terrifying spectre. He felt Ron's hands on his back yanking him upwards. To his horror, Snape rose up with him, his hands still wound tightly into the fabric of his clothing.

"Bloody hell, Harry!" Ron's voice was little better than a high-pitched shriek.

"Get him off me! Get him off me!" Harry shouted, frantically pulling at Snape's hands, trying to peel the clutching fingers away. Snape was still trying to speak without success, his features contorted into a furious expression.

"Look, he's alive!" Ron shouted, shaking his friend's shoulders to try to stop him from pulling at Snape's hands. "Bloody hell, Harry! That's what we wanted! HARRY! Oh, for goodness sakes *Mobilicorpus!*"

The tingle of magic broke through Harry's panic, and he froze as the pressure on his robes eased. The fingers that had been clutching his clothing abruptly relaxed and let Harry go as Snape's body floated upwards and out of the sarcophagus. Harry stumbled off the plinth and back onto the springy ground of the island, just catching himself before he fell.

He turned and smiled sheepishly at Ron. "Sorry. Panicked."

Ron rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Prat."

Snape's body was still hovering silently beside them. Harry turned his attention to the impossible vision before him. How was he alive? He had *died* in front of him, for Merlin's sake! He remembered the Shrieking Shack, watching the bleak acceptance in the man's black eyes as the light died in their depths before looking down and wondering at the silvery memories that he had collected in the little bottle Hermione had pressed into his hands.

Snape was staring at him with a haunted and desperate look. He was trying to speak once more and the arm closest to Harry reached out towards him, the cloth from the burial robes falling away from his wrist as he did so. Harry stared at the extended fingers as they advanced towards him. He could see every bone in the hand and exposed arm, and the veins were also clearly visible underneath his pale, translucent skin. Harry looked back at Snape's face and was almost relieved when he saw the older man's eyes roll backwards into his head as he lost consciousness. Snape's throat was revealed as his head fell backwards. The skin that had closed over the ragged wounds there was livid with bruises and looked raw and fresh; the flesh around them was sickly looking and pale. Harry shivered, his heart still beating heavily as he recovered from the shock.

Harry studied Snape as he took deep breaths to try to calm himself down. He could see that Snape's breathing was painfully erratic. Harry grabbed Ron's arm. "We have to get him into the castle, Ron. He looks properly poorly."

Ron snorted. "He looks pretty good for someone who's been dead for eleven years.... Hang on; I'll send my Patronus for Poppy she'll know what to do."

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Dimly, she became aware again. She was lying on the gritty floor, her back to the great stone bath, her cheek pressed into the ground. For a few moments, she was disorientated. Something was wrong... different.... It was another second or so before she realised what it was.

The shaking and juddering in the room had ceased, and it was inexplicably quiet. *Why can't I hear Vesuvius?* she thought suddenly. *What the hell is happening?*

Hermione's eyes fluttered open as she heard a faint, but unmistakable, chuckle.

"Ah, my dear girl. Very well done. Very well done indeed. I trust that you are well?"

On the floor before her she could see a pair of high-heeled, purple, buckled boots.

She blinked once... twice.... The vision remained the same. The boots appeared to be of a brushed suede, soft and very fine.

She looked on uncomprehendingly as one foot turned to the side and displayed a beautiful pattern of diamante rhinestones on the instep and heel, arranged in a swirling pattern. The buckles were in the form of salamanders, or tiny fire-lizards, their mouths wide and gaping.

Hermione blinked slowly, trying to clear her head. She could not understand what was going on. Her mind felt sluggish. *What...? Who...?* She could hear the volcano's impotent roar in the distance, but the noise sounded dampened and strangely far away.

She blinked again. The boots were still there in front of her. Purple boots against the pale and washed out colours of the mosaic floor and the dusty sepia tones of the room around them. The atmosphere felt... expectant somehow like the way the air seemed to crackle before a summer rainstorm.

Abruptly, she saw the owner of the boots cross his feet and slowly begin to sink to the floor. Hermione remained where she was and saw the man's torso sink into view, then his flowing beard, face, and eventually his hat, perched jauntily on his silver-grey hair. Her breath caught as she recognised whom the man was.

Hermione's vision swam, and she fought a wave of nausea, which threatened to overwhelm her. Cautiously, she pushed herself upright and twisted around so that she was sitting on the floor with her back to the stone bath.

Before her, sitting peacefully cross-legged in the centre of the reformed mosaic, sat Albus Dumbledore.

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It was like rising through deep water to a dark surface. He felt as if he were drowning and thrashed for air, clawing at the cloths that bound him. His throat closed in panic. *Where is she? I have to get to her!*

"Severus? Severus? Can you hear me?" The voice was female, but it was not the voice he wanted to hear.

He became aware of strong hands holding his arms down, a soft cloth rubbing over his face and chest. He panicked, rolling his face away from those soft hands, lashing out with limbs that did not feel entirely under his control.

"Professor Snape? Sir...? You're safe! You're *home*. Lie still and let Poppy help you." The voice was patient and kind, but it wasn't the *right* voice.

He struggled to fight clear of the constricting arms and hands that bound him. Drawing deeply into himself, he focused his will on forcing the heavy weight away from him. His throat felt unbearable as if it had been burned and flayed raw.

"He's fitting again!"

"No he's trying a non-verbal charm. *Supprimere Incantatio!*"

"What...?"

"I'm stopping him hexing us into pieces, Potter! That charm suppresses magic temporarily. Now stop asking idiotic questions, and hold his arm like I showed you so that I can get this potion properly absorbed! Severus... hold still! I'm giving you a broad-range restorative draught and nerve tonic, but your throat is too damaged for you to swallow it properly, so I'm using Absorbere Incutis for your face, neck, and arm *damn it, Harry, Ron! Keep him still!*"

He coughed and tried to swallow, but his tongue felt as if it were twice the size that it should have been and it would not move properly. He tried to open his eyes, but the damp cloth over his face was still blocking his vision. He grunted with the effort of trying to twist away from it.

"I'm *trying*, Poppy but he's going to do himself a mischief if he doesn't stop flailing about like this!"

Severus heard an exasperated snort beside his ear, and then he felt the cloth over his face grow colder as more liquid was soaked into the material. He tried to understand, but his body was automatically rejecting rational thought in preference for irrational action. He struck out blindly with his right hand.

"Ow! Grab his hand and hold it down! Poppy he's getting more and more agitated! I thought you said the potion would calm him down!"

Another grunt, and the cloth on his chest felt colder and wetter this time. His panic and disorientation returned *why* did his throat hurt so much? Who were these people? How did they know his name? What was happening to him? Where was Hermione? He bucked upwards again against his bounds in fear and panic. He felt hands on his shoulders pushing him back down against the mattress beneath him, and he fought again to rise up and grab at the cloth over his face.

"I said that it would help him to *recover*... '*Recovering*' means getting *stronger*..."

Snape thrashed again, this time feeling a satisfying slap as his hand caught something warm and soft.

"Ow!"

"Oh, Severus, you silly man! *Stay still!*" The female made an exasperated sound. "This works better if the patient is conscious *and* mobile, but at this rate, he'll run out of magical energy before I can get this potion absorbed *Somniare*, Severus!"

Darkness claimed him.

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Hermione sat still and regarded the wizard before her with a level and calm stare.

"I suppose that you would like to know what is going on, my dear," Dumbledore said with a maddening twinkle.

"I expect that you have a few questions," he added benevolently, indicating the silent sepia-toned room about them with an airy wave of his hand.

Silence. Hermione regarded him steadily, striving for control.

Dumbledore coughed.

"Perhaps, my dear, you would like to know where you are exactly...?" he asked again, and this time, there was the tiniest trace of irritation in his voice.

Hermione remained still and quiet, fighting the rising surge of anger in her chest that was filling her throat with acid and her stomach with gall.

*He was here.*

Before her.

The reason why she had left Britain and deliberately made a life for herself outside her native country.

The man who had set teenagers against a madman.

The man who had set Harry on his path with *just too little* information for him to make an informed choice until it was too late.

The man who had made Severus kill him *no, put him out of his misery...* even though he knew that Severus would be hated for it.

Albus Dumbledore.

Slowly, she rolled her eyes away from his expectant regard and looked about the room.

Everything was as it had been before she had been knocked out by the blast. The mosaic floor with its portrait, the stone bench... even the goblet that she had tried to cut herself with to activate the portal.

But the colours were *wrong*.

It wasn't just the frozen motes of dust, hanging still in the atmosphere. It was as if the room had been bleached of normal colour and replaced by something different; a pale palette of sepia parchment tones like a film set or a dreamscape. Shadows played across the floor from above. Slowly, she raised her eyes to look at the ceiling of the room.

In place of the brick barrel-vaulted ceiling, she could see something very like the enchanted ceiling from the Great Hall. Grey and white clouds roiled and shifted above her, churning and re-forming, illuminated by occasional flashes of lightning. The sconces in the walls of the bathroom had failed, but many magically suspended candles, flickering brightly among the clouds, lit the room in their place.

She knew where she was. Harry had described it to her and so she knew. The details might be different, but the atmosphere was the same.

Dumbledore coughed again, and Hermione returned her level stare to him once more.

He seemed rather discomforted by her reaction but then rallied. "Dr. Granger," he began, "*Hermione*. Dear girl..."

Hermione held up her hand. "*Don't*," she said. "Just... *don't*."

She replaced her hand in her lap. The silence stretched out between them. She drew a deep breath, and then raised her head to face him.

*So this is what it is. Death. The Afterlife.*

*And Albus fucking Dumbledore is in it.*

"I hate you," she said quietly.

Dumbledore looked flustered and surprised. Clearly, her reaction was not what he had expected. She saw his eyes harden behind his half-moon spectacles, the blue of the irises glinting in the magical candlelight.

Nevertheless, the old wizard seemed to force a smile and leaned forward towards her. "I thought that you might, my dear, because you stayed away for so long, but..."

"No," Hermione cut him off sharply. "You don't get to lecture me about maturity and wisdom and the perils of leadership and how war makes us all do things, terrible things that we would rather not have done. I *saw you* in Harry's memories and in Sev-Severus' too. You sent us out to face Voldemort with nothing but a children's book to guide us. And all you had, when Harry had *died* for you, was a clap on the back and a few asinine comments about the greater good."

"I think you'll find that..."

"Oh, *shut up*," she said flatly, interrupting him again. She didn't know how long she had, and she didn't want to miss this opportunity. "Clearly, I'm dead but unlike Harry, I wasn't killed by magic, so there is little I can do about that. Necromancy is almost as foolish a discipline as Divination. I don't need you to tell me what's going on. I can work it out for *myself*."

Dumbledore rocked backwards a little and he raised his eyebrows. A small smile began to play on his lips, but he said nothing.

Hermione frowned, trying to cudgel her reluctant reasoning faculties into action. Tiredness infused her body, making every action sluggish and unresponsive, but she was determined to find the answers to her questions without relying on Dumbledore.

"I know I'm dead," she repeated again, glowering at the flamboyantly dressed wizard sitting calmly opposite her while she tried to fight the sick feeling of regret and anger that she felt at that knowledge. "But I don't understand why I came here in the first place. And I need to know, I need to *know*. I need to know, God damn it! And how did Severus get here? Why *here*? Why in Ancient Roman times?" Dumbledore made to answer her, but she held her hand up once more to forestall his reply, then pushed her filthy hair back away from her face in a determined effort to keep calm.

"So. There must be something in the portrait that activates the portal," she continued. "And there must be something that directs the portal to a certain point."

For a moment she was silent, but then the answer came to her.

*Simple really*, she thought.

"The runes," she said, and fought not to show her instinctive, childish pleasure when Dumbledore silently inclined his head in agreement.

"There were runes on the portrait in Italy," she continued. "The same runes were on my portrait here in Severus' house.... But I've seen them somewhere else...." She

paused, closing her eyes to try to recapture the memory. The scale was different. Something *smaller... something small...*

Her eyes snapped open. "The Time-Turner! Severus' Time-Turner the one that Ron and I found in his office. I'm sure I remember him grabbing it from around my neck when he was... when I was.... But... but I saw it again *here* he was wearing it here in Pompeii. And Fiducius had it with him when he disappeared with Conviva and his family. I knew it was different from the one I'd used in my third year."

She could feel her heart beating faster as she pursued the thought. "So the runes might work like the numbers on the rings in normal Time-Turners. But why are the runes on the Time-Turner the same as those on the portraits *here*? What keys the one thing to the other...?" She furrowed her brows in concentration.

Five feet away from her, the ancient wizard steepled his hands together in front of his lips and raised his eyebrows.

Hermione scrubbed her face with her hands in frustration, then pulled her hands away as the recently made cut on her palm opened up once more. Fresh blood welled in her palm, and she stared at it for a moment. *Could it be that easy...?*

She fumbled with the front of her tunica, pulling the Daum perfume bottle out from under the rough cloth. Holding it in her cut palm, the bright blood smearing a little on its cloudy surface, she stared at it as if seeing it for the first time. The blood... the blood in the bottle. *But is it only Severus' blood in there?* she thought. *Could some of mine be in there, too...?*

"Blood activated the portal," she blurted, staring at her old headmaster.

Encouraged by the old man's stillness and silence, she continued. "Blood has tied us together. That's how I was pulled through the portal to him.... But... why did it take so *long*? It's been years since the end of the war... Is this the portrait I was excavating? If it *is*, then this is a *time loop*...."

But then she remembered the gentle, questing, magical mist that had washed over both of them as the floor had transfigured. She frowned suddenly, a cold wave of realisation washing through her. She lifted her head once more to meet Dumbledore's eyes again and saw that he was still watching her carefully in a thoughtful and measured way.

"But I didn't transfigure the original mosaic into the portrait, did I?" she went on softly. "So that explanation won't do, now... will it? And I can't see how Severus could have got here in the first place Pompeii is *my* area of expertise, and unless there is something that ties him to this place, I can't see how...." She felt the sharp, acid burn of tears and closed her eyes to ease the sensation.

Then they snapped open. "Could that old Time-Turner have been linked to something the original owner of this place did?"

She looked again around the room, remembering Severus' explanation of its previous resident's obsession with strange rituals and Dark magic. Her head swam with the possibilities, a familiar sensation, one she normally welcomed but an unbalancing sensation, nonetheless.

She remembered the beautiful workmanship of Snape's Time-Turner, the soft glow of the dark gold against his skin, the precision of the hand-carved numerals and runes... the slight, hand-made imperfection of the sand chronometer at its heart. She pictured the device, held carefully in her fingers as she had examined it when he had been knocked out following the battle with Sabazios and then as she had last seen it lying against his warm skin, nestled in his sparse chest hair.

Then she remembered where she had first noticed the Time-Turner hanging delicate and vulnerable on its golden chain after she had gently lifted it from the secret compartment of the Punishment Ledger in the Headmaster's office.

*Could it have been Roman made? Or Egyptian? The quality of workmanship was certainly equivalent to Persian and Intermediate Dynasty gold work....* Her thoughts tailed off as she settled backwards, resting her back on the stone lip of the marble bath.

She became aware that she was feeling increasingly tired, a lassitude which was growing throughout her body. She sat still for a moment, analysing the sensation. It was like the pull of magic through her, leeching her energy away.

"You are not quite there yet, dear girl." Dumbledore's voice roused her from her languor. She had almost forgotten that he was there sitting neatly cross-legged on the bleached colour of the mosaic floor like a spectral leprechaun. She roused herself to scowl at him.

And then the final question placed itself before her... the crucial memory, which demanded an answer that she couldn't possibly find.

Fresh tears fell unchecked on her cheeks in the silent enchanted room as she ground her teeth in frustration.

"You're right, *old man*," she said, her voice now roughened and sour. "Nothing I've said so far can explain the fact that Severus Snape is dead and buried in a granite tomb on Hogwarts grounds."

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A strange noise was the first thing he heard when he came back to consciousness. For a moment, he was so disorientated that he didn't understand what it was until he recognised the noise to be quiet voices, pitched low so as not to disturb him. His thoughts were sluggish and unresponsive. *Drugged?*

"... You cannot possibly blame yourself for his condition, Poppy. There was no sign of life at all. For hours, days, even!"

"... Yeah, Madam Pomfrey... Don't beat yourself up. I helped to bring his body back into the Great Hall after the battle. He was dead. No pulse even Hermione said he had gone and you know how desperate she had been to save him."

"... Professor, what does all of this mean? Can he help us to get her back? Did he *do* anything to her...?"

Severus lay still, trying to force his mind into clearer thoughts. The names he was hearing were familiar... Who was this person he had supposedly done something to...? He prodded his memory cautiously like trying out a rotten tooth with his tongue. Slowly, he opened his eyes to slits and tried to look around the room without giving away the fact that he was awake.

He was in some sort of a hospital. The walls were dressed stone, there were only a few beds visible, and they were all empty, their blankets neatly folded at the end of each mattress. Privacy screens jutted out between the beds. Shelves of glass and ceramic containers lined two of the walls in a series of cabinets.

Severus shifted his head slightly to the right so that he could see more. The ceiling was spectacular, an extraordinarily effusive example of decorated fan vaulting, the fine stone carvings of mythical and magical creatures intertwining with the more traditional stylised forms of design and decoration on the arches of the roof.

His attention focused in particular on the stone carving immediately above his head. A fearsome Manticore was fighting a dragon, its claws raking the animal's body while the other creature in turn sank its fangs into the Manticore's neck.

Snape looked away quickly, feeling slightly ill. He tried to move his head a little to the right and felt an intense sharp pain in his damaged neck. He was able to catch a glimpse of a bed beside his own, the blankets folded neatly into a roll at the foot of the mattress.

There was something very familiar about the room. He prodded his memory again.

Light was streaming into the ward from a series of windows set high in the walls on either side of the room. One of them was lit by stained glass. Severus squinted though his eyelashes.

He saw a badger on its hind legs pawing at a lion.

His eyes opened wider. What...?

Above them, a great green and golden snake writhed and twisted, its fangs bared at the image of a proud bronze eagle.

He felt a rush of memories and emotions, as if a great blockage in his mind had been breached.

He knew where he was and *when* he was.

He remembered.

Not a hospital.

An *infirmary*.

At *Hogwarts*.

He tried to sit up, but in doing so, he dislodged a metal bowl that had been placed at his side on the bed. It fell to the floor with a harsh metallic clang. The movement caused almost every muscle in his upper body to scream in protest. He dropped back against the pillows behind him, and his eyes shut as he fought for control. *Merlin that had hurt!*

Severus heard swiftly approaching footsteps and felt a solicitous hand on his brow and one at his wrist feeling for his pulse.

"Severus?"

Poppy Pomfrey's face swam into view, tear stained and flushed. He screwed his face up in a sneer against the pain in his muscles and the humiliation of his weakness.

He opened his eyes a fraction again.

"How do you feel now, young man?" he heard her ask.

He looked up at her as the light from the Founders' window played in multi-coloured fractals across her face. Poppy looked far more care-worn than he remembered her; her hair was silver white, her face was lined and puckered, but the intensity of her gaze was just the same, as was the faintly disapproving set of her mouth.

He coughed. His throat still felt raw and abused, but nothing like the burning sensation that he had experienced when he...

He grabbed Poppy's arm in alarm, pulling her further towards him. "Hermione?" he rasped, his voice a throaty ruin. His stomach writhed with guilt. How could he have forgotten? "Did she make it back with me? Is she all right? Where is she?"

Poppy was not looking at him anymore her face was turned to the left. Tears sparkled in the sunlight.

"We hoped that you might be able to tell us that, Professor," said another voice, and Harry Potter's concerned face came into view behind Poppy's shoulder. Standing next to him was the younger Weasley, his round, freckled face serious and concerned.

Severus blinked. Both young men looked so much *older* than he remembered. Potter's face was thinner and Weasley looked positively worn.

"Where is she?" he insisted desperately. How could he get back? He reached for the old Time-Turner that hung about his neck with a trembling hand, patting his chest for it. *It isn't there. It isn't there! Oh, shit! Oh, fuck!* Severus started to panic, pulling at the bedclothes to get his legs free.

"Shhh! She's *here*, Severus." Poppy's hands lay flat on his chest, halting his ineffective struggles.

He looked wildly about him, ignoring the stabbing pain from his injured neck and the complaints from his muscles. His gaze swung about, taking in more of the infirmary ... the soaring, fan-vaulted ceiling, the dark portraits on the wall, the other beds, all empty as before...No!

To his immediate left, the partition was pulled back, and rather than the more usual roll of sheets and blankets on the end of the mattress, Severus could see that the bed beside him was occupied.

"I moved her down here when the boys brought you in," Poppy continued softly. "I needed to keep an eye on both of you while you...." her voice faded away.

His breath caught, his throat spasmed.

*Hermione.*

*Alive! Thank God!*

He felt like crying. Greedily, his eyes took in her still form. Her skin was alabaster, smooth and pale. He could not see any blemishes on her skin... There were no wounds... no imperfections. Her chest rose and fell regularly.

She was *alive*!

Above him, he heard Poppy sniff and darted a quick look again at the Healer. Tears were still coursing down her lined face. As he looked up at Poppy in some confusion, she frowned and dashed some of them away with a quick movement of her hand.

A cold fist seized his heart and twisted it.

He snapped his head around and looked at Hermione again.

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"We buried him," she said flatly. "But you know that."

"I wasn't there at the time," he pointed out delicately. "Portraits are not easily moved."

She snorted. "I wouldn't let them take you outside to see it." She remembered the fight that she had had with Harry over that, and her mouth twisted into a little grimace at the memory.

"Ahhh. I *see*." Dumbledore twinkled infuriatingly.

She glowered in response. "He was dead. We did everything to try to revive him. But he was gone." She sighed. God she was so *exhausted*.... She felt... drained.

"Perhaps, my dear," Dumbledore prompted mildly, "rather than assuming that Severus did actually die, you should think about what he might have done to prevent his passing *entirely*...."

Hermione stared at him, defensive and yet... intrigued by his suggestion. Severus was a clever man. He knew more about potions and the Dark Arts than anyone she had ever known.

She looked down at the little perfume bottle, nestling innocently in her hand.

"What is he doing to me...?" she breathed.

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"Dying?" He stretched out a hand towards her and heard the Weasley boy make an angry, snorting noise. He ignored it. "Why, Poppy?" he rasped angrily.

Potter and Weasley both moved around his bed to stand awkwardly by Hermione's feet, staring at him. Weasley folded his arms across his broad chest.

Snape remembered something he had overheard. "What did you mean, before?" he asked Potter, the slick dread of fear still causing his heart to clench. "When you said, 'Did he do anything to her?', you were talking about me, weren't you, Potter? What did you mean?"

Potter flinched, but Ron leaned down, his lower jaw jutting out aggressively. "Well, *did* you?" he asked.

Snape glowered at him, hearing the implied accusation in the younger man's tone. He opened his mouth to make a blistering reply...

"We think that you are linked with her in some way, Severus," Poppy said gently but firmly, distracting Snape's attention from the impertinent red-headed shit.

"What?" he hissed.

Pomfrey's face was a mixture of concern and embarrassed irritation. "Septima thinks that you have some sort of personal connection with Hermione, Severus," she said. "Could it have anything to do with your coma? How... How did you do it? How did you... survive?"

Snape recoiled, confused and alarmed. His memories were so confusing. Had he harmed her? He had fallen through the mosaic portrait as he saw Hermione flung across the room by the pyroclastic surge. He hadn't touched her.

He hadn't touched her!

But as he looked up again into the face of the school matron, Snape closed his eyes.

Those weren't the memories he needed.

He cast aside thoughts of his life in ancient Pompeii and thought instead of those frantic moments in the Shack, the fear and the panic, scrabbling in blood-soaked clothing for his mother's perfume bottle while choking on the various potions and philtres that Hermione was tipping into his mouth. Saying the words of the curse, feeling the hideous agony as his soul fractured, staring into those beautiful, terrified eyes.

Oh, *fuck*.

He opened his eyes and looked at the unconscious woman on the bed beside him.

Oh, *fuck*.

He reached out again towards her, but there was too much of a space between the beds for him to touch her. He bared his teeth in frustration and flicked his fingers.

Hermione's bed lurched quickly towards him, sweeping the legs out from under Potter and Weasley and sending both of them crying out in surprise and sprawling onto Hermione's bed and each other. Their protests were drowned out by the exquisite sensation of skin-to-skin contact with Hermione's arm.

Flesh leapt to flesh. As his fingers curled about her thin forearm, he felt that same sensation of thrilling excitement and soothing balm that he had felt as they had nestled together in each other's arms.

He felt Hermione move beneath his hand and watched in wonder as she arched her body off the bed. He felt a surge of well-being and strength flow into him. He easily pushed himself up on his elbow and leaned towards her. She was still asleep, but he thought that he saw her skin tighten on her features, even as her power throbbed into him. She was fading, even as her power was pushing into him...

"Hermione!" Weasley shouted, knocking Snape's hand away from Hermione's arm and grabbing the front of Snape's hospital gown. "What are you *doing* to her, you filthy bastard?"

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"I'm very tired," she added.

"Yes, Severus is draining your energy through the Horcrux."

Her head snapped up, eyes flashing. "It's not an evil thing," she said defensively.

Dumbledore shrugged. "It is a work of magic. Why do people insist on drawing black and white distinctions between good and evil? Things are never just as they appear to be to us as *children*." She didn't miss the subtle correction in his tone.

She looked again at the little bottle. "It doesn't matter anyway. I'm dead already," she said in quiet voice, feeling something empty settle in her heart.

Dumbledore snorted delicately. "Why are you *persisting* in these assertions, Miss Granger?"

"*Doctor* Granger," she corrected him stubbornly, then disbelievingly. "What? What do you mean? What assumptions?"

Dumbledore stretched luxuriantly, enjoying her irritation and exuding an insufferable sense of superiority. She bit her tongue to stop herself from saying anything and waited for him to speak. He was going to make her suffer.

He opened his mouth to reply and then paused to waggle his eyebrows at her again.



"Why," he said, holding up the fingers of one hand and counted off the two points with his other hand, "the assumption, firstly, that you are ~~dead~~, my dear. And secondly, the assumption that the *perfume phial* is his Horcrux."

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Snape stared at Weasley in dumb horror as the young man's face contorted in rage. He was not afraid of the young ginger-haired wizard, but rather at the implications of the rush of magic that he had felt from Hermione... the knowledge that her magic was sustaining him.

Poppy was right; they did have a link, and that link was his Horcrux.

The knowledge of that made him sick to his stomach. What had he done? He turned his head to look at Hermione's still form once again, this time seeing her deathly pallor, the translucence of her skin, and the sharpness of her bones. Potter hauled Weasley off him, but Snape barely noticed as he lay rigid with horror at the thing that he had created.

"Severus, drink this; it will help your throat." Poppy Pomfrey was still hovering over him, this time with a small glass in her hand filled with a viscous liquid. He batted her hand away. He was certain that he would throw up anything he drank.

Weasley made to move towards him again, but Potter restrained him.

"Severus? Do you know what we can do to help her?" Poppy asked quietly, the glass of elixir still in her hand.

Snape stared at her blankly. His throat was raw and dry. He licked his lips with a tongue like sandpaper.

"No," he croaked. "I don't know."

*What the fuck do I do now?* he thought blankly.

The answer came to him very quickly. *Yes, of course.*

He heard Weasley emit a snort of disbelief and Potter shush him.

"But Harry..."

"The Aurors will be here soon, Ron. Maybe Septima can work something out...." Potter's voice faded into silence. It was obvious that none of them had any idea what to do next. He darted another quick look at Hermione's still and silent body. It was enough to calm the flutter of anxiety in his stomach and stiffen his resolve.

Severus looked at Poppy who was still looking down at him anxiously, as if he would break. "I... I need to use the loo," he said, hoping that she would take the boys away and give him the privacy he needed to do what he had to do.

To his immense relief, Poppy nodded and reached beneath the bed, pulling out a shallow bedpan. She placed it upon the bedcovers near his leg. "Once you have used it, Severus, please call me, and I will dispose of it."

She frowned at him with a trace of her usual asperity. "Don't even *think* of using magic yet, young man. You are not completely out of the woods, you know."

Then she stood and began to fuss over him, pulling out the privacy screens around Severus's bed, gesturing to the young men to back out of the way.

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"Not dead," repeated Hermione blankly. She felt an absurd flare of hope at the notion.

"Quite so," replied Dumbledore with maddening calm.

"So," she said. "So... this is King's Cross, isn't it? Or my version of it, anyway. Harry told me all about what happened after he had confronted Voldemort in the Forest."

Dumbledore shrugged but remained silent.

Hermione looked at him, then down at the perfume phial in her palm. "Am I dying?" she asked baldly, knowing the answer as soon as she asked the question.

The old man had the grace to look rather embarrassed. "That, my dear, is rather up to Severus."

"But the phial is not the Horcrux."

"No, my dear. The Horcrux is not in the perfume glass it is far closer than that." The old man cocked an eyebrow interrogatively and looked at her.

Hermione grimaced in frustration. *Always playing games.* She tapped her fingers against the glass in frustration and waited. She was almost too tired to think straight.

"The Horcrux is *inside* you, Hermione," Dumbledore added kindly.

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Severus waited until he heard Poppy, Weasley, and Potter withdraw to the far end of the room again before beginning to move.

Slowly and gently, he peeled back the sheet and blanket covering him and swung his legs out of bed, placing his feet uncertainly on the floor. He looked towards the voices. One of the screens that Poppy had pulled out was set across the end of his bed and Hermione's, thus obscuring the view from the end of the room to both beds. Perfect.

He paused. He could hear Weasley arguing with Potter about fetching the Aurors and Hermione's mother, Poppy interjecting that he wasn't strong enough for an interrogation and reminding the young men that it was a medical miracle that he was alive in the first place, that however Snape had managed to save himself, by some sort of healing deep coma, needed to be studied and catalogued.

Snape's mouth twisted in dislike. The prospect of being poked and prodded, studied like a lab rat for medical research was repugnant to him. He steeled himself to lean over quietly so that he could touch Hermione again.

The only way to break the link between them was to destroy the Horcrux. Not making a sound, Severus ran his hand lightly over Hermione's breastbone to find the perfume bottle. He patted her chest gently through her thin hospital gown, trying to find the silver chain. Nothing. His hand moved with increasing desperation as he searched for the Horcrux.

Nothing.

*Nothing!*

*Fuck!*

It was not there. But she said that she always wore it! She was wearing it in the bathroom when he fell through the mosaic....

*Where is it?*

He turned frantic, searching around her body in case it had fallen to her side.

Nothing.

He was braced over her body, looking down at her beautiful, drawn face. He could almost *see the life draining out of her. He remembered the page from De Magia Veterum*, the Dark Magic text that he had studied before creating his Horcrux, picturing the Latin text in his mind's eye.

*"The Horcrux is inviolate to all spells and curses and is vulnerable only to the destructive forces of Dark powers. Should the creator of a Horcrux wish to reverse the spell and destroy his creation, this may only be done when the creator feels true remorse, although the pain of such action may destroy him."*

Snake's nostrils flared, and he felt hot tears pricking his eyes as he lowered his forehead to rest gently on her collarbone.

Oh Merlin, he was sorry.

At his touch on her skin, he felt her magic leap towards him again. Images cascaded through his mind, and he felt a sudden burning sensation begin in his chest and spread rapidly through his body. Rather than pull away from her though, he welcomed the pain instinctively, embraced it with a selfish pleasure. He deserved it. Her Horcrux was gone, and he could not destroy it. She would die as his selfish body drew on her magical energy and sapped her own.

He was suffused with self-loathing, remembering the recent times when she had saved him from the Manticore, from Sabazios, even from Fiducius. Then he remembered the young girl who had splayed across him, pouring potions into his body, willing him to recover even as he created the thing that would anchor him to life at her expense.

That image morphed into another this time of her face contorted in pleasure as she writhed beneath him, her eyes heavy lidded with desire. She had *wanted* him. She had loved him.

Thick bile rose in his throat, and he let out a whimper as the pain of his remorse grew and blossomed.

He was burning with it. It consumed him and he welcomed it. He deserved to die. Selfish bastard.

He felt her magic batter against him, and he rejected it shoving it back towards her roughly, pushing more of himself into her, willing her to survive, to be restored, ~~live~~.

He became conscious of a deep blue glow emanating from Hermione's body, wrapping itself around him like a net, pulling him closer, and crushing the air from his chest. She began to move beneath him. He gripped her shoulders with both hands and pushed her back into the mattress, feeling the pain of his regret and humiliation scorching through him but refusing to let her go. He had no idea what was happening but he was determined to see it through to the end.

He shook with the effort of remaining in contact with her body and poured his love and fear and grief and sorrow into her.

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Hermione felt the change as a slow burn in her chest... like indigestion.

"What do you mean, 'up to Severus'?" she asked. "Why must you always speak in riddles, damn it?"

Dumbledore tilted his head on one side. "I think you know. You did study Horcrux-lore," he said.

Hermione frowned. Her head was feeling clearer, her energy levels seemed to be rising.

"Severus would need to...," she began, trying to remember what she had studied with Harry and Ron all those years ago. "He... he would need to destroy it with remorse."

Dumbledore nodded.

"But that could kill him!" she blurted out in shock.

Dumbledore shrugged his shoulders a little. "Quite so, dear girl," he said with equanimity. "Quite so. Or, of course, he could save you both."

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"... And I say that we should fetch the Aurors right now," said Ron mulishly, his face set in a scowl that Harry recognised all too well. "He's clearly got some sort of hold over her just look at what happened when he touched her! It's *sick*."

"He's not strong enough to be moved, Ron!" argued Harry. "You heard what Poppy said he's just about hanging on, as it is. The Aurors won't be able to do anything and what's the point of arresting him?"

"But Harry, she's going to die if we don't do something, sever the link in some way. Look, *her mum's* going to be down here any second! What are we going to say to her?"

Poppy Pomfrey slowly folded her arms and adopted a stance that Harry would later describe as her 'protective lioness' pose. "What exactly are you suggesting, *Mister* Weasley...?" she asked in a dangerously quiet voice.

"Well, we can't just... We just can't...." Ron raised his hands in frustrated supplication. Harry quirked his lips slightly at the look on Ron's face and Poppy's trenchant body language.

Despite the desperate situation they were facing, he was pleased to see that some things remained the same.

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Hermione clutched at her chest, breathless with distress, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. No, she corrected herself, not her heartbeat; she could hear the volcano again, the roar of Vesuvius clearer and more evident than it had been for the past few minutes.

Another wave of burning pain washed through her, and her body spasmed forwards. She braced herself on the floor with her other hand as she tried to ride out the agony.

"W-what's going on?" she managed to ask between the agonising convulsions.

Dumbledore made no reply, and Hermione looked up at him through tear-soaked lashes, her face contorted in anguish. The burning rolled through her again, doubling in intensity. It felt as if her chest were being scorched and flayed open. She cried out again.

Dumbledore sat, cross-legged as before. She could not quite make out his expression through the bouts of sickly pain rushing through her body.

A sharp and demanding wave of nausea struck her as the pain gripped her chest once more. Oh gods, it hurt! "Fuck you, Dumbledore! What is happening?" she hissed.

"I think you know what is happening, Hermione," Dumbledore answered kindly. "Severus is doing what he needs to do. He's coming."

Her hand dug into her chest, as if by pressing down on the pain there she could lessen it somehow. Curiously, the action did seem to help a little. She panted out a few breaths and tried to lift her head again.

"I didn't ask him to," she gasped out, staring at Dumbledore. "I wouldn't."

The old wizard nodded and smiled. "Quite so," he agreed.

Hermione blinked. The pain in her chest was certainly abating. As it lessened, she thought that Dumbledore's body seemed to be becoming less... opaque. The deep purple of his cloak and robes was fading and becoming translucent. The roar from the eruption was now reaching a deafening level, and the walls and floor of the bathroom were shaking.

"What...?" she began, confused and frightened. The room was now as it had been, the deep colours of the portrait clearly visible.

Dumbledore smiled at her again as his form continued to shift and change. Hermione blinked again; her vision was clouding.... What was going on? She wiped her eyes roughly on the back of her hand so that she could see more clearly.

The sight that met her eyes when she opened them again made her gasp.

Dumbledore was gone. In his place, rising through the mosaic portrait before her, like an avenging spirit in the maelstrom that roiled about them, his face drawn and pale but resolute, his arms extended to catch her, was Severus.

Sobbing with relief, she fell into his arms.

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He did not know how long he had been asleep, but he awakened to the pressure of circling fingers on his sweat-soaked back and a splitting headache.

He was lying on a sweaty pillow, his arms bent at the elbows to each side, his hands tangled in soft curls.

Cautiously, he moved his head. The movement caused the pillow to shift slightly of its own accord.

"Ooof. Could you...? You are quite heavy...."

Severus stilled immediately and then pushed himself slowly up away from the pillow, his arms shaking with the effort this simple action cost him. He was exhausted beyond measure.

His hair hung lank and greasy in front of his face, and his eyes felt like they had been bathed in acid. He blinked carefully, trying to clear the stinging, sticky substance away from his vision.

Gentle fingers brushed the limp blades of hair away from his eyes and tucked them carefully behind his ears. He looked down in numb disbelief at the smiling face of the woman in his arms.

"Hello, Severus." Hermione whispered and she smiled. "It looks like I'm back."

## Chapter 30

*Chapter 31 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.

A/N: Thanks to JKR for allowing me to borrow her characters, and to beawesley2, Clairvoyant and nagandsev for everything else.

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### Chapter 30

Gentle fingers brushed the limp blades of hair away from his eyes and tucked them carefully behind his ears. He looked down in numb disbelief at the smiling face of the woman in his arms. "Hello, Severus," Hermione whispered, and she smiled.

"It looks like I'm back," she said. Her fingers gently caressed his scalp, and her fingers slid through his hair.

He blinked at her, tired beyond words, but before Severus could say anything to the beautiful, extraordinary woman in his arms, or hold her more closely, or bury his face between her soft breasts once more...

"HERMIONE!" A bellow of shock then, "What the *fuck* are you...?"

"Poppy! Hermione!!"

There was a flurry of footsteps and another wordless exclamation as something fleshy barrelled into him. He landed painfully on his back across his hospital bed, Weasley's knee digging painfully into his side. Severus felt something shift uncomfortably along his spine and grimaced in pain.

"Severus! *Mister Weasley!* Get *up* you are hurting him!"

Severus smiled inwardly at the outrage in Poppy Pomfrey's voice, grateful for the Healer's protective instincts.

The knee lifted off Severus, and he sucked in a painful breath, fighting the blackness that was threatening to engulf him.

"Hermione! Can you hear me?" Potter's voice sounded earnest and hopeful.

"I'm fine, Harry." Despite her polite words, Severus could hear the irritation in Hermione's voice. He could picture the expression on her face and tried to raise his head to see what exactly was going on, but he found that his muscles were refusing to respond.

"Hermione!" Weasley's deeper tone, strained and emotional.

"Ouff! Ron! Get *off!*" Severus heard a scrabbling of limbs, then felt a sting of magic before he heard a loud exhalation of, "Ow!" followed by the slap of a body hitting stone.

It sounded very much like Weasley had been thrown onto the floor by the force of her spell.

Severus drew in more breaths, fighting the increasing pressure in his chest. *I thought she said that she couldn't do wandless magic?* It was too painful to actually laugh. *Serves you right for trying to manhandle her, you stupid idiot!* he thought, air wheezing into his lungs.

"Harry, can you restrain your friend please?" Poppy asked with some asperity.

He heard the boy reply, "Just sit down, Ron! Sorry, Poppy. H-how are you, Hermione?"

"I'm *fine*, honestly, Harry! How is Severus? Let me up..."

Severus was still concentrating on his next breath. It seemed to be becoming harder and harder to drag oxygen into his chest. Bright sparks were flashing in his peripheral vision, clouding across it. He felt another hand rest on his sternum and tensed automatically. His chest spasmed painfully in response, and a whimper escaped his lips. He could hear a whistling sound every time he tried to breathe.

"Try to relax, Severus," Poppy instructed him.

He wanted to, but it felt like his lungs were being slowly wrung out like a wet dishcloth. *Poppy has a nice voice*, he thought dimly, losing control, fighting to clear his vision, gasping for shallow breaths now.

"Severus!" Hermione sounded desperate.

*No need, foolish woman*, he thought. *You're safe now....* He heard a low, muttered incantation, and he recognised the healing spell that Poppy was intoning as he slid into unconsciousness.

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Severus awoke with a sour taste in his mouth and a headache.

He opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of the isolation room. Unlike the main infirmary, these rooms were undecorated. Gone was the gothic splendour of the vaulted ceilings, the stained glass windows, and the decorated walls. He was lying in a comfortable bed in an anonymous room, which had a smooth, plain ceiling with a single light globe, clean walls, and a leather wing-back chair to the side of his bed. A small clock hung on the wall at the foot of his bed, its face decorated with a simple twelve-hour notation. Beside his bedside was a small table that held a glass of water and a small golden bell. Inscribed on the shining metal were the words "Ring for Assistance".

Slowly, he wriggled himself backwards higher on to the pillows behind him. He pushed the bedcovers down and looked at himself. He was wearing a pale blue hospital gown of soft cotton, which was cut in a deep 'V' at his neck, so as he looked down over his chest, he could still see the ridges of his sternum and ribcage jutting out clearly as his chest rose up and down. His skin was still deathly pale and mottled. He frowned a little in regret. Gone was the honey-rich flesh tone of his time in *Italia*.

*No*. He brought himself up short. *Not in Italia. I was never in Italia.* A sick feeling twisted in his gut.

He must have been in a magically assisted coma. The potions and elixirs he had taken after Nagini had ripped his throat open and pumped her venom into him were designed to protect his body and neutralise the poison. His Horcrux had anchored him, kept him attached to life, while this healing process took place. Nagini had been a powerful snake, an enhanced variant of the Muggle *Vipera aspis*. Voldemort had found her, tamed her and made her his own when he had been in exile in Albania. Because of Voldemort's attentions and the Dark magic he'd used, she had grown to monstrous size.

When Arthur Weasley had been attacked by Nagini, Dumbledore had suggested that Severus should offer his aid to the Healers at St Mungo's who were trying to save his life, pointing out that such an opportunity to get closer to one of Voldemort's most potent weapons was not to be missed. Severus had not missed the chance to study the complexities of Nagini's venom as he and the Healers had fought to stem Weasley's blood loss and counter the effect of the hematoxic venom. He had developed the series of potions which had enabled the elder Weasley to survive by countering in turn each of the elements of Nagini's venom. In doing so, he had also bought himself the opportunity to protect himself from such an obvious threat.

But it had been a near thing. The speed with which the venom had acted, coupled with the need to give Potter those bloody memories before he could treat himself, had left him badly injured and unable to administer the antidotes in the correct order. The girl had simply poured all of them into his mouth randomly until he gagged, and he had barely had enough time to create the Horcrux to buy his body more time for the poorly administered potions to begin to work.

Clearly he had even managed to fuck that up....*But how...?*

He remembered grasping the little bottle, his hands slippery with blood both his from his neck and hers from the grazes and cuts on her hands. He had summoned up his guilt and horror at his murder of the old man and *willed* his soul to split and form the new Horcrux within his mother's perfume phial... But then his recollection became hazy. She had kept distracting him, pouring dittany into his wound God that stuff had stung! She had been weeping over him and trying to force more healing liquids down his throat as he had tried to sing the Anima Digeris incantation to effect the transfer.

And so the Horcrux had been created. *But not in the perfume bottle*, he realised in a moment of horrible clarity, *in her... just like Voldemort and the boy*.

So.

Just... so.

He drew his hands slowly up to his face as he groaned with the implication of his actions. That was why she had joined him in Pompeii. Or had *he* joined her...? He had known nothing in particular about Roman Pompeii beyond general knowledge. How could he have imagined all those details? He thought of the beautiful decorations in his house, the shops and precincts of the city, the tavernas and temples, the *people*.

His head swam. It was so confusing! His life there had seemed so *real*. He scowled angrily, forcing his thoughts into order.

In his Pompeian dream, she had told him that she was a Muggle archaeologist and that she had been studying the buried city. Perhaps his subconscious had simply been drawn into *her* imagination through the Horcrux as she had worked in modern day Pompeii, slowly revealing the city, imagining how it would have looked before it had been ruined by the volcanic eruption in 79AD.

He had been pulling on her magic for years like a parasite. Near to the end, as the venom had finally been metabolised and his body had begun to consume itself for the want of sustenance, he had drawn even more on her resources, causing her to fall into the same linked coma with him, the Horcrux acting much like a conduit through which his body was nourished at her expense.

That was why his remorse had brought her back, even though the perfume bottle had been nowhere to be found. He had broken the Horcrux within her.

His mind filled with images from his delirium like a series of cinematic images playing across a screen before his eyes. Conviva and Restitutus, flame haired and joking, began to change in his mind's eye into the image of Arthur Weasley's boys, Fred and George two of the most brilliant and frustrating students he had ever taught. Beautiful Marcella, with her green eyes, her hair auburn and shining in the sun, became Lily but a Lily that had forgiven him and who had remained his friend and become his ally rather than casting him off like her real-life echo had done all those years ago.

Marcus Fiducius' image now swam before him: sneering, arrogant, and resolute. It was obvious now. So *simple*. He was Lucius. Desperate for power, convinced that he could manipulate and control everything, but lacking in the end, reduced to petty theft and threats to murder in the desperate thrall of that power.

Even Sabazios.... He moaned into his hands. *Obvious. Pathetic, really.*

So he had played out a fantasy in his delirium and dragged her into it, risking her life and magic as he did so.

And nothing had been real between them.

His heart wrenched hard in his chest, a shadow of the savage remorse he had felt when he had destroyed the Horcrux within her and brought her out of her coma.

But he had destroyed the link between them, he remembered, so she was free.

That thought should have made him feel better, but instead, it filled him with an angry sort of sadness.

There was a knock on the door, and he gasped at the sharp noise, his heart thumping irregularly in his chest as the door swung open. He had no wand.

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Poppy Pomfrey bustled into the room, followed behind by a levitated trolley containing a series of jars and phials.

She smiled at him in a businesslike manner and settled the trolley gently beside his bed. "Good morning, Severus," she said, and if he had not been such an observant man, he might have missed the tension in her voice.

He opened his mouth to reply, but she held her wand hand up sharply. "No talking please, young man. Your throat is still too damaged to risk speaking for the moment."

He snorted disparagingly; he was hardly *young*. His body felt stiff and slow.

She bent towards him and muttered a diagnostic charm. Severus watched the blue numerals and figures dance in the air above his chest, furrowing his brow as he tried to read them from the wrong angle.

Poppy grunted in apparent satisfaction. "I would be very interested in the potions formulae for those elixirs you used, young man."

Again, that reference to youth. He rolled his eyes and scowled uncomfortably; she really needed to work on her bedside manner.

Undeterred, the Healer picked up a glass beaker and carefully decanted a pale green substance into it. Severus recognised the draught; he had brewed enough of the stuff for her over the years. Broad-range restorative. He took it from her and tossed it down, noting the flavour. *Peppermint*. He had never bothered to flavour the healing potions he had brewed for her.

Next came an antivenin. "Just to be on the safe side," she said with warm good humour.

Next he swallowed a vitamin booster, followed by a health draught, an anti-inflammatory potion, and two types of glucose infusion. The sweetness of the latter one set his teeth on edge.

She offered him the glass of water from his bedside, and he sipped it gratefully, washing the sickly potion out of his mouth. She replaced the glass on the table, and he noticed, as expected, that it was as full as it had been before he had drunk from it. "Your muscles have wasted and will need some therapy. These potions will help you to recover muscle mass and tone, but there is no substitute for physical activity. I will leave you a series of exercises that I will expect you to follow to help you to regain your mobility."

She summoned a roll of parchment from underneath the trolley and flicked her fingers at it. The roll opened out promptly and fluttered onto the bed in front of him. Severus picked it up. Various diagrams promising pain of increasing magnitude lay before him. His eyebrows rose at some of the illustrations.

Snape grimaced. The Muggles had a word for that sort of activity. *Exercise*.

She smiled but then looked him up and down appraisingly. "You know, you really are in excellent condition though, given what you have been through for the last eleven years. Your body should show far more damage than it does." She moved closer to him, raising her hand towards his neck. "May I?" she asked quietly.

He nodded and turned his head a little to the side.

Cool fingers gently felt the new skin of his scar, gently testing its quality and resistance to pressure. The nerves were newly grown, and her touch was painful, but he did his best to remain still. Eventually, she grunted in satisfaction again and withdrew her hands, offering him the cool water again. He drank some more and replaced the glass on the table himself. The potions were taking effect, and he was feeling much better.

Poppy tidied the jars and potion bottles away carefully on her trolley, fussing with the containers for longer than seemed necessary.

Severus cleared his throat carefully. "Poppy..." he whispered.

She spun around quickly. "Don't talk, Severus. You need to give the elixir time to work," she berated him sharply, but then she sagged, her hands wringing together.

*What is she doing?* he thought, confused by her body language.

"Oh, Severus," she whispered. "I am so sorry! I missed... I didn't know...."

She sat down shakily on the bed beside his hip, and he realised that she was crying. Slowly, she crumpled forwards, and he put up his thin arms automatically to hold her lightly, fighting the roiling emotions within himself just as he sought to offer her comfort. "It's alright, Poppy," he whispered back to her, and the Healer's shoulders shook.

Awkwardly, he patted her back. "You didn't know," he hissed, his voice a ghost of its usual richness. "It's alright."

After a few seconds, her shaking abated, and she remembered herself, pushing her body backwards and away from his stiff embrace. She wiped her eyes on a cloth from her trolley and nodded. "Thank you, Severus."

Severus needed to change the subject. "How... How is Miss Granger?" he asked, unable to resist any longer.

Poppy smiled. "She is recovering well. She wants to see you, Severus, when you are up to receiving visitors. In fact, she is quite insistent on the matter. She claims that there is a... an *understanding* between you both..." She raised her eyebrows in a silent question.

*I'll bet*, he thought in resignation. Miss Granger must be ready by now to unleash her legendary temper upon him. He had no doubt that she would have worked out what had happened to her as quickly as he had.

A sudden, horrible thought occurred to him. What if she still fancied herself in love with him? That would be even worse. *Intolerable*. The feeling would certainly fade as all such false emotions dissipated in time, and that would leave her hating him even more than he hated himself at this moment. He steeled himself. "I would like to see her," he said.

Poppy smiled. "Perhaps later on today," she promised, passing him another healing draught.

He held it in his hand for a moment, trying to work out what it was.

"It's a little concoction of my own, Severus. It's a combination of Strengthening Solution and Calming Draught. You are not the only one here who can invent new healing potions, you know." Poppy waggled her eyebrows at his expression.

He glowered, but swallowed the potions. He shuddered. *Aniseed*.

She reached forward and gripped his hand with hers. "For now, I expect you to get some rest while the restoratives work. We should have you up and about in no time at all. Good *morning*, young man."

Severus suddenly felt his eyelids grow unbearably heavy. "Not *young*..." he mumbled, even as sleep claimed him.

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"Professor Snape?"

Severus remained perfectly still, his eyes closed, his breathing carefully regulated.

A dry cough and boots scuffing the stone floor of the room. A rich, strong, earthy smell mingled with the sharper scent of decomposition...

"He's asleep. Sir, I really don't think we should be... Didn't the Healer say..." Another voice with a lighter tone... a younger man... two of them, then.

"Do shut up, Abercrombie. *Ahem!* Professor Snape, sir?"

Severus heard a squelching sound, and a fresh waft of putrid vegetable matter struck his nostrils.

"I don't understand why drying charms are not working on our robes, sir," the younger man's voice said, taking on a whining tone.

"It was an *enchanted swamp*, Abercrombie," the older voice replied, obviously irritated. "We will soon be able to get new robes once we have reported back to the Auror's Office... which we will be doing, once we have interviewed the... suspect."

"But it's *Professor Snape*, sir! He's a hero!" the one called Abercrombie exclaimed. Severus tried to remember anyone with that name.

*"Is he, Abercrombie? Or is there something more sinister going on?"*

*Aurors*, Severus thought disparagingly. *Inevitable*. He opened his eyes, affecting an exaggerated sigh as he did so. He was pleased to see both young men recoil from him.

The older one recovered first, stepping forward towards the bed. Severus narrowed his eyes, flicking through his memory to recall the man's name. "Mr... Finch-Fletchley, isn't it?" he drawled, pleased to hear that his voice seemed to be returning to its normal timbre. "Decided to eschew the family estate for a career in..." he deliberately allowed his eyes to rake over the men's dishevelled appearance, taking in their sopping wet and filthy robes... "swamp management...?"

Finch-Fletchley flushed a bright red. "Now look here!" he said hotly, but the other one, whom Severus did not recognise, stepped forward instead and enthusiastically extended his hand.

"Abercrombie, sir! Euan Abercrombie... Gryffindor, 2002... I was in your first year Potions class back in 1995. It's a *pleasure* to meet you again, sir!"

Snape stared at the young man suspiciously, but then extended his own hand to offer a handshake. Abercrombie pumped Severus's hand up and down, a foolish grin on his open features. The actions dislodged more foul-smelling globules of black matter from the sodden cloth of his robes onto Snape's bedclothes. Snape's nose wrinkled at the smell, and Abercrombie pulled backwards quickly, muttering hasty apologies for the mess as his more senior colleague stepped forward smoothly.

"Professor Snape," Finch-Fletchley began rather pompously, despite his somewhat ridiculous appearance. "We are here investigating the kidnap of Doctor Hermione Granger from St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries..."

The door banged open.

"*Which* the Professor could not have had anything to do with, given that he has been trapped in his tomb in some sort of magical coma for the past eleven years, Justin!" Harry Potter stated firmly, entering the room with a firm step. He planted himself in front of the Aurors, his body angled slightly between Severus's bed and the two Aurors in a subtle but unmistakable attitude.

Snape stared. Harry Potter was attempting to *protect* him.

"Look, Justin," Potter continued, "Hermione's safe and well. I'm more than happy to come to the Ministry to explain what happened, but she's okay.... and... You *really* need to get out of those clothes soon, don't you think?"

Finch-Fletchley looked as if he were about to argue with Potter, but then seemed to collapse slightly. "Very well, Harry," he agreed grudgingly. He gestured towards his colleague. "Come on, Abercrombie. We have a report to make."

Abercrombie was still grinning at Severus like a star-struck lunatic, but he allowed himself to be led away by Finch-Fletchley.

The door closed softly behind them.

Potter turned to face him, wafting his hand in front of his face to try to dissipate the lingering stench from the Aurors' clothing. He met Severus's eyes and stilled. Now that Potter faced him, Severus could see he was carrying something in his arms. It was a small carton about the size of a shoebox.

"Sorry about that," Potter said. "They got away from Filius once he had helped them out of The Weasley Memorial Swamp on their way to the Headmaster's Office, and then they found their way down to the infirmary...." His voice trailed off into silence.

Severus said nothing, watching carefully. Had Hermione said anything to Potter? Was she all right? What was in the box? Why was Potter being so... pleasant?

Potter was still staring at him. Severus looked back at him levelly, but Potter did not move. He seemed to be frozen.

Snape cleared his throat. "Is that box for me, Potter?" he asked and slowly raised an eyebrow.

Potter nodded and set the box down on Snape's lap, taking the lid off with a fumbling flourish.

Snape looked into the box. Inside it, he saw his wand, the old Time-Turner, and a key.

"After Ron left, I... I went back to the sarcophagus and found them," the young man said.

Severus looked up at him and met, once again, those earnest, bright green eyes. "Thank you, Potter," he said gruffly, his fingers ghosting over his wand, feeling the slight tingle of recognition from the birch wood.

Potter was looking at him oddly, as if he wanted to say something but was uncertain how to begin, so Severus tried to lift the other eyebrow. The action appeared to have the desired response.

"No-one knows what you did," Potter said abruptly. "Hermione won't let on, but I think I understand. Only a Horcrux could have anchored you to life while you healed."

Severus tensed, his fingers reaching carefully around his wand, ready to defend himself if necessary.

But Potter merely stood still, watching him for a moment. "When we were hunting Horcruxes, Hermione told us that there was a way to destroy one without violence," he continued softly. "You had to be sorry. You had to be *so sorry* that your remorse shatters the part of your soul in the Horcrux and transfers it back into your own."

Severus felt his body go very still indeed. His memories of Potter were mostly of an impetuous hothead, a boy whose reckless actions and impetuosity had frequently placed his friends in great danger. Mutual animosity had marked their relationship from the moment that Potter had appeared in his first Potions lesson. What had changed during the past eleven years?

The young man standing before him now seemed quieter and more thoughtful.

*Older.*

*Changed.*

Severus shivered. Why was this castle always so bloody cold?

"I'm very glad to see you again, Professor," Potter said quietly. "But I think that you should be moving on quite quickly, don't you?"

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After Potter left, Severus stared at the contents of the box. The quiet implications of Potter's words had not gone unnoticed. The Aurors would be back, and trouble would follow.

He was not going to think about her.

He *wasn't*.

*Oh, fuck it. Where is she?* He slipped back into unconsciousness.

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Two hours later, Poppy came back and roused him from a fitful sleep. She fed him another round of revolting restorative potions and then suggested that he try to eat some soup. He had been pleased to see his hand only shook a little as he brought the spoon to his lips, and Poppy had smiled a wide and proud smile at his increasing strength and independence. He felt a flush creep slowly up his neck and to his face. *Bloody woman.*

Clothes. She had also brought him clothes.

She draped them awkwardly over the chair by the side of his bed as he watched her numbly: underthings, a grey cotton shirt, black woollen trousers, thick socks... a buttoned frock coat. Boots.

He looked at them, schooling his face into a blank expression.

"I know you, Severus," Poppy teased him. "You will have been missing these. I was sure to ask the elves for exactly the same design that you always used to wear."

He said nothing, simply staring at his costume, remembering the last time he had worn it. He realised that his hand had crept up to feel the livid scars on his neck, and quickly pulled it away before she could notice.

"Now... let's have a look at you." Poppy pulled his sheet back and cast a diagnostic charm over his chest. He peered at the wavering numbers and symbols, trying to interpret the results. Poppy grunted, apparently satisfied by the results, banished the floating sigils and pulled the sheet back up to his chin, tucking it in around his shoulders.

"I am not an infant," he said stiffly. "You should see to *Herm Doctor* Granger."

"Hermione is recovering well, Severus, but she is still not well enough to leave her bed. *No matter what she thinks*" Poppy added rather sharply under her breath.

Severus fought to keep his expression disinterested.

"I'm leaving some more Strengthening Solution and restoratives on the trolley here," she said after a moment. "In case you need to take any more today or tomorrow."

Their eyes met and a sort of mutual understanding fell between them.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said.

Poppy smiled at him again. "It really is wonderful to see you back again, Severus," she said, resting her hand lightly on his arm. "Now get some rest. You should feel able

to get up tomorrow morning."

Severus nodded, settling back against the pillows, waiting for sleep to wash over him again.

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He woke the following morning, feeling brighter. The lassitude of the previous day had receded, and he was thinking more clearly. What to do now? He could continue teaching... No, he shuddered at the thought. *Another generation of mewling addle-pates to prevent from destroying my laboratory.* He could write and research... or open a small shop perhaps. *But where?* He was not foolish enough to think that he could escape notoriety in Wizarding Britain. *That is*, he remembered, *if the Aurors don't come back and throw me in Azkaban first.*

He used his wand to summon Poppy's potion and quaffed another dose of the restorative, grimacing at the awful taste. Then he used the bell by the side of his bed to summon a house-elf to order breakfast.

He wondered if Hermione would come to see him today. He longed to see her again, but the longing was mixed with the crushing sense that he had completely *fucked up*. She would hate him. She *should* hate him.

He pulled the sheets and blankets away from his legs, staring at the pale limbs in front of him, at the knobbly knees and black hairs on his thighs and calves. He cast a glance at the parchment of exercises and contemplated one of them, stretching his arm out to try to catch hold of his toe to stretch out his hamstring.

He gave up after the third attempt, glowering balefully at the smugly flexible wizard in the picture.

Slowly, he moved his legs to the side and carefully levered himself upright, steadying himself carefully on the high back of the chair. He took careful breaths, willing his head to stop spinning and the stars in his vision to dissipate. He counted to twenty carefully, then lowered himself back down to the bed, summoning the horrible clothes to him instead.

He dressed slowly as if arming himself or preparing for his execution. It seemed to take much more effort than it should have done. The fabric felt stiff and unresponsive under his fingers, and he felt a sudden, irrational pang of longing for his Pompeian *tunica* at least a man could *move* in that. But the castle was chilly, and he hated the idea of receiving Hermione in his nightshirt. Buttoning his collar hurt his neck badly, but he forced the buttons into their place and smoothed down the jacket, feeling layers of defensive energy begin to slip into place about him as he did so.

The clock on the wall chimed the hour.

He drank more of the disgusting aniseed solution and settled down to read some of the old, archive copies of the *Daily Prophet* that Poppy had brought him.

He completely lost track of the time, sunk in the story of the fall of Voldemort as reported in the popular press. The *Prophet* had published a full account of the final hours of the Dark Lord. Severus devoured the testimonies of Neville Longbottom, Seamus Finnegan, and Susan Bones, trying to picture how a group of children had fought so bravely against fully-grown Death Eaters and largely survived to tell the tale.

He was oddly pleased to read that Longbottom had dispatched the snake that boy had grown in stature and confidence during Severus's time as Headmaster. He had admired the boy's spirit, recognising in him the resolution of a born leader and a brave man, even though at the time he had condemned the boy for the risks that he took and his stubborn refusal to subordinate himself to Severus's authority. He wondered briefly if Augusta Longbottom had been proud of her grandson in the end.

He flicked on through the yellowed pages of the newspaper, dismissing the emotive language, contemptuous of the triumphalism of the editorials.

A grainy picture of a battle-scarred and weary Hermione finally caught his attention again and stopped him restlessly flicking through the pages. She was staring out from the page with dull exhaustion, her wand dangling from her hand as she sat on the bottom of a stone step. She looked remarkably like she had done in the bathroom of his Pompeian house.

Beside her in the picture, Potter scrubbed his hand through his hair and smiled bravely for the camera while Ronald Weasley leaned into her side, tears streaming down his face. Severus remembered reading in an earlier edition that Fred Weasley had been killed during the fighting. *Presumably, the boy had just been told*, he thought.

The caption of the photograph read: *Our heroes reflect on a battle worth fighting.* I'll bet, he thought wryly. Severus made a disparaging sound in his throat and turned the page.

His eyes lingered on the names of the Death Eaters who had perished in the battle. *McNair... Greyback... Lestrangle.... No Malfoy.* He skipped to the next edition and searched for news of Lucius's family.

The clock on the wall chimed, and he was shocked to see that it was nearly six o'clock already. He had been reading for hours.

The collar of his jacket was chafing his neck badly, but he welcomed the sensation. He could feel his old professorial persona slipping more firmly into place with every passing breath. He tried standing up again and began to walk across the room. Simply putting one foot in front of the other was exhausting. He managed seven steps before he began to feel uncertain on his feet. Sweat beaded on his forehead and settled in an uncomfortable pool at the base of his spine. Gritting his teeth, he turned and walked stiffly back to the chair beside his bed and half-sat, half-fell into its seat.

He was still sitting in the chair next to his bed in his uncomfortable clothes, working his way through another edition of the *Prophet*, and trying not to think about when she would come, when he heard a quiet, but firm, knock at the door. He knew it was *her* immediately by the strange stirring in his chest at the sound of the knock and the adrenaline that spiked through his stomach.

The heavy oak door opened, and suddenly, *she* was there.

Hermione shuffled through the doorway, wearing a different version of the Hogwarts' infirmary gown, buttoned up to her chin, and white slippers. Her hair was in its usual riotous state, the curls forming a frizzy aurora about her head. Dark circles shrouded her eyes, and her face was thin and flushed. The light from the window behind him was dazzling her, and she blinked, lifting her right hand up to shield her eyes from the glare, while her left hand gripped the door handle so tightly that Severus could see her knuckles flashing white. When her eyes fell on him, she straightened her body under his stare, shifting her weight until it was balanced on both feet, and she let go of the door. It shut behind her, and he saw her turn to it and heard the lock snap shut.

She looked dishevelled and exhausted, yet stubbornly triumphant.

His heart gave another lurch in his chest.

She smiled warmly at him, and her eyes seemed to sparkle in the summer light through the window behind him.

His mouth suddenly went dry. "H..." He tried to buy himself more time by flicking the pages of the *Prophet* closed and folding the paper in half before letting the paper fall to the floor by his side. He cleared his throat and swallowed. "*W Doctor Granger,*" he ground out eventually, wincing at the timbre of his voice, at how raw it sounded.

"Hello... *Severus.*"



There was a slight inflection in her words, and he could not quite grasp her meaning. Was she angry with him? She deserved to be, after all. He placed his hands carefully on the soft arms of his chair and tried not to grip them too tightly.

She advanced into the room slowly, shuffling her stiff limbs forward. She was obviously fatigued and sore, but her jaw was set determinedly, and she was making stubborn progress towards him, a blazing look on her face.

Without thinking, he pushed himself up from his chair equally stiffly, his weak leg muscles protesting as he forced himself upwards. He held out his hand to guide her to sit on the bed in front of him. She grasped his fingers with surprising strength, and he felt the thrill of their contact fizzing through him as he had done before when she had been in her coma.

She stared up at him for a long moment, then reached up and cupped his cheek in her hands. Feather light touches ran fire across the skin of his cheekbones, his ear, down the uninjured side of his neck, onto his shoulder. "You look... terrible," she said softly.

He could not help but smile at that, allowing his free hand to slide around the curve of her ribcage, down to her hip, pulling her gently towards him. "So do you," he murmured, drunk on the sight of her.

He knew it was foolish to indulge his emotions like this, but he could not help himself. He let go of her hand and wrapped both of his arms around her, breathing in the faintly peppermint smell of her hair the distant remnants of a dose of Pepperup, his sensitive nose reminded him. He realised, after a moment, that she was shaking and, shortly afterwards, that he was too. He felt lightheaded, giddy with pleasure, as he sank his fingers into her hair and rubbed the small of her back with his other hand. After a few moments, he realised that he was breathing more shallowly and his vision was becoming a little clouded.

She seemed to realise that his legs were wobbling badly, and she giggled slightly, letting go of him so that she could lower herself carefully onto the blankets with a small sigh of relief. He sank back into his chair, his knees almost buckling beneath him. His heart was pounding hard in his chest, and his neck was throbbing badly. He tried to force himself to be calm; to face what had to be done.

"I am sorry that I have not been able to come before," she said breathlessly, leaning forwards towards him, her knees nearly brushing his. "Poppy wouldn't let me get up for bloody ages, and I had to convince my parents and Ron that I was perfectly capable of walking down two corridors to see you on my own." She looked about the room, her eyes resting for a moment on the open parchment of exercise diagrams that he had banished to the end of the bed.

He thought he saw her lips twitch. Then she looked at him again, her face settling into a more serious expression. He readied himself.

She leaned forward, putting her hand on top of his, curling her fingers around his fist and pressing down. "I missed you," she said quietly. "Thank you for rescuing me from that place."

He nodded stiffly, not knowing how to reply. He had expected recriminations and anger and could not believe that she did not hate him for what he had done. He tried to move his hand out from under hers, but she tightened her grip.

"Are you *comfortable* in those?" she asked, indicating his clothes with a little flick of her fingers.

"Perfectly," he lied and raised his head as if daring her to contradict him.

Hermione raised an eyebrow and rocked her head slightly on one side, a small smile once again twisting the corner of her mouth. "It's just... You don't look like *you* in those clothes any more. I liked you in your less formal robes when we went to the dinner party, remember? Doesn't that collar hurt your neck?" she asked, leaning forward, her other hand raised towards his jaw line.

Snape flinched and scowled. "This is me, foolish woman." His voice was rough and sore. "There is nothing else."

Her hand froze in mid air, and she frowned. "Are you alright, Severus?" she asked, her voice suddenly tentative. "How much do you remember?"

"Nothing," he said flatly. "There is nothing to remember. I was in a coma, after all."

Her eyes narrowed, and she gave him another one of her thoughtful stares as if she were gauging his response. She took in his stiff and uncomfortable clothes, his defensive posture, and then her attention was drawn to the wand and key on his bedside table. "Harry's been here, hasn't he?" she asked quietly. "And I bet that he threatened you and told you to get out."

He did not answer, but he felt his traitorous body begin to flush in response.

"Well, I remember everything," she insisted firmly. "Conviva, Restitutus, Marcella... the smell of the streets, the sound of the eruption. How terrifying it was. Sabazios and the Manticore. You and me."

"There is no 'you and me', Hermione. It was a dream. An illusion," he said, his voice barely a whisper.

"It felt real to me," she said quietly, stubbornly.

He pressed on, not looking at her, hating himself but knowing that this needed to be said better now than later, when his heart surely would not survive the destruction. "Of course it was not real! I *used you* in order to survive. Everything else is in your imagination. What do you remember... tender words? Caresses?" he spat the words at her as if they were distasteful to him. "You were enchanted, Hermione, ensnared by the... the *thing* I put inside you. Well, now that has gone, and even if we are still feeling some... regard... for one another, it would be less painful if we were to stop now than wait for the emotion to fade, as it surely will." He waited for her to respond, flexing his fingers underneath the hand that still covered his, not wanting to look up at her.

A few seconds passed, and then she sighed tiredly and withdrew her hand.

He darted a look across at her.

She was fumbling awkwardly at the buttons around her neck, and he watched in horror, thinking that she was taking her gown off and what was going to happen then? His heart was hammering so loudly he feared that she might actually *hear* it.

She dragged the little Daum perfume bottle up from around her neck and offered it to him. "I took this when you were... after... anyway I know that it's yours... It was your mother's. My mum had it in her handbag from the hospital in Italy where they found me. You should have it back," she said.

He stared at her for a long time. "No," he said eventually, although his voice came out as barely a whisper. "No. It is yours. You must keep it."

"Because you gave it to me," she said. "Back *then*. You gave it to me to look after for you."

"Yes."

"To keep you safe."

"Yes." He cleared his throat.

"And I did. We kept each other safe." Her voice had taken on a husky tone. Her fingers tightened on the little bottle in her hand. He saw her knuckles whiten. She leaned forwards towards him, raising her other hand as if to touch him.

He stiffened, his chin rising defensively. "You have an unusual definition of the term 'safe', Miss Granger," he bit out. "I nearly *killed* you."

"But you didn't," she argued quietly.

He could not let her continue. Back in the real world, *here*, among her friends and relatives, his deficiencies were painfully clear for all to see. "I am not the man for you, Miss Granger no matter what you... imagine is in your heart," he insisted, fighting the rise of bitterness in his throat at how he now appeared. The image of Potter popped into his mind's eye that odd look the young man had worn as he had returned Severus's meagre belongings to him. An ambivalent hero once safely dead, now suddenly comes to life... how *fucking inconvenient*.

"I think I should be the judge of what is in my heart, Severus," she replied with more of that insufferable certainty which made his chest constrict and his insides squirm.

*The fantasy has bitten deeply*, he thought. *What have I done?* He had to say something to break this dreadful delusion that she had genuine feelings for him.

He tried a different tack. "You are making an assumption, Miss Granger," he purred, forcing his voice to keep its mocking tone, glad that he had forced himself into the costume that was strangling him it made it easier to play the turncoat Death Eater, the predatory old professor.

Hermione's expression shifted immediately: he had set her a challenge. Her eyes narrowed and her head cocked slightly on one side. He clearly was not intimidating her... far from it, indeed.

He let the silence grow between them for a few moments before he curled his lip in a sneer and hissed, "Dark magic is beguiling, Miss Granger. You have precious little experience of it. You are assuming that you can *trust* what you *feel*. I assure you, that is not the case."

"After all..." He bent his head towards her, his face contorted with vivid condescension. "You could not possibly feel anything like... that... for..." he indicated his wretched self with a flourish of his thin fingers, "...*this*."

She didn't answer him.

He could not think of anything more to say. He stared at her, transfixed, waiting for her reaction.

Her expression did not alter for a number of seconds, but then he saw her features clear and her face soften. Instead of a stinging rebuke or a frightened withdrawal, Snape watched, his nerves strained almost to snapping point, as she slowly lifted her free hand and advanced it towards him, as if she was trying to gentle a distraught Thestral.

Her hand came closer and closer to his throat, and he thought he should stop her, but when her fingers brushed the stiff fabric away from his neck, he almost whimpered with relief. Her touch was a balm to him and yet, at the same time, seemed to set his senses on fire with prickles of energy.

Slowly, she moved closer still. "Foolish man," she whispered. "You'll rub your neck raw like that..." Gently, she began to push the black woollen fabric further away from his skin. "I hated him for what he did to you, but Dumbledore told Harry something significant once," she said softly, easing her fingers under his jacket, pushing it further away from the damaged skin on his neck. She placed her other hand gently on one of the fabric buttons at the front of his jacket. "Just because it's happening in your head *doesn't mean it isn't real*," she emphasised softly, her face inches from his.

The jacket fell open under her hands, the buttons shucking themselves clear of their anchors. His breath caught sharply in his chest, but he could not move, mesmerised by her calm touch. She licked her lips, and he found himself fascinated by the action. He swallowed thickly, leaning forward to help her remove the heavy and restrictive jacket, pulling his arms clear of the sleeves and replacing them on the arms of the chair because he did not know where else to put them. He could feel the susurration of her breath on his lips as their faces came even closer to each other.

"It happened, Severus," she continued. "We shared that experience. I got to know you. The *real* you. Brave. True. Strong. I don't want to lose that, and I don't plan on losing it either. Everyone has to work on relationships, Severus. Even the strongest love only lasts if you nurture it. I don't know whether I still have a piece of you inside me, or if the Horcrux made me start to love you. Frankly, I don't care. Right now, I want you and none other, and that's the truth of the matter. I remember *everything*, and so do you. That's our *reality*."

He couldn't speak. He felt the truth of her words, their resonance and weight. Slowly, he could feel a burning sensation begin to unfold in his chest. *Is this what hope feels like?* he thought suddenly to himself, surprised and intrigued by the unfamiliar sensation.

Her hand traced over his collarbone, back and forth with the lightest of touches, her face drawing closer and closer to his. She was shaking slightly with the effort of moving so slowly, but he could not move, could not stop her. She brought her hands up to his face and shoulder, resting one gently against the sharp bone of his clavicle and running the other through the fine strands of his hair, over the curl of his ear, around the base of his skull.

"And so is *this*..." He felt the faint brush of her breath on his face, saw her hesitate for a moment as if asking for his permission, but before he could cudgel his brain into making any suitable response, to push her away, her lips met his.

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*Oh, love... I hope that this works* she thought, pressing her lips tentatively against his.

Almost immediately his mouth gentled beneath hers, and his hands shook slightly as they grasped her hips and guided her as she climbed awkwardly onto his lap, knees digging into the corners of the chair seat. Her thin hospital gown rode up her thighs, and she could feel the harsh rub of the horrible, woollen trousers chafe the insides of her thighs as she settled more comfortably on his lap, exploring his mouth with her tongue and running her fingers through his hair.

Severus growled into her mouth, tightening his grip on her hips. He was moving against her now, kissing her back with a fierce passion that sent waves of thrilling intensity pulsing through her. Without thinking, she began to grind her hips into his pelvis, delighting at the increasing pressure that she felt as she pressed her body closer to him there.

He moaned again and broke away from her for a moment, taking frantic gasping breaths before reaching for her lips once again. His hands fumbled underneath her gown, pushing upwards along her flanks and spine, hot and needy as he caressed her skin. One hand found and cupped her breast, and she whimpered, tilting her head backwards and exposing her throat to his eager lips and teeth.

The spell that had opened the buttons of his jacket had done the same for his shirt.

He was so thin, thinner than she remembered from her time in Pompeii, even thinner than her memories of him at school. His pale flesh was stretched cruelly over the bones of his face and body like the taut skin of a drum.

She ran her fingers slowly across his chest and ribs, then down to the concave of his belly, feeling how his skin puckered and shifted at her touch. When her fingertips returned to his shoulder she could feel the heat of his body rising through his shirt, dampening his hair at the collar.

He was breathing very heavily now, sucking great rattling whoops of air into his chest even as he kissed the column of her throat. He was also shaking badly. *Not just with*

*passion*, she realised guiltily as he emitted a frustrated growl and fell back against the leather chair back. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he fought for breath, scowling heavily.

"Severus, are... are you okay?" she panted anxiously, moving her hand down his heaving chest. His shirt was damp with sweat, and his taut skin slick with moisture. He nodded quickly, eyes tightly closed and hands firmly clutching her hips once more, but she was not convinced. "Severus?"

She gently put her hand on his forehead. It was feverish and sweaty. He was still sucking air into his chest, and she looked about her for something to help him.

Her eyes fell on the little bell by the side of his bed, but as she reached across for it, he flapped his hand at her and shook his head. "P-potion," he gasped. "On the trolley over there. Green bottle..."

She pushed herself off his thighs awkwardly and padded quickly over to the wheeled table, snatching up the only green bottle there. Her legs shook a little as she returned to him. She held the phial to his lips and watched him gulp its contents down greedily.

"I should fetch Poppy," she said, taking the bottle back out of his hand and placing it on the bedside table beside the little bell, his wand, and the Gringott's key.

"No..." He stopped her, catching her wrist again in his hand and pulling her gently towards his body until she was sitting on his lap once more. He settled back against the high leather chair back, his breathing becoming noticeably easier. Slowly, she curled up against him, resting her cheek on his bony chest and feeling the reassuring *thump... thump* of his heart against her skin. The adrenaline rush was dissipating, leaving behind hot prickles of self-consciousness. What had she been thinking? He was barely recovered, and she had practically ripped his clothes off.

"Do you feel better now?" she asked and was embarrassed by how much her voice quavered as she spoke.

The arms around her tightened, and she felt him bury his face in her hair. "Much better now," he mumbled. A few seconds passed, and then he let out a small, exhausted chuckle. "But I do not think that I am up to your level of... erm... *enthusiasm* quite yet."

"Mmmmm," she burrowed further into his shirt. "At least you've stopped trying to push me away, stubborn man."

"Obdurate woman," he retorted, but there was no heat in the words, and his arms still cradled her firmly against his chest.

She smiled, feeling an extraordinary sense of peace begin to creep through her limbs. "Obstinate man."

She heard him take a shuddering breath and release it with a faint chuckle. "Indeed," he replied. "It seems that there is no getting rid of you. *Dum anima est, spes est*"

She frowned. "*Where... there is a soul, there is hope?*"

He shrugged rather awkwardly. "I heard it somewhere," he muttered.

She made her decision. "Come on," she said, sitting up and pushing her hair out of her eyes. "Let's get you into bed."

"Hermione..."

She placed her fingers to his lips and shook her head, smiling. "Just to *sleep*, Severus. We could both do with the rest for now." She reached for his wand, feeling the same familiar quiver of recognition from it that she remembered from her dreams.

"*Engorgio*," she commanded softly and smiled in satisfaction as the narrow infirmary cot expanded under her direction.

She levered herself off his lap then, tugging him to his feet in silence, pulling the covers down, and sliding quickly beneath the sheets before she could change her mind. She turned and watched him lever off his boots and reach forward to pull his socks off, methodically balling them together and pushing them into one boot. His movements were rather stiff, and she realised that he was a little nervous.

"It's okay," she reassured him quietly, scooting backwards to make room for him in the bed and closing her eyes.

After a few moments, Hermione felt the bed dip as he gingerly settled onto the mattress, and she sighed with relief when she felt him stretch out his long limbs under the blankets beside her. His body language was still stiff and unsure however, and she felt him turn on his side away from her, drawing his knees up and wrapping his arms about his torso, tension still evident in his frame.

She rolled over, pressing herself against him, revelling in both the scratchy wool of his trousers as they rubbed the front of her thighs and calves, and the rise and fall of his ribcage under her forearm and hand. At that, she heard a soft exhalation of breath and felt him beginning to relax; his body seemed to sink further into the mattress, and the rigidity in his frame eased. She nuzzled into his hair and began to rub his chest slowly with her palm. He stretched slightly and arched his neck, shifting slightly so that he could catch hold of her massaging hand, interlacing his fingers with hers.

He rumbled a question, but she could not tell what he was asking and anyway was too tired to press him to ask it again. "Sleep now," she murmured, feeling the heavy weight of her own exhaustion pulling her into unconsciousness.

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A/N2: Severus is quoting from Cicero's Letter to Atticus, in which Cicero is, in turn, probably quoting the earlier Greek poet Theocritus. This quotation is where we get our phrase "Where there's life, there's hope" from.

## Chapter 31

*Chapter 32 of 32*

Archaeologist Hermione Granger has survived the Great War. She has a life, a career and friends who love her. She has also spent the last eleven years trying to locate something that she does not know she has lost. Could the answer to her restlessness be even further away than she thinks?

Nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards Fall/Winter 2013.



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### Chapter 31: The final chapter and its epilogue

His eyes snapped open the moment he heard the door locksnick.

Severus was instantly alert, adrenaline pumping, heart racing.

He could feel Hermione lying behind him, pressed against his back, her legs tucked behind his, her face buried in the space between his shoulders, the warmth of her breath on his skin. She was hidden from obvious view from the door by his body. He moved his right hand fleetingly back to her hip, touching its curve under his palm through the light blanket for a moment. She seemed to still instantly under his touch in her sleep.

He turned his full attention back to the door, watching it warily as it slowly cracked open, admitting a single figure backlit by light from the corridor beyond. Severus' wand slapped securely into his outstretched palm. Who the hell was it? The Auror Department? A wronged Weasley? The ghost of Voldemort? *Her mother?* His stomach clenched.

"Hello, Severus." It was Poppy's voice, calm and low. Relief washed through him. It was *Poppy* on her nightly rounds.

He told himself to settle down, but his heart still thumped loudly in his ears. *It's Poppy*, he thought firmly. *Who else would it be in the middle of the night, dullard?*

The Matron walked quickly and quietly into the room, shutting the door behind her and raising a small glowing lantern in her hand to light her way. At the sight of her, Severus was reminded absurdly of the Florence Nightingale stories his mother had read to him as a child. He watched her, unmoving as she approached him, painfully conscious and, at the same time, fiercely protective of the sleeping woman behind his back hidden by his body and the blankets that covered them both.

Poppy summoned the potions one at a time from the trolley at the end of the room, critically noting the level of contents in each bottle by holding them to the light in her other hand, then placing them on his bedside table. She spared a glance at him, flicking her eyes quickly over the wand in his hand and the expression on his face. "No need to be so concerned, Severus," she whispered in a low voice. "It's time for another round of your medications, my boy... And *no one* will get by my infirmary wards this time."

She placed the lamp carefully on the bedside table, settled into the wing-backed chair with a rustle of fabric and held out the first measure to him. Feeling a blush steal onto his cheeks at his defensive reaction towards her, Severus laid his wand down on the sheet before him and took the small bottle from her fingers. He tipped its contents into his mouth and returned the phial. Another potion followed... and another until all the concoctions had been drunk. With every bottle exchanged and its contents swallowed, Severus could feel her eyes upon him, her look calculating and evaluative. He prayed that Hermione would remain quiet and still behind him, obscured by his sharp shoulders and thin frame.

"How are you feeling *now*?" Poppy asked eventually once Severus had downed the remains of the final dose. There was something in her voice that he could not quite identify. Was it... *teasing*? Severus watched the dance of light from the little lantern play across her features and illuminate the worn patterns in her skin. He had spent more time in the castle with this one person than any other, he realised, both as a child and an adult. Aside from Albus, Poppy had been the closest thing to a friend in this place that he could remember.

He needed to answer her, but he suddenly felt completely tongue-tied. *What did Poppy mean?* He felt Hermione move slightly behind him and thought suddenly of her insanely curly hair, frizzy and untamed, fanning out on the pillow. Poppy must have seen it - seen *her* behind him in his bed. He narrowed his eyes.

"Like I never want to taste aniseed again?" he sniped snappishly, waiting for the inevitable scolding for his actions. *Well, no matter what she has to say* the churlish thought presented itself in his mind, *I'm not about to let Hermione leave*. He could feel the reassuring weight of her against his back, remembered the snuffling noises that she made in her sleep as she had snuggled closer to him. She was sleeping soundly, and he was not going to let anyone disturb her. Other thoughts began to race through his head. *And what was there to apologise for, anyway? It might look as if... as if... But we have not...* Not that he hadn't wanted to, of course; oh god, he had wanted to... *But why should we be judged, and what right does...?*

With an effort, he brought himself under control. His emotions were all over the fucking place. Poppy might not have seen anything. *Fuck it*. He was going to brazen this out. He felt his chest puff outwards and his shoulders stiffen.

After all, his wand was only inches from his grasp.

Poppy's warm, dry chuckle at once reassured *and* embarrassed him. "Oh, unruffle your feathers, Severus." The hint of irascibility in her voice reassured him further. "I have already explained to Hermione's family that she is perfectly safe and well with you and that you are *both* not to be disturbed at least until you are ready to receive... other visitors." Poppy steepled her hands under her nose and raised her eyebrows. "Now, answer the question please, or I will have to wake her up and ask *her* opinion."

She needed her sleep, and he could not bear the thought of disturbing her. "No need," he bit out quickly in a whisper. "I am... much improved." And then, because he meant it about many things, he said, "Thank you, Poppy."

The Matron huffed an acknowledgement, but her mouth curved into a smile as she raised her wand in a flourish, casting the same diagnostic spell over him that Severus recognised from the previous day. She read the numbers shimmering above him with a practiced eye and nodded. After a considered pause, she recast the spell again, and Severus knew that the new set of numbers and sigils that spun and twisted in the air above their bodies must relate to Hermione. He stared at them, trying to make sense of them, wishing that he had spent more time researching diagnostic charms.

Evidently, Poppy was happy as she dismissed the runes with a satisfied flick of her wand and smiled. "All back in the 'normal' range... for both of you," she pronounced with approval evident in her voice. He relaxed a little at her words, but then he saw that Poppy was still looking at him intently. She was sitting poised on the lip of the chair's cushion, her hands folded primly in her lap as she stared at him, her eyes as bright as a bird's in the reflected lamplight.

Severus blinked. She was trying to tell him something.

"Weasley?" He hated the rasping sound of his voice.

"Ronald has departed the castle," Poppy informed him promptly. "He has agreed to return to his Quidditch career once Hermione's mother... explained a few things to him quietly."

Severus failed to suppress a sneer at his rival's loss... But then he saw that Poppy was still looking at him intently. *Wrong question, dunderhead.* He frowned. "The Aurors?"

Poppy blew out her cheeks. "Harry and Filius have spoken to the Auror Office. Neither Hermione nor her parents wish to press any charges against you. As for your *activities* after the Dark Lord rose again..." Poppy's look had become a little haughty. "You were exonerated of all wrongdoings after Voldemort's demise, Severus, largely in part thanks to the testimony of *Mr Weasley*." There was a mild rebuke in her response.

Behind him, Hermione let out a small snorting noise in her sleep, and he felt her nestle closer into his shoulder blades. Severus stared back at Poppy, one eyebrow raised, thinking, *Mine*.

"The Ministry *does* want to speak to you, however," she added with that earlier teasing note back in her voice.

Severus's upper lip curled, and Poppy leaned forwards, her eyes dancing. "My boy, there is talk of a *re-presentation* of your Order of Merlin, and the *Prophet* is anxious for an exclusive," she whispered with evident enjoyment.

Severus reared back slightly in horror. He could feel his heart begin to beat harder in his chest. He could imagine the media circus. He had been dead for eleven years. He had no intention of becoming... a *celebrity*.

"They will be here in the morning. Filius has invited them for tea at eleven," Poppy continued blandly, seemingly ignorant of the horror her patient was experiencing at her words.

Severus set his jaw. There was no way in the seven hells of Samhain that he was going to...*wait, idiot!* What was Poppy saying now?

"... And so, I imagine that you will have a few things to plan?"

He nodded dumbly, thinking, *I am not speaking to the bloody, sodding Ministry....*

"Well, then." Poppy smiled, her features softening. "I prescribe rest, good food, and warm weather for the rest of your rehabilitation." She paused, and Severus was astonished to see the normally reserved Mediwitch waggle her eyebrows at him. "And the exercises on that sheet of parchment, of course...."

He knew that his jaw had dropped slightly at that comment because she laughed at him. Poppy reached forwards as she pushed herself to her feet and squeezed his shoulder gently as a farewell.

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As he settled back into the pillow, his mind still racing with thoughts about how he was going to avoid the Ministry minions in the morning, he felt a small hand snake its way around his ribcage and an insistent leg insinuate itself between his knees.

"Has she gone?" Hermione's quiet, sleep-roughened voice ticked his ear. She kissed its shell delicately and he shivered.

He smiled in the darkness. "Were you awake for all of that?"

"Naturally."

"Good."

"And you're recovered? No more potions?"

"Seemingly not."

"Good."

She wriggled against him, and her finger began to trace a circle lightly and maddeningly around his nipple.

He caught her fingers in his hand and deliberately bit one of them at the tip, soothing the mark immediately with a rasp of his tongue and grinning as she moaned and writhed against him again.

Not to be outdone, Hermione kissed his neck and began lipping and biting a slow line down his nape and along his right shoulder. She did not seem to mind his scars or his wasted form. He closed his eyes at the pleasure of her gentle lips on his body.

Her lips moved against him, and he knew that she had summoned his wand into her hand. A quick flicking motion of her wrist, and his rough woollen trousers and underclothes vanished along with her nightshirt. He gasped at the heat of her naked flesh against his.

The discarded wand clattered unceremoniously to the floor.

"You need to do your exercises," she whispered, nipping the pale skin of his shoulder blade and trailing her hand slowly over his chest then lower across his shivering belly, tracing patterns through the fine hairs that covered his skin. Severus shuddered again at her actions, feeling a hot flush of desire begin to burn through him. He could feel himself hardening so rapidly he felt lightheaded.

"Build up your flexibility," *kiss*, "and resilience," *another kiss*, "and *stamina...*" *Bite*.

Her hand stroked the inside of his hip, around his groin, through the curly hairs around his straining erection, teasing ~~g~~*antalising*...

He felt her smile against his skin, and then *oh god, god, yes!* her small, hot hand closed slowly about his cock and squeezed it gently. Severus' hips began to make small involuntary motions beneath her hand. He closed his eyes, riding the overwhelming wave of pleasure that her fingers were bringing to him.

He moaned as he began to feel a delicious tension building in the base of his spine when she dragged her fingers again up his length, and he realised that he needed to move quickly if he wasn't going to embarrass himself.

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Hermione squealed breathlessly as she found herself suddenly thrown backwards against her pillow, and then she giggled as she felt Severus spin around in one fluid movement, rising up on trembling arms above her, heat radiating off him in pulses.

"You know... I can think of a far more pleasurable way for us to improve our fitness," Severus murmured softly, the hint of a question in the rusted silk of his voice.

She wished that she could see him, but his face was in deep shadow what ambient light there was in the room from the moon and stars was insufficient to see properly by. But then she remembered the last time they had made love in the darkness and realised that she didn't need to see him at all.

His breath was coming in heavier rasps above her, and she wondered whether he was waiting for her to do something, so she ran her hands up his sides, feeling his

flanks shiver under her touch and his back twist and arch responsively. "Oh, please, yes," she whispered, reaching up for his head and pulling him firmly down to kiss her.

"Hermione," he groaned around her lips, and she felt his hands in her hair and the hard length of his body against her own, his hips bucking slightly as he lay over her. She could feel the blunt end of his cock stabbing into her thigh as she kissed him again.

*Not waiting for me trying to control himself* she thought with a delicious shiver of anticipation.

He pulled away from her kiss and dragged his lips along her jaw and down her throat, muttering something that she couldn't catch but she didn't need to because her higher brain functions were shutting down and he was now suckling on her left nipple and she didn't know that her nipple was that sensitive and connected to all the other erogenous zones in her body and now he was rubbing his stubbled cheek along her belly and she was rising up against him and he was growling, "Stay *still*, woman, *or*..." and pushing her back again and his hand was slipping on her sweat-slicked chest and then he was holding her thighs with his hands and his tongue was licking and swirling and pushing and *Oh, good god, was that his teeth?* and she was spinning and crying and shouting and screaming and fisting both hands in his oily hair, feeling the blades of it slipping through her fingers as he moved again and again against her sweet spot with his fabulous, talented, magnificent, incredible, astonishing...

And then he was on her, catching her quickly in a thorough kiss that tasted of salt and musk, want and need. She still had her fingers fisted tightly in his hair, and she could feel how badly he was trembling as he tried to move slowly into position between her legs, the heat of his cock and heavy balls sliding deliciously over her thigh as he carefully manoeuvred himself into position. She shifted her hips and wiggled underneath him until he was cradled between her thighs, feeling the blunt weeping head of his prick poking at her folds, seeking its place. It knocked roughly against her sensitised clitoris, and they both cried out, Hermione throwing her head back, exposing her throat to his teeth.

"Oh god, I love this, I love you," she babbled, clawing her fingers hard into the spare flesh of his shoulders.

"Yes, I... *both*," he moaned back, and she could feel him fumbling with shaking hands at her entrance as he tried to position himself more effectively. Then, with a whoosh of air and a strangled cry, he thrust forwards into her body, burying himself deep, deep within her, his sharp hips gouging into the soft flesh of her inner thighs.

His head dropped on her shoulder, and his back arched again under her hands. For a moment, he went completely still, and then he kissed her sweaty neck at its juncture with her collarbone and began to *move*.

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Hermione twisted and bucked under him, her muscles fluttering and squeezing around him as she tried to accommodate her body to his rhythm, causing exquisite sensations to fire through his belly, up his spine and into his balls, and he knew that he would not... could not... did not stand a *chance* of... *oh, oh*...

He pushed himself higher on his hands, his hips jerking forwards and backwards with a desperate instinct as he tried to keep gasping enough air into his lungs to stay conscious while his senses were assaulted on all sides by the unbearable pleasure of fucking her.

This was better than he remembered. In his dreams, he had been out of his mind with grief and fear, lust and sorrow, *and it hadn't been real anyway*, and this was better, so much better than he remembered...

He wanted to kiss her again, to feel her tongue duelling and caressing his, to bite and snap and nip and *pinch*, but he could not bear to stop moving, shaking, pulsing, *pushing* the sensations from the tip of his cock intensifying with every rub against her yielding flesh.

He could feel her fingernails scratch across his chest as he laboured above her, catching his nipple *oh, fuck!* and then scraping slowly up and down his thin belly skin *ahh, god!* before digging into the flesh around his furiously pumping hips.

He wanted to see her and cursed the layers of darkness in the room that prevented him from doing so, but he reached for her with his mind and pushed just as his body pushed and, *oh, oh*, he was so nearly there...

Like molten lava, his orgasm began to form deep in the base of his spine, forming a core of pounding heat and light that crawled through his balls, roiling and spuming through his pelvis and towards his cock. He shook with the tension of it, his breath coming in frantic gasps as he felt his semen rising, rising, bringing with it an unbearable intensity as waves of sexual pleasure rippled and drove through his body. He felt her muscles surrounding him begin to flutter and clench, and he heard her voice rise in pitch; he was dimly aware of her nails raking his skin and her legs twisted around his body. She was chanting something, but he could not hear properly over the rushing sensation in his ears as he threw his head back and bellowed his release to the world.

He chased his orgasm to its end, his hips thrusting shallowly, his head bowed to her neck, lapping at the salty flesh there and trying to keep his arms from collapsing, feeling her relaxing slowly underneath him, her breath shallow and her fingers tracing circles down his spine.

"Oh, bloody hell," he panted against her neck. "Bloody hell," he repeated, his voice hoarse with fatigue and pleasure. He planted light kisses along her collarbone, feeling his prick wilt and wither inside her and gently disengaged, half-rolling, half-falling off her, his heart slowly returning to its normal rhythm. His head was foggy with exhaustion, and a heavenly sense of voided emptiness tingled in his bollocks. He wondered if he had ever felt quite this contented in his entire wretched, miserable life before.

There was a faint rustle then Hermione whispered, "*Lumos*," and they both blinked in the harsh wand light. Hermione rose up on her elbow over him. Her face was flushed and smiling, her eyes wide and shining. Severus stared back at her, calming his breathing, trying to force his brain into some form of rational order.

Before he could speak, she leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips, flicking her tongue playfully against his lower lip, sending shivers of renewed excitement dancing like shards of light through him. "Alright?" she murmured, her fingers stroking slowly in a line down the middle of his chest and stomach, ruffling the softer black hairs on his belly.

He snorted at the idiocy of her question, lifting his hand to wind his fingers through her beautiful, fabulous hair. "Beautiful," he muttered, amazed that he could still form actual words with his mouth. Of course he was all right, he had never felt better, ever, ever, ever. He raised a sleepy eyebrow at her. Lassitude was spreading softly throughout his body, pulling him in. "You?" he managed, and was rewarded by the best smile he had *ever, ever, ever*...

He felt her curl more closely around him, her hand flat on his belly, her chin tucked into his shoulder. She made a soft, contented sound and rubbed her cheek against his chest. "I know what we can do to avoid the Ministry," she whispered. He could feel her breath tickle across his nipple. "But I think we should get some sleep now and sort it out early in the morning."

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He had never been kissed awake before.

He opened his eyes to see Hermione's thin face, her eyes smudged and dark in his early morning vision. He deepened the kiss, coming fully awake as he felt a smooth pulse of arousal spread through his groin. She chuckled then and pulled back before he could get a proper grip on her, pushing herself away from him and standing smoothly upright.

Snape frowned. "You're wearing clothes," he said, struggling to keep from sounding too petulant. He'd had plans for the morning...

She rolled her eyes and laughed delightedly at his ill humour, plucking at the russet red robes that swirled about her. "They are rather lovely, aren't they?" she asked,

almost shy in front of him. "I asked one of the house-elves for clothes, and this is what he came up with. It reminds me of the *stola* I wore... Do you remember?" He nodded, throat dry, thinking of their companionable walk through the bustling city, of how uncomfortably aware of her beauty and desirability he had been that night, of sharing that incredible kiss outside his friends' house....

The fresh light of morning was streaming through the windows, catching the golden threads that were woven into the fine material of the robes that Hermione wore. She looked stunningly lovely, despite her thin frame and tired countenance. His lips quirked as he noticed the small purple bruise on her neck at the base of her throat. He looked forward to making more of those in the days to come. Another beat of excitement tingled through him at that prospect.

"I've asked the elf for some clothes for you, too," she continued, pulling at the sheet that covered him. "You need to get up, Severus; it's a big day today." She stared at him in obvious expectation, and he blinked as his memories from yesterday reformed in his head. *Poppy. The Ministry. Shit.*

"I'm not talking to any newspapers," he began flatly. "And the Ministry can bugger off, too."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course not! But you'd better get up if you want to avoid becoming a featured article in the *Daily Prophet*. We've got the rest of our lives to enjoy together. Poppy prescribed a holiday for your recuperation: good food, warm weather, and... ahh... *exercise*. And I know the perfect place." She tweaked the sheet impatiently with her fingers.

"Nag," he grumbled but got up anyway.

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Two hours later, Severus was sitting in a Muggle coffee shop off Charing Cross Road not one of those awful chains with teas that taste of dust and sugar and coffees that have no taste whatsoever but an old-fashioned, independent café with antique curios decorating the walls and seats that had been ripped out of old theatres, or dental surgeries, or house clearance sales. The cakes on the coffee bar were homemade, and the coffee varieties were listed on a chalk and blackboard menu with exotic names like Jabberwocky, Sidikalang, or Yirgacheffe.

He took an appreciative sip of the complex Ethiopian blend he had ordered and returned the cup back to its saucer before turning his attention back to the Sudoku puzzle before him. He shifted a little on his chair, an old theatre seat, its dark velvet upholstery fashionably shabby, and his hand fluttered briefly over the Gringotts key sitting next to the saucer on his table.

The key had opened a vault considerably richer than he had left it eleven years ago. Snape would long remember the mixture of disgruntled irritation and grudging respect that Griphook had worn after he had passed the identification procedure for access to his vault. The goblin had directed a particularly unpleasant look at Hermione, who stood beside Severus throughout, his face unaccountably set in a defensively determined expression as he had surrendered his wand and key to the bitter-faced creature.

Eventually satisfied, Griphook had lead the way grudgingly to the Snape vault and stood to one side as Severus had filled a sizeable bag with a range of coins. Severus had no idea where Hermione was imagining they would holiday... So long as it had soft linens and warm pillows, he really didn't care. He was getting increasingly used to the idea that, against all odds, he had survived and, better, that he had retained the affections of a beautiful and intelligent young woman. Snape had noticed that Griphook had not let Hermione out of his sight at any time... and that she had not needed to visit her vault at the bank either.

They had not spent too much time in Diagon Alley. He had cast a light Concealment Charm over himself to prevent others from recognising him, but he had still felt uncomfortable pushing and jostling his way along the street. It had reminded him too painfully of his Pompeian memories. He had missed the warmth of the sun, the industry of the city, the freedom of not being derided as a turncoat Death Eater. More than anything, he had realised, as Hermione had squeezed his hand in silent understanding, he missed his friends, even though they had only existed in his imagination. One sharp-faced witch had stared at him a little too long, and he had nudged Hermione to move along to The Leaky Cauldron so that they could escape the chance of detection.

*Little chance of that here*, he thought with satisfaction. Snape stretched his legs, feeling the muscles burn slightly and then relax as he did so. The bacon sandwich he had eaten earlier sat satisfyingly heavy in his stomach. He was feeling stronger; the Concealment Charm he had cast on himself had not drained him, and physically, he had coped with the walk to and from Gringotts well. He took a deep breath. Hermione had insisted on Side-Alonging him to London once the startled, but amenable, infirmiry house-elf had taken them to the school gates, but he could feel his magic was nearly at full strength again; just the faintest pull on his core reminded him that he was still recovering from serious incapacity.

He rubbed his hands idly over his new Muggle trousers (wizarding robes were a little too much, even for *this* area of London), wondering how much longer Hermione was going to be. She had left behind a note for the Ministry (he had eventually agreed that her version was more diplomatic than his draft), a thank you card for Poppy, and a letter for her parents. He understood her need to negotiate her return to the real world she had left him nursing the strong pot of coffee and the Sudoku puzzles while she made a few telephone calls to her site director in Italy.

Severus took another sip of the bitter liquid, frowning at the numbers of the puzzle. He had completed the Difficult and Extreme versions of the challenge very quickly and was now working his way through the Super Fiendish, which was proving a little trickier.

The door to the coffee shop slammed open with a crash, and the jolly *ting-a-ling* of the shop bell. Severus looked up and was startled to see Hermione bearing down on him in agitation.

"What is it?" Snape was instantly alert on his feet with wand in hand. Hermione's face was pale as if she had experienced a shock her eyes were wide and the pupils dilated, twin spots of red flared on her cheeks. She clutched at his arms, her mobile digging into his forearm painfully. Severus scanned the shop behind her. "It is the Ministry? Or the *Prophet*?" He shuddered but drew himself up to his full height. He was probably not in a fit enough state to duel for long, but he could get them enough time to get away...

"No," Hermione said, shaking her head. "It was... my boss at the dig. He was telling me about a new gravestone that has been discovered in Salerno, ancient *Salernum* a new villa site that the Italian archaeological team from the university in Naples have just started to excavate." She was shaking, he noted with concern, and he urged her to sit down in the seat that he had just vacated, sinking into the chair next to her.

"It was unearthed last week before I had my... accident." She blushed again, and her fingers travelled unbidden to her forehead.

Snape frowned. "Spit it out, woman. What's got you into such a state?"

She looked at him. "We may need to put our holiday plans on hold for a little while, Severus," she told him. "The gravestone has Conviva's and Restitutus' names on it."

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It was late afternoon by the time Hermione and Severus arrived at the dig site near to Salerno. He was well practiced at the creation of illegal Portkeys, and she knew exactly where they could travel to safely, so they created the Portkey together, her hand lying over his, the warmth of her magic flowing through his skin, caressing and enlivening him, sending delicious sensations through his body.

Now the sun was fading, the shadows were lengthening, and he was back in *Italia* with the smell of the pine trees and the cicadas chittering noisily in the darkening skies. Severus was standing close to Hermione as she explained, in her careful Italian to the youthful archaeologist at the villa site near Salerno, that she was here to see the recently discovered grave marker, that she could not wait until the following day, and that it was imperative that she and her colleague, Professor Snape, should see the find for themselves. The Italian was irritated. It was well past the hour for going home, and he was anxious to leave, but Hermione was remorseless.

Her credentials established, they were ushered through the temporary gates to the dig site, their feet scuffing on the dry soil of the path.

The villa site was on the apex of a rolling hill to the north of the city of Salerno, about an hour southeast of Napoli, with fine views over to the Mediterranean. The Italian archaeologist explained to Hermione that the local farmer had been ploughing early for his next crop and had discovered some archaeological remains and so had been obliged to report them to the local authorities. The dig was in its beginning stages but had already revealed a villa complex that was significant in both its size and the richness of the finds. Severus could feel Hermione's tension as she walked beside him. He knew that the Vettii were a famous family. Hermione explained to him that it was not known if they had survived the eruption in 79AD and, if they had, what had happened to them after that. He too could feel his heart beginning to thump more heavily in his chest as they walked quickly to a small marquee that had been erected over a patch of newly excavated ground.

Outside the tent, the young man paused, glancing longingly back at the exit of the site, and Hermione quickly assured him that she would close the gates behind them when they were ready to leave. He could leave in time for his date. Flashing a relieved smile at her, the young archaeologist walked away.

Severus followed Hermione into the tent; his nostrils immediately were assaulted by the smell of freshly turned earth, which contrasted with the sour plastic smell of the marquee. Hermione drew her wand and muttered, "*Lumos*."

A harsh light flared in the claustrophobic tent. Severus' eyes immediately fell onto the large engraved stone that had been carefully exposed in the earthen wall of a trench below their feet. The gravestone was engraved with a long Latin inscription, flanked on both sides by relief portraits of two seated individuals and one standing, two men and a woman. The inscription was etched deeply into the surface of the stone in the daggered script that was typical of most first-century AD engravers.

Hermione caught her breath, and she immediately dropped to her knees in front of the trench, lifting her wand so that she could see the details of the inscription more clearly. After a moment, she made a small frustrated noise and threw her legs over the edge of the trench, dropping down into it to kneel at the foot of the stele, her lips moving silently as she read the abbreviated Latin. After a few moments, she darted an anguished look up at Severus and reached out her hand to beckon him closer to her.

He sat down on the edge of the trench, took her hand and lowered himself gently down beside her. He squinted at the first line of the inscription in the wandlight. He could see the letters, Au VETTIUS M L CONVIVA, dug into the limestone. "It's them," he said. "It must be... But what exactly does it say?"

She looked back at the stone, running her fingers lightly over the surface of the inscription. "Do you remember your Translation Charm?" Hermione asked, her voice husky.

Severus nodded reluctantly. "But I'd rather you read it to me, Hermione," he said, placing a warm hand on her shoulder. "What does it say?"

Hermione turned back to the stone. She cleared her throat. "The 'D. M.' is an abbreviation for *Dis Manibus*, meaning 'to the kindly gods of the underworld'," she began, tracing the letters with her finger as she translated. "Umm, let me see, now... Most gravestone inscriptions are pretty formulaic.... The first line says 'Aulus Vettius Conviva, freedman of Marcus, ordered this tomb to be built for Aulus Vettius Restitutus, his brother, also known as... erm 'spica'... that's 'ear', singular... erm 'one ear, freedman also of Marcus... oh, bloody hell, it is them, Severus! It's the tomb of the Vettii do you know what a significant find this is?'" Her eyes were sparkling in the wandlight whether with tears or excitement, he couldn't tell.

"What else?" he murmured, inclining his head to indicate that she should go on.

Hermione focused again on the engraving. "Freedman also of Marcus, and also for his loyal wife, Marcella Fidelia' oh God, Severus, it's Marcella's tomb, too! But hang on..." her eyes were wide, "...we don't know the names of any wife that the Vettii brothers had. There's been no evidence before now that they were even married...."

Her voice drifted off into silence as her eyes flickered over the next set of characters. "Erm... 'Having escaped death by'... Oh shit, Severus 'Having escaped death by the aid of magic, we lived on for many years in happiness and joy, raising strong heirs and keeping safe the... erm... mysteries that we shared, resolving to pass to the future generations the secrets of how we were... *posse evadere*... erm... able to escape... the anger of Vulcan and the... erm... *quidquid est rationem artificiat*... erm... whatever is the nature of the artefact' I think I've got that right; what on earth does it mean, 'the nature of the artefact'?" Hermione frowned at the inscription, then continued. "'This is our eternal home, this is our farm, these are our orchards, this is our tomb.' That's a bit formulaic at the end, too; I've seen that before on another gravestone a bit like this... Oh, Severus... it's *them*."

Her voice trailed off into silence, and for a few seconds, Severus thought that he could hear her heartbeat as well as his own in the claustrophobic silence of the earthy trench. When he lifted his hand to outline the face of the seated woman carved in relief into the limestone tomb, he could see that it was shaking.

"Marcella..." he breathed. The woman stared out at him with an expression of calm certainty. Above her, Conviva was depicted, standing proudly behind his wife, his chin jutting out and his hand resting proprietorially on her shoulder. He re-read part of the inscription again, '*Living on for many years in happiness and joy*,' and he felt something easing in his chest a happy life, a good life and he was glad.

On the other side of the inscription, Severus could see the figure of Restitutus, one ear clearly missing, sitting in a low chair with a faint smile on his lips. Severus looked more closely. There was something dangling from the sculpture's hand on a thin string or chain.

It was too small, and the limestone too pockmarked to be sure, but despite that, Severus' hand automatically went to his throat, feeling once more for that ancient Time-Turner, the old broken thing, with sands that were fused and runes in the place of numbers... the old Time-Turner that had been passed down through his family on his mother's side for generations and which had been gifted to him reluctantly as a boy by his spiteful and unpleasant grandmother... The one he could not bring himself to throw away but had hidden in a secret compartment at the back of his punishment ledger when he had been Headmaster. He knew it was gone. It had not been in his hands when he had awoken, and Potter had not found it in his tomb.

He felt Hermione's fingers wrap themselves around his own and squeezed her hand in return.

"So, they *did* survive," she said softly. "And lived for many years." He nodded, unable to speak, almost overwhelmed by the sensation of hope and confusion warring in his mind.

"And we saved them," she whispered in wonder. "Bloody hell. Did we? I mean... Maybe I got the translation wrong...?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps," he said quietly. "Perhaps we did."

At that, he pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. Whatever had passed before, he was here now with her, and the future stretched out before him, filled with hope and love. He increased the pressure of his arms around her until he felt her laugh a little and hug him back strongly.

"Now," he said, his voice deliberately light and teasing. "What about that holiday you were promising me?"

Epilogue

He dreams.

First.

The smell of her hair, sweet and clean.

The sound of her breathing, slow and even.

Then.



The feel of her body, tucked closely against him, her hips pressed into his, her spine curled into his body, warm and vital.

He wakes slowly as he realises that she is semi-naked in his arms, that she is alive and so is he. Her hair tickles his nose and his face as he breathes in the scent of her, sweet and sweaty and somehow, unbelievably, *impossibly*, his own. He revels in the feeling of this small warm body fitted so closely to his, wondering at her persistence and her fierce determination to claim him.

Sometime in the night while she was sleeping, he pulled her to him again, enfolding her within his embrace, feeling the steady beat of her heart beneath his hand, the swell of her arse pressed into his groin, the sensation of its warm fullness against his prick sending electric impulses to his libido.

Her chest rises.

Breaks.

Stills under his hand... and falls again.

He smiles and kisses the nape of her neck softly so as not to wake her.

His bladder is aching, and he needs to get up. The alarm will soon ring, and he likes to have a fresh cup of espresso waiting for her on the balcony.

Slowly, carefully, he disentangles himself and stands. Hermione makes a small snuffling noise and rubs her cheek against the pillow, still sleeping. He watches her for a moment, marvelling at his life.

Then he pads to the front door and retrieves the morning's post, tossing the envelopes onto the kitchen table. Sunlight is streaming into the little brightly decorated room. It will be another lovely summer's day.

He visits the bathroom, showers quickly, then wanders, still naked but for the towel wrapped low about his hips no need to wear clothes in this heat back into the kitchen, lighting the stove and filling the old-fashioned percolator with fresh ground coffee and water. While he waits for the rich, bitter grounds to brew, Severus wanders over to the balcony windows, feeling the light breeze brush delightfully across his skin. Their rented apartment looks directly out over the Bay of Naples, and he can see the small fishing boats bobbing gently far below in the azure blue waters, alongside the motorboats and yachts in the harbour.

It is still too early for the first tourist boat of the day; at this time, the island is sleepy and relaxed. He pictures the old men hunching over their morning espressos in the little café on the square, chatting about the latest news, the price of olives and vinegar, or the antics of the latest starlet in the gossip magazines. He imagines the children getting ready for school, slinging their rucksacks over their shoulders and preparing to catch the bus from the station, the younger ones talking excitedly to one another, the teenagers listening to their Muggle music players, pouting quietly in the corner, flicking looks at one another to make sure they are noticed....

A flutter of wings, and a large Eurasian post owl lands with some panache on the back of one of their kitchen chairs. *Showy*, Severus thinks but unties the small bundle from its leg without comment and feeds it a treat. It emits a haughty trill and is gone in a flourish of feathers.

The percolator begins to bubble and spit on the stove, and he adjusts the heat, his eyes drawn to the post on the table. He pokes through the various letters and articles on the table. Another invitation for Hermione to speak at an academic conference, this time in Padua (he has never been to Padua)... two more orders for potion remedies (he keeps his hand in it with interesting commissions)... another letter from Potter (he pushes this one to one side with a long-suffering sigh)... a circular from the Italian Ministry for Magic (rooting out corruption at the highest level)... the latest edition of *La Migliore Pozionia!* a new potions periodical he has subscribed to recently... a Muggle postcard from Hermione's parents, who are on holiday in Corsica (almost illegible writing from Hermione's father, but she will be delighted to read it).

He picks up the potions magazine and tucks it under one arm, glancing up at the clock on the kitchen wall to check the time. He grunts. He has a few minutes. He pours a small cup of the thick, aromatic coffee and walks back onto the balcony, past the Hogwarts infirmary exercise sheet that is framed on the wall.

He sits down carefully on one of the rickety bistro chairs that she loves so much (one day it will break, and he will be insufferable about it) and begins to read the periodical.

The articles are interesting, and he knows that he will need to employ a better Translation Charm to ease his understanding of some of the more technical terms. He is midway through a fascinating discussion of the advantages of using dragon's blood to boost the efficacy of heartsborne when he feels slim arms slide down his shoulders and chest and a warm cheek press against his own.

"That's *my* coffee," he says as he sees his cup disappear behind him. It returns shortly afterwards, drained.

"Is it any good?" Hermione gestures at the journal and sits opposite him, her hair tousled and her skin pink from the shower. She is wearing a light cotton bathrobe, which give a delicious glimpse of her cleavage. He leaves it with her and gets up to fetch more coffee, returning with another cup and saucer and the percolator.

When he returns, she is no longer sitting at the little table, but standing at the edge of the balcony, staring out across the Bay toward ~~Napoli~~*Napoli*. He puts the coffee things on the table and goes to stand behind her. He understands her pensive mood.

"We are opening up a new area today in the District of the Faun," she says quietly.

He nods, slipping his arms about her, pulling her towards him, her back to his chest, and placing a kiss in her curls. In the distance, he can see the huge bulk of Vesuvius, dark and brooding, no longer the perfect cone shape that he remembers from his dreams.

She sighs. "More bodies," she says.

He kisses her again. "Yes. But you will find them," *kiss*, "and take care of them," *another kiss*, "and treat them with *respect*." He squeezes her firmly in his arms.

"Mmmmm." Her arms cross over her chest and find his arms.

"You'll bring them home." He kisses her again, feeling the familiar stirring of desire as he holds her close.

"Yes." She rolls her head slightly, giving him more access to the side of her neck.

"*Anima mea*," he murmurs and kisses her once more before they both look out across the bay, eyes narrowed against the early morning sun.

Across the Bay of Naples, he can see the mainland, the looming form of Vesuvius, dark against the pale blue of the morning sky. He pictures the city of Naples, curving around the flanks of the volcano, pressing around its foot and spreading out around the bay for miles and miles....

"How many people live in *Napoli* now?" she asks as if following his train of thought.

He tightens his hold slightly. "About five million," he said softly, understanding what she means by the question.

Hermione nods and shivers. She turns her head slightly and kisses her husband again, obviously wishing to be distracted from her thoughts.

He smiles happy to oblige and scoops her into his arms, revelling in her sinuous embrace, the feel of her warm skin... the touch of her tongue.

They will have time for more coffee later.

Far away, in the distance, a plume of smoke hangs over the mountain.

Vesuvius waits.

*FINITE INCANTATEM*

*Dies Dominica XXIV Februarius MMXIII*

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Final Author's Note

The Vettii (Conviva and Restitutus) did exist, and you can visit their house in the city today. Equally, there is evidence that the Thracian cult of Sabazios increased in popularity at around the time of the eruption in Pompeii. All other Roman characters (beyond the Emperor) are my own invention. The details of the city are as accurate as I could make them. I placed Severus' house in an area that is yet to be excavated, but it is based on a real city dwelling that has been excavated called the house of Valerius Rufus, in the south east of the city in Insula Block 6. There is no evidence of a *vivarium* at Pompeii unlike that one found in Rome near the Coliseum, but I had to put my Manticore somewhere!

If you would like to find out more, I recommend the following books and website:

The Roman World: Pompeii by Peter Connolly (Oxford University Press)

Pompeii: the Day a City was Buried by Chris and Melanie Rice (Dorling Kindersley)

Pompeii: the Living City by Alex Butterworth and Ray Laurence (Phoenix)

Pompeii: the Life of a Roman Town by Mary Beard (Profile Books)

<http://interactive.archaeology.org/pompeii/>

The British Museum is hosting an exhibition on "The Life and Death of Pompeii and Herculaneum" from 28 March - 29 September 2013, if you can get to London to see it!

I don't own JKR's world, and I am eternally grateful to have been given the opportunity to borrow her inventions for a while.

This work of fan fiction would not have been possible without beaweasely2, whose sound advice on, well, *everything*, from plotting to character development to the Potter universe itself, good humour, and strict planning rules enabled this story to get out of the blocks in the first place. Lyn\_f was with me at the beginning of this story as my first beta, and I am very grateful that she took pity on an untried writer. Clairvoyant took over when lyn\_f couldn't continue and has been with me so far. She is unbelievably kind, thoughtful, and wonderful, and what this lady doesn't know about dangling participles or compound predicates is not worth knowing! Admins rarely get a mention, and yet it is these hard working people who bring the quality of the work published here to such a high standard. Astopperindeath was my first admin, and she resisted the temptation to send me a rejection letter, even though my horrendous grammar certainly deserved it in the early days. Linlawless took over from Clairvoyant, when C became my beta, and more recently, the lovely nagandsev has shouldered the burden of my last minute changes and confused pronouns.

Magnum has created a front page for this story (thankyou!) which you can find at: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/30097663@N04/8479207612>

To those of you who read and review, you have made the process of writing more rewarding and challenging. For those of you who have been with me throughout the story, this tale really is for you. I hope that you continue to read and review the work on this site. Thank you for reading.

Final FINAL Author Update (October 2013): I have just learned that *Anima Mea* has been nominated for Best Drama/Angst in the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards (Fall/Winter 2013). Needless to say I am deeply honoured by the nomination. *AM* is in extraordinary company - please go over to the HP Fanfic Fan Poll Awards on Livejournal and take a look at all the nominees there. Thank you, Pxx