

Tree of Life - graphics heavy version

by shefa

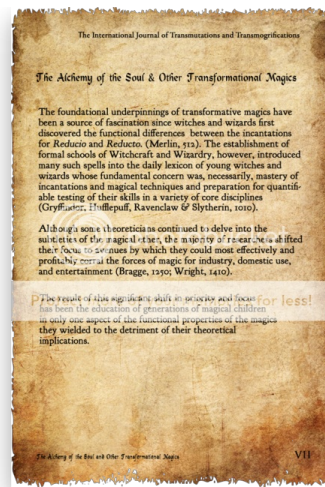
Voldemort is dead and gone, but the wizarding world bears more than the usual scars of war. Severus and Hermione find themselves in the middle of what they hope will be the solution that will keep their world from unraveling. Author's Note: This story will appear on the archive in two formats, graphics heavy and text only. The content is identical, only the formats differ.

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Chapter 1 of 6

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The first time she'd tried the transformation, she didn't honestly expect to succeed. Everybody said that it took months, or more likely, years, to accomplish. Even so, being Hermione Granger, she couldn't help but be vaguely disappointed not to be the exception that proves the rule.

It had appealed to her as an academic exercise, tackling advanced magic on her own. She needed something to distract her from the hollow ache left by too many losses and the ragged edges of threads unravelled by her own hand. There were so many loose ends dangling: schooling unfinished despite sitting for NEWTs, the end of a barely-begun relationship with Ron, and a strained, distant relationship with her parents weighed down by years of absences and half-truths and sunk by one fateful memory spell.

The early months after the war seemed surreal; the future spread out before her like a buffet of the choicest Hogwarts delicacies. For Hermione, though she'd never admit it out loud, being free to choose her path was nothing less than miraculous after the horrors they had all escaped. But when the passing months left her more muddled than focused, she told herself that she was just tired. But no matter what she tried, nothing held her attention, her restlessness only compounded by the implicit pressure to *just get on with it*. How does one get on with it after what they'd all been through, she wondered. And besides, after months of running for their lives, how could something as mundane as a job compare?

Coasting for months in the aftermath of chaos, the odd project for Weasley's Wizard Wheezes keeping her busy and paying the rent, had given her a cocoon, a place to rest. Or, if resting wasn't quite it considering that her irritability didn't ease even as the chaos around her did, at least she'd found a familiar place to perch. Now, faced with an uncertain future and nothing to focus on, being Hermione Granger was, frankly, no fun.

For the first time in her life, she longed to be somebody, *anybody*, other than herself.

And in the restless months after breaking up with Ron, drifting between the life that was and the one not yet found, Hermione wanted nothing more than the option just once in a while, when things were especially difficult or lonely to shed human form altogether. How could it be that she could transform a snuffbox into a hamster and a drinking goblet into a raven, but she couldn't turn herself into what was, supposedly, the animal essence of herself?

If the magical theory was correct, by now she should be able to easily eliminate those wretched hands and feet and exchange them for paws.

Furry paws.

And add a snout.

And shift effortlessly into a sleek body that could cut through the water without a care in the world.

Oh, for the oblivion, the mindless joy that would bring.

She could *really* use it.



It had never occurred to him that there was anyone with a greater grasp on the pulse of the wizarding world than Albus Dumbledore. And given Dumbledore's propensity for half-truths, evasions, and manipulation, he'd long ago become inured to dodging the shrapnel of randomly thrown bombshells each time his own world had begun to make a sort of malevolent sense in its own right.

In retrospect, he supposed that Dumbledore wouldn't have considered it in his own best interest or that of the "greater good" to clue Snape in on what Unspeakables actually *do*. Or what they *know*. Purveyors of knowledge and skill beyond his scope of control rarely appealed to the man who had played the wizarding world like a game of chess.

The end of the war had come at a clip reserved for what he privately referred to as "That which Severus Dreads Most". No more so than on that last night, standing before the Dark Lord, his blood running cold. He'd spent hours slipping beneath the shadows, precariously balanced on a razor's edge between the worlds he traversed; certain that the next encounter would expose his duplicity. Never in his harshest nightmares would he have predicted that the Dark Lord would dispose of him with barely the blink of a red-tinged eye, not to mention for the wrong reasons. How anticlimactic, he thought, to be deprived of his own unmasking, even in death.

His memory of *that* night, the maw of the great snake coming at him, lifeblood drenching the parched wooden floor and depleted earth below ran like a blurry scene from

someone else's life. Even the urgency of his mission, finding Potter, *telling* Potter what he must do, had since faded like an old wizarding photograph whose colour and motion had grown grey and patchy with time.

He'd spent long nights obsessing that he'd find the boy only to have his integrity and his message dismissed. Vivid dreams in those bleak nights before the end led him to consider whether, if given the option, Potter might at least have the sense to *look* even if he wouldn't listen. Memory, after all, was the purest of vessels, and one of the few bits left of him still untainted.

What would it be like, Snape wondered as he walked the hushed corridors of Hogwarts just as Dumbledore had meant him to do, to be seen as he actually was, rather than as the shrouded man whose bitterness had become so ingrained that he feared it had become cardinal truth? An ironic end for a spy, he'd thought distantly, as memory spilled from him like silver water. To end a life of hiding turned inside out.

By the time they'd found him, strangers whose urgent voices pierced the haze and whose capable hands lifted him from the dusty floor, he'd been as depleted as a vessel whose form was useless without its contents. For an interminable moment, with the chilling sensation of being moved below ground, he was convinced that the unfamiliar hands were carrying him to Hell.

He was pretty sure he belonged there.

If this was Hades, it was an odd sort. Burning pain was there, certainly. And a muffled confusion that reminded him of the deepest wells of grief. But the hands that touched him were too gentle to belong to tormenters, and the periods of agony grew shorter. The bustling that he sensed during the twilight moments between sleep and waking reminded him of lonely nights in Hogwarts hospital wing, as did the pungent smell of medicinal potions.

His first thought after opening his eyes, the light just bright enough to illuminate his cotton-swathed body, was that he must not have passed through the Veil after all. Reluctant experience with the sting of bait-and-switch meant reserving judgment; one never knew what fresh hell the gods had in store.

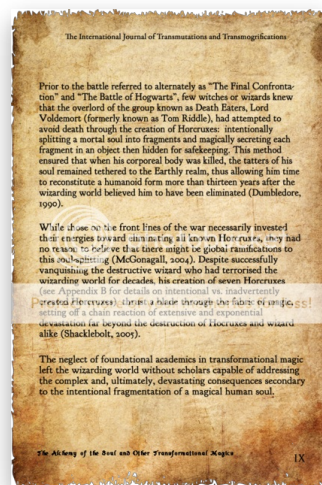
He watched them from behind hooded eyes, wondering what use they had for him. They chattered a lot but said little, and he slowly understood that his body was healing and his voice would soon return. That they were Healers had penetrated the pain and fear weeks before. That they were also Unspeakables came to him in a rush when the Healer whose confident voice had led the rescue and supervised his care invited him to sit, in a chair, no less, and ask the questions that pain and fatigue had muted. Looking around the small room at the witches and wizards whose voices had held him through his convalescence as surely as their hands, he was overcome with gratitude and a gut wrenching wish that he could have found this place, whole, healthy and ready to learn, twenty years earlier.

But of all the questions he could possibly ask, only one rose to his lips that afternoon. A whisper.

Why me?

His words exploded into the hushed room of Healers who had swept him from the cold, filthy floor of the Shrieking Shack, nursed him day and night, who had brought every ounce of their skill and compassion to bear, seeing to his survival. The effort of speaking left him shaking, worn out as he was from fear and uncertainty, terrified that he might learn he'd been saved from one inferno only to be used as kindling for another.

The mournful expressions of the witches and wizards he'd come to know, if mainly by voice and quality of touch, confused him nearly as much as their stunned silence as it wrapped around him like the shroud that he still sometimes thought he deserved.



Hermione didn't make the connection, not at first. Reflexes honed by nearly a year on the run had softened, and so the distant reports of natural disasters and violence erupting around the world didn't initially pierce her post-war haze. But as the months passed and reports of unusually violent hurricanes, earthquakes, and human-made disasters, magical and Muggle alike, flooded the news, the knot in her stomach and the dread that rose to press against her throat each morning as she scanned the paper made the harsh reality impossible to ignore.

Despite the destruction of the most evil wizard to terrorise the magical world in a generation, *something* had gone dreadfully wrong.

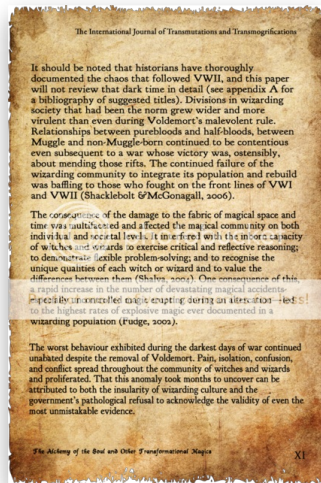
Newspapers noted the continual trail of natural disasters and violent attacks with vague indifference couched in sorrowful words. *Such awful tragedies, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis...how helpless we are in the face of nature's wrath... We grieve the terrible loss of life. With the spectre of terrorist activity hanging over us all, what is the world coming to?* They commented with distant abstraction on the rising numbers of fervently ritualistic groups whose attempts either to stave off the next catastrophe or infer causes with the fiery language of fire, brimstone, sin and retribution led to even larger waves of violence but had no apparent impact on the natural disasters continually peppering the globe. It was all so very *interesting* but had nothing whatsoever to do with them.

Hermione's discomfort grew day by day, but every effort to get her friends or even Ministry officials to take notice fell disappointingly flat. Friends and family were busy with work, studies, and rebuilding lives stolen by war. Ministry officers humoured her at first, but then stopped returning her owls. Nobody wanted to hear that there might be something more than a little odd about the apparently random disasters saturating the news. In the early hours of morning, when she lay awake in bed, worrying, she could admit that she understood their denial. Who could bear to think that Harry Potter's defeat of Lord Voldemort actually heralded the End of Days?

So, Hermione went to the only place she knew where data and research were treated with their proper respect. Three weeks in the Hogwarts library, indulgent dispensation given by her former Head of House, and five overflowing notebooks later, she was both more frightened and more determined than before. There was only one thing to do, she thought, only one place where her concerns might be treated seriously...one place that *could* address them without fear or obfuscation.

She hadn't been back to the lower levels of the Ministry for Magic since the night Sirius Black fell through the Veil, but the path to the sleek black door that marked the entry to the Department of Mysteries had the familiarity of a place oft visited, if only in memory and dreams. Something was gravely wrong, something *unspeakable*.

Someone had to say something.



If he'd had the time, he might have felt guilty for enjoying himself so much. As it was, he was far too busy to care.

Unspeakable training was rigorous, more so than even his Potions mastery. He revelled in it, absorbing new disciplines with an eagerness he'd not felt since, well, ever. What a pleasure it was, he thought, to be free to learn without fear; for his achievements to serve no nefarious purpose, and to be given leave to leap into his studies with abandon. It took months for the reflexive flinch and glance over his shoulder to fade whenever a supervisor or colleague entered the room. Decades of vigilance softened ever so slightly as Severus settled into the first unequivocally scholarly setting he'd ever experienced.

His fellow Unspeakables were a varied lot: deeply involved in work that crossed disciplines, theoretical and practical; seeking out one another for scholarly discourse or assistance and the occasional shared meal. He knew some of them from his own schooling; others he'd taught. His reputation and natural reserve set him apart, as did the inescapable reality that some of them had pulled him from his old life and near-death.

He understood now, from his vantage point inside the department, that they had watched him for years, tracking the convoluted steps of his journey with instruments designed to monitor the ebb and flow of the hearts that held the soul of the wizarding world in their hands.

For now, his only task was to steep himself in the mystery that was magic and to wait for the project that would be his to find him. He wasn't in any hurry at all.



Accustomed as she was to having to fight her way through the forests of indifference and ignorance, Hermione was astonished to not only be invited in when she knocked on the door to the Department of Mysteries, but also to be asked to pull up a chair and stay for tea. If she hadn't known better, she would have said they'd been waiting for her.

Notwithstanding the stonewalling she'd received from department heads at the Ministry, she was, apparently, not alone in her worry about the sudden increase in disasters around the globe. But the war had wrought little change on the monolithic bureaucracy that had long specialised in denying even perhaps, especially what was standing right before its eyes.

Happily, the Department of Mysteries had a wholly different approach to crises and dilemmas, even those of the international variety. Any witch or wizard skilled and persistent enough to uncover a problem of such magnitude and who also managed to find the hidden door to the Department without the aid of the specialised Portkey used to ferry their infrequent visitors was someone they most assuredly wanted to enlist.

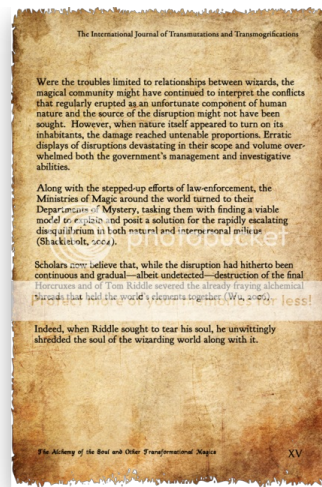
Hermione, delighted to be recruited, considered the matter closed once she'd had a look at their library. Without a second thought, she gave up the keys to the lonely flat she'd been renting in London and moved into chambers provided for trainees and those working on Special Projects.

Here, she thought, was a stellar example of on-the-job training. She was used to this. She'd made her way through Hogwarts with the same mix of regular class work and covert, vital research. It was an unanticipated pleasure to have her observations taken seriously and to no longer be alone in asking questions until the answers made some sense.

It wasn't that she was surrounded by other Unspeakables or trainees, she thought. In point of fact, she'd met hardly anyone apart from her instructors and staff who would wander through her training area now and again, looking for a book or muttering about choppy magical flux and flow. It was an unusually designed space for an unusual department. Laid out in embedded rings, peppered with nooks and crannies for teams to set up dedicated research space in proximity to whichever room or instruments they needed, it provided a delicate balance of solitude and support.

Reassured that the Department was already aware of what had come to be referred to simply as the anomalies, she threw herself into her training, delighting in the pleasures of unobstructed research and intensive lessons about the underpinnings of the wizarding world. And if she thought her introduction to Diagon Alley and Hogwarts had been filled with surprises, it was nothing to the briefings on wizarding history, culture, and magical management that made Hermione wonder if the decision to keep Professor Binns teaching was rather more than simply expedient.

By the time Hermione walked into the cavernous meeting hall, surrounded for the first time by the entire staff of the Department of Mysteries, she had encountered enough shocking revelations and unsettling bombshells buried in the bedrock of the wizarding world that the sight of the black hair and sharp features of Severus Snape bent over a book, oblivious to the noisy milling-about of his co-workers, caused her virtually no surprise at all.



He sat in the meeting room long past the time the others had gone. The thick sheaf of parchment dangled from his hand, unopened. What was the point, he thought. All the manoeuvring, years risking his life, his sanity; risking *everything* to try to save them all. And *for what*?

"Professor Snape?" The tentative voice broke through his rumination. Here it comes, he thought. First would be the inevitable questions about his survival, and then a pathetic attempt at half-baked thanks. Or, if he were really lucky, he'd be treated to a snide remark and not-so-thinly-veiled contempt for what others, *insane others*, thought of as his safety under the Dark Lord's protection...*had they not heard the accounts of what was obviously his near death*. While they and their families were in mortal danger.

Whoever it was, maybe she'd just leave if he refused to look up.

The movement he spotted out of the corner of his eye didn't bode well. She was moving closer.

"Professor"

"Yes," he growled. "I was at one time, for a gruesomely *long* time, Professor Snape." He was gratified by her gasp, and wondered if he could force the cracked stone beneath his feet to crumble if he glared at it hard enough.

"Yes, well, class time was gruesome all around, as I recall," her voice, sharper now, replied. "I'm sure it was all just awful for you, it certainly looked that way. I was there for most of it, remember? And I wasn't having all that much fun, myself." The sharp voice had devolved into a bit of a huff.

Class time... just awful? There for most... He lifted his head abruptly.

"Oh, hell," he muttered.

"Not yet," she said grimly.

"Perhaps not," he grunted. "But we are, it seems, well on our way." Everything about his bearing, his shuttered expression, his crossed arms, all of it, he thought, ought to make it clear as day that she should go now. How much more blunt must he be for her to leave him to his desolation?

"So what, you're just going to give up?"

It was as if she had slapped him. Who did she think she was...this child whose exploits at Hogwarts had given him nothing more than another moving target to try to protect during some of the most tumultuous years of his life?

"How dare you?" he hissed. He stood and looked her in the eye. She was startled, and he hardly noticed her eyes brimming with tears. "You were there for *most* of it, were you?" he mocked. "Such an arrogant little girl, you are. You were there for the blink of an eye, Miss Granger." His heart was hammering and he struggled to regain his composure. "I have been laying my life on the line attempting to salvage something, anything from the darkest hell you can imagine since the time you were a *toddler* trying to master the art of *standing* without *wobbling*."

Her gasp punctuated his tirade, and her tear-stained face stopped it cold. As irritated as he was by her presumption and her expectation, his days of intentionally provoking Gryffindors to the point of tears were long over. He turned away again, sitting silently on the hard wooden chair. She could stamp off to lick her wounds and, if there was any mercy in the world, leave him to the torture of his own.

Lost in thought, her soft voice startled him.

"Don't you want to know what's in that packet you're ignoring?" she asked.

He closed his eyes wearily. It was, of course, too much to hope that *therewould* be some mercy in the world...how quickly he'd forgotten. Years under Dumbledore's thumb, decades managing one pushy, insensitive Gryffindor only to be saddled with another.

"I know what's in the packet, Granger," he muttered. "It contains what is probably a nonsensical and entirely useless report submitted by some flunky in one of the roughly three-hundred Departments of Mystery abroad. It is my assignment for the indeterminate future...a future whose outlook is, apparently, deteriorating by the day, and it names the unfortunate partner with whom I am expected to *collaborate* on this obviously doomed project."

"It's me, Snape. You're supposed to collaborate with *me*." She was waving her packet in front of him, as if he might miss it otherwise. "We've been assigned to investigate the findings of Master Wu from China. So, if you think I'm prepared to let you sit here and sulk while I do all the work, you're sadly mistaken. Even if you *are* a war hero and I did think you were dead... for years," she added, almost to herself.

"I see that your level of respect for your former Professor hasn't changed a whit, Miss Granger. Such appalling disregard for a man you thought you saw *differentially* in the war. Tut, tut." He wasn't sure why he was goading her, but he felt reckless at the sight of the young woman who he remembered with both grinding irritation and bottomless envy. And if that weren't enough, the last time she had seen him, he'd been in a particularly compromising position. That sort of thing did tend to make him tetchy.

"Respect? I gave you nothing but respect, *Professor*," she said. "Even after..." Her voice caught. "Look, I'm sorry about what I said earlier. You're right, of course. The time I've spent fighting in this war has been nothing compared to yours. It's just... I knew that things were more complicated than they seemed even then... you know, when you

left Hogwarts. There *always* seems to be more to the story, Professor, as there obviously is now."

"Yes, there's *more* to the story, Granger," he rasped. " Everything we did, every moment of horror we lived through, *none* of it matters. Potter killed the Dark Lord, but that malevolent bastard had already killed us all." He stood, agitated.

"No, don't say that," she insisted. "It's not over yet. At least we have something to work on. Everyone on the outside is just sitting there, waiting for the disaster that's going to knock down their house or blow up their families."

He stopped and turned to look at her, at her defiant, determined face, hauntingly familiar, but no longer the girl whose voice and hair and *certainty* had filled his classroom. Hermione Granger had grown up. The silence that cloaked the room proved just how much. He cleared his throat, the tutor in him unwilling to simply walk away.

"I'd only just begun to consider that it might not be folly to hope for a somewhat benign future, Miss Granger." He swallowed thickly. "I expect that this should be a lesson to trust my first assessment."

"If that's the case, Professor," she whispered, "what do you have to lose?"

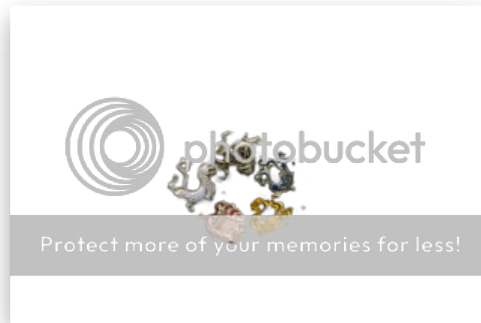
Pushing, pushing, and relentlessly wanting more. They never understood. The knowledge bore down on him, crushing in its weight, his truth slipping nearly silently into the space between them.

"Until you permit yourself to want something with every cell of your body, Miss Granger, you have nothing to lose. What is loss or fear to one who has no hope?"

Her sharp gasp was less gratifying than he'd expected. He met her eyes, tear-reddened but determined. He recognised the tenacity of youth in her expression and a fierce hopefulness that he remembered from his own days spent scheming to overturn evil from within. What could she possibly know about hope and loss?

But he remained there, standing with her, only the soft sounds of their breathing filling the cavernous space. Her tears fell quietly, as if intuiting how easily he could plummet into the abyss of despair that lay just beyond. He wouldn't look at her. He didn't want to know her, nor what pained her so deeply.

At last, with only the slightest pursing of his lips to indicate that he'd made a decision, he broke the thick wax seal, unfurling pages of parchment inscribed with fear, uncertainty and the barest blush of possibility.



The Department of Mysteries unfurls its labyrinthine coils far beneath the city streets. Chambers tumble over one another, indifferent to the laws of Muggle physics and geometry. Even the Unspeakables who work and even, sometimes, live there don't know all their secrets, though certain rooms are inexplicably imbued with legendary status.

One such chamber gained its reputation by virtue of its unwavering inaccessibility. Its door remains firmly locked and has for decades been the subject of perpetual speculation. Like a parlour game for bored Unspeakables, they guess what lies beyond the sleek black door. Did it contain baby Dementors? Perhaps it held creatures so dark that they could not be released into the open air? Albus Dumbledore liked to hint, in his typically enigmatic way, that the room contained nothing more terrible than Love.

But, they argue, if that were so, whyever would he have insisted that it remain perpetually locked?

Endless gratitude to my beta readers: AnnieTalbot, Juniperus, and Somigliana. There would be no story without you, ladies.

Disclaimer: Not mine, just here to play.

2

Chapter 2 of 6

Voldemort is dead and gone, but the wizarding world bears more than the usual scars of war. Severus and Hermione find themselves in the middle of what they hope will be the solution that will keep their world from unraveling. Author's Note: This story will appear on the archive in two formats, graphics heavy and text only. The content is identical, only the formats differ.

The bloom, Hermione thought, was most definitely off the rose.

Whatever fantasies she might have once harboured about the supposed joys of freedom to do research without being nagged to "get out once in a while and have some fun," had undoubtedly been crushed by the stacks of useless documents obscuring her work table. She was bored to tears and bloody frustrated. If she had to do one more pointless reference search, she thought, pushing her papers aside to glare at the wizard across the room, she was certain to go mad.

Years in his classroom monitoring volatile cauldrons and dodging dicey spells had left her with a reflexive compliance to what had always been his exacting requirements.

And as Snape couldn't seem to help but slip back into the teacher role, and Hermione was still training herself not to flinch when he leaned over to peruse her notes, they might well be making their way through the books in the library, but they were getting nowhere in terms of their fundamental objective. None of their reading or calculations was bringing them one jot closer to determining the source of the world-wide disruption or generating a solution that would stop the escalating disasters in their tracks.

And anyway, she thought, he wasn't meant to be her supervisor; they were supposed to be *partners*. Not that you could tell from how he bullied his way in and took charge--*instructing* her in the ways of research and process. He had probably never worked with a partner, she grumbled to herself. If he had done, she wondered where he'd buried the body.

The sigh that escaped her sounded suspiciously like a groan of exasperation.

"What is it now, Granger?" Snape muttered from behind the tower of books on his worktable.

"This is ridiculous," she said.

"Ridiculous?" he echoed, his head still buried in a large volume with a binding that looked awfully like Hippogriff skin.

"We're not getting anywhere by staying in here," she said. "And no clever remarks about me and libraries." She glared at him, snickering from behind his book. "For Merlin's sake," she snapped, "would you put that down?"

He raised an eyebrow and looked up as his book struck the tabletop with a soft *thump*. He didn't exactly look eager to listen, she thought, but at least he wasn't flinging insults. If she were honest, she'd have to admit that while he'd been impossible to engage as a colleague, he'd not been rude or hurtful towards her. In fact, apart from being unbearably bossy, mordantly sarcastic, and more than smart enough to keep her on her toes, the man across from her now bore only slight resemblance to the sharp-tongued wizard she'd known at Hogwarts.

Even his physical appearance had changed. No longer gaunt and grey, his features had softened just enough to emphasise chiselled cheekbones and a sharp jaw line. His black hair still looked slick, but he wore it pulled back these days, though wisps often slipped from the queue that held it. She'd become irksomely fascinated by those tendrils of hair, delicate bits of him escaping confinement--briefly liberated until he'd push them into place when they dared disrupt his concentration.

She wondered how his year as Headmaster at Hogwarts or his near death had changed him. Merlin knew that her months on the run had altered her in ways she'd not appreciated until long after the war. Her experience at Malfoy Manor had shaken her more profoundly than any of the other times her life had been at risk, shaken her more than she'd let on; she supposed that Snape's near death by snake hadn't been the first time his life had been in danger, directly or not. She couldn't imagine what that must have been like--day after day, month after month.

It wasn't as if she'd ever know, she thought. He'd not given her leave to broach any but the most superficial conversation over the last few weeks. Instead, he adopted a variation of his Professorial stance and attacked the dossier they had been assigned with a tight-lipped, single-minded focus.

It was not only frustrating; it was getting them nowhere. Hermione had imagined that in Snape, she would finally find a research partner with whom she could wrestle difficult ideas until they came into focus. No more coddling a lab or project partner and doing all the work, or so she'd hoped. Working with someone for whom scholarly process was valued would be a dream.

If only he would talk *with* her instead of *at* her. She wished he would trust her to follow her own train of thought, to present her tentative hypotheses and conclusions. Instead, he set out the path just as he would in the classroom, expecting her to follow his lead and dismissing her efforts to engage in more collaborative dialogue. If that approach were gleaned results, she thought, she might consider swallowing her pride and continue on without speaking up. But as they hit dead-end after dead-end, Hermione couldn't stay silent despite Snape's tendency to dismiss her and return to his own line of study. Still, the reports from the outside mounted, worsening by the day. She couldn't sit back and let him continue to direct a program that had them wandering in circles.

She had, in short, had enough.

"We need to get out of here," she said.

"And where, precisely, do you propose we go, Miss Granger?" His arms were crossed, challenge in his eyes.

"This is hardly news to you," she snapped. "I've said for ages now that we should visit the node that Master Wu examined. None of this bibliographical research is getting us anywhere. I think we need to do a site investigation."

"What makes you think there's anything there to inspect, Granger?" he asked. "Wu went to the closest Ley lines to Hogwarts and proceeded to act entirely... insane."

"Who said he was insane? The written report sounds--odd, I'll give you that," she said. "But isn't it a bit strange that nobody thought to include a Pensieve memory of his examination?" she added. "Didn't the other teams get memories along with their field reports?"

Snape sifted through a pile of parchments on his left, pausing to scan a thick packet. "The other teams don't have field reports to peruse," he said. "It would seem that the other dossiers are primarily theoretical. Ours is the only one that includes description of a trip outside a library or Ministry office."

Hermione felt her heartbeat accelerate. "Give me that--" She reached for the parchments. Now both his eyebrows were raised as he dangled the packet out of reach, and she wondered why he felt it necessary to treat her like a child. "Please--may I see the list of leads the others are following?" He smirked, handing over the pages. She snatched it from his hand. "If you ever do that again, Snape," she murmured, "I'll certainly make you sorry you did."

"Is that right?" he murmured.

She glanced at him, startled, and flushed at the gleam in his eye. *He enjoyed that...?*

"Indeed." Their eyes met for a moment, the colour warming her cheeks before she tore her gaze away to stare blankly at the pages.

Dammit, Hermione. Focus.

She forced her eyes down to the parchment, distractedly reading the list of hypotheses other teams of Unspeakables were investigating. "Unreasonably speculative, wildly unlikely, just... absurd," she muttered as she willed her heartbeat to slow and the blood to leave her cheeks "What a bloody waste of time," she said. "This was the best they could come up with?"

"It's not as if what we've got is any better, Granger," he retorted.

"Isn't that what I just said? That's why we have to get out of here."

"And again, I ask...for what purpose, precisely?"

"I don't know for what purpose, Snape. But we're getting nowhere in here, and it wouldn't hurt to get out, clear our minds a bit."

He was silent and she braced for the biting remark that would dismiss her and return them to the fruitless meandering that had occupied them for weeks. Instead, he pursed his lips and huffed shortly.

"Fine, Granger. Let's go." He smirked at her gobsmacked expression and she scowled.

"Let's go," she agreed. "To Wilmington. To the Oracle."



The figure was stunning. More than two hundred feet tall, carved into the slope of the brilliantly green hill, the outline of the gigantic man stood with staves in each hand planted firmly in the ground.

They Apparated into a grove across the valley facing the hill, the white outline of the ancient man brilliant in the midday sun. The air was still nippy, but the promise of spring was clear in the light and the tentative blooms. Snape could feel the earth's vibration through the soles of his feet and the song of the figure calling to him, beckoning him closer.

She was right.

"Are those wands?" she whispered. He felt her sway as she stood alongside him and reached his hand out to steady her.

"I should say so," he breathed. He didn't move to release her arm, and its warmth grounded him as he adjusted to the power of the current.

They made their way towards the figure carved into the rock, the energy flow growing more focused, sharper, as they approached. At the bottom of the hill, they sat, as if at the feet of the giant.

"Will you read the account again?" Snape murmured, loath to shatter the aura that cloaked the hillside.

Hermione retrieved the oft-read parchment from her bag. It wasn't much, he thought, but the sparse report was all they had to start with. But as the page unrolled, it began to shake. If paper were sentient, he realised, he would have believed it excited to be unfurling in the open air of this place. Black ink rose from the page in a swirl, a chain of letters, words taking new shape, until a shallow bowl lay motionless on the grass between them. The runes etched along its border and the mists churning in the basin were achingly familiar.

"A Pensieve," she gasped.

"Not of a sort I've ever encountered," he muttered. But visual and magical examination of the bowl revealed it to be just as it seemed: A Pensieve basin for display of one specific memory. A rarity.

"How do we activate it?" she asked.

"Don't know," he replied.

As if this were permission to charge forward like an unwary Erumpent, she reached for it--*impulsive, reckless, Gryffindor*...--and he leaned forward to grasp it as well--*who knows what traps could still be lurking there*...--steadying the bowl while keeping a sharp eye on her for evidence of cloaked jinxes or curses.

He so *hated* when she was right.

Their touch set the mist to purposeful motion, and the misty figure of a man rose from the vapour.

An elderly wizard, walking stick in hand, stands at the edge of the giant. He doesn't speak at all, only walks around the site, periodically crouching to bring his hands into contact with the soil.

He looks pained, his brow furrowed, he shakes his head and sighs. He traces the outline of the enormous man with measured steps, stopping periodically to kneel on the ground, once laying his cheek against the soft grass, his eyes closed.

At the top of the figure, he bows and walks forward through what appears to be an enchanted gate. The air shimmers as he passes but he doesn't pause, marking his steps until he reaches the belly of the giant. There he sits where there would be a navel, if this were a man instead of a portal.

The old wizard, Master Wu, sits cross-legged, arms open, eyes closed. He appears to be meditating. His breathing grows shallow and without warning, his body appears to melt--no, he shifts into animal form--not into just one shape, but into a series of half-forms that flash by too quickly to identify. There are furred creatures, scaled ones, feathered... again and again until, abruptly, he regains human form.

His nods like a man who has been given a terrible task, as if he is listening to a voice whose message pains him. His body is shaking--from the exertion? No... Not from exertion.

Hands buried in the earth, head bowed to his chest, Master Wu is crying.

The image hung in the air--a suspended, frozen memory. The elderly wizard had entered the massive figure, tapping into the node itself and its portal to the magical currents that ran deep beneath the earth. It seemed, Severus thought, if his supposition was correct, that Master Wu had been given instruction by something--someone, from within the magical enclosure.

What, in Merlin's name, are we getting ourselves into?

"We should go in," Hermione whispered. "We have to go..."

He nodded, wishing for once for a bit less cunning, and a bit more bluster. Cunning had only ever got him tangled in other wizards' intrigue, anyhow. She was beside him in an instant, thankfully interrupting his rumination, and they scaled the incline, pushing against the wall of energy that rose in the chalky border of the giant. As they neared the boundary separating them from the source of the power, he raised both hands--the energies felt like an invisible wall. Hermione watched and did the same.

It was like touching a wand that had distinctly *not* chosen you in Ollivander's shop, he thought. And which was showing a rather violent distaste for your touch.

Unlike the wands, though, the magic flowing along the boundary line wasn't rejecting him--them, he amended. It was just--ragged. Instinct pushed him into the frayed current, at first meeting resistance and then...

--tumbling onto the grass, Hermione fallen upslope slightly, inside the pulsating boundary.

It was no wonder Master Wu didn't speak, Snape thought. He, himself, could barely move. Later, he'd not remember making his way to the belly of the giant, only that Hermione was already there, eyes closed, sitting cross-legged with her fingers threaded through the tall grasses. Facing her, he adopted her pose, trying to remember how to meditate. Restless thoughts soon caught the rhythm of Hermione's breathing; his slowed to match hers as the minutes passed. Gradually, his mind stilled, rocking in the current of the magic flowing around them, above, and below.

He could see it more clearly now. The streams weren't random currents of magic. They were distinct, each with a tone and texture of its own. Every one a strain of unique melody--or what was formerly melody, he realised abruptly. What once must have been like a symphony was discordant, notes colliding into one another instead of blending in harmony; rhythms grown irregular and staccato where once they had been smooth, legato.

Each song held its own tragedy, rhythms broken with malice--shredded by the vicious magics of a wizard intent only on dominance. Wrapped in the tenor of the magic, Snape felt each jagged cry, gasping with pain as the building blocks of their world showed him their injury.

Indeed, Riddle had torn them to shreds as surely as he'd done his own soul. And despite knowing this for months now, until this moment, it hadn't touched him, not like this haunting, soulful howl of despair. The pain felt so *old*, he thought. As if the songs had begun to splinter long ago. He was flooded with an awareness of it and its fear and chaos distracted him. Notes spilled over one another as if panicked, their sharp edges drawing blood.

Here was the key to the cacophony that had risen to cloak the world. The elements themselves were in shreds; unstable, depleted and unable to balance themselves.

He could sink into despair here, he thought, his own hopelessness finding purchase in the shards of sound. But another melodic thread was there too, its strains growing stronger even as Snape mourned alongside the spirits he'd hoped to save. It sang to him and he felt its rising voice, its determined insistence that however broken, they would find the means to heal the torn soul of their world. He reached for it; he could hardly help himself. The touch of its magic to his was a balm, a surge of hope in an ocean of fear. Like a lullaby.

Soon, it was only the strains of that melody--*hers*--he recognised with a start--that held him, only her. How had he worked so many months alongside her without actually hearing her voice? The crystalline tones softened his armour, and he gave himself over to the resonant sound and the warmth that suffused him. It felt like being given a vital ingredient he hadn't noticed was missing, blending and balancing with components long familiar.

Emerging together from the heart of the earth, he savoured the connection between them, if only for this moment. He opened his eyes and she was there, and he saw that she also felt the alchemical streams of magic combining and the agony of elements unjustly fragmented.

The broken heart of the world. And his own, too.

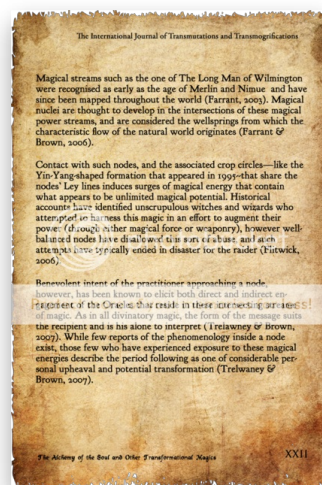
The bond shimmered in the air, singing its need. No compulsion, this. Sensitive to coercive magic, Severus welcomed the sensation. This was a gift not oft received, and he would treat it with the reverence it deserved.

She leaned towards him, her body a whisper away. Every cell of him screamed to bridge the space between them, to stroke her with hands and lips and breath as surely as he had her magic. But the echoes of fraying song pulled him back; memories of broken promises a knot in his gut. Who knew what damage he could do to her, and to the gossamer bond shimmering between them, were he to permit himself to have this and allow their magics to blend.

He couldn't do it, not to her. No matter how much he wanted to wrap himself in her magic, to hold her close until he could remember how it felt to be unbroken. It was only the power of her magic, he thought, and the tenacious soul beneath that might put this right. But the melodies that had scarcely carried him through endless days of fear and pain had worn too thin. Only the sharp edges of his mind remained, and an endurance that he'd built over decades.

One more moment, just one to hold on to and then he would go. They'd learned what they needed--they could untangle the rest back at the Ministry. Later, after he'd tucked his memory of her into some sacred, hidden corner, and she would be safe from the razor's edge he had never learned to blunt. Despite his resolve, he almost reached for her still, but pulled himself away wearing the most austere expression he could summon. With a mumbled word of parting--something sufficiently distant, he hoped--he rose to cross beyond the shimmering magic of the node on trembling legs.

He would do no harm. That was the best he could hope for.



The library was bitingly cold, no matter how much she stoked the hearth.

Wrapped in layers of clothing, wool blanket around her shoulders, Hermione curled on the library couch, a slender book, *Gifts of the Animagi*, doing little more than keeping her hands from totally stiffening in the cold.

What rubbish.

The weeks since their visit to the Oracle had been awkward. Even now, she couldn't understand how she could emerge from the node with such energy and clarity of purpose, while he had chosen to turn and walk away. Had she misinterpreted the meaning of his magic, raw and reaching for her, and the absolute *rightness* and renewed strength that filled her when their magics had blended?

At the time, she thought, she'd been so sure of what the Oracle had shown her. But now her memories of that morning were only an uncertain guide.

Once through the enchanted barrier, she'd ridden the heavy air to the giant's centre, positioning herself cross-legged to wait. Her eyes had closed as she dug her hands into the lush grass. The rhythms of the elements tumbled, in free-fall, their centre, shattered. She'd felt the ribbons of magic, let them carry her as they flowed like coarse rivers of smoke. She'd nearly missed it when they began to change, so caught up was she in their ethereal dance.

The translucent currents swirling in the cradle of the earth resembled refugees from early Transfiguration classes. Ghostlike creatures--wounded and frantic in their need to find and hold their shapes. Instead, they had become ragged streams of water and light without a centre.

She'd never felt such pain. Not even in the worst days of the war. Not even when she felt nothing but the sharp point of a knife at her throat and then the searing of the Cruciatus. No, this wasn't just her pain; it was the crippled heartbeat of a world.

He had to be there somewhere, where had he gone? She didn't think she could bear more of it alone. The currents and their shapes, they must be the key, she thought. Though how, she couldn't say. He found her first, his spirit a burst of magic like a cry in the night when she reached for him. The echoes of what he'd felt clanged in the ether when their magics twined together. *Sound?* Maybe he didn't see the mists, she thought. Could he see the creatures struggling to take shape? Did *he* understand what the ethereal animals needed them to know?

As the surge of their magic found one another, the tumultuous currents gentled. The creatures of mist sighed in relief. And then, the voice of an old man, weary, cut through the white noise of flowing magic. She couldn't speak--only sink into the rhythmic movement of the magic, like rolling waves finally at peace after a storm.

As a ring with neither beginning nor end, there is no Yin without Yang, no dark without light--day without night. Heal the broken vessels; reunite shards scattered in the winds. Fur and fin, scale and mail, feather and flesh circle until the fire time when Heaven and Earth heal in the unity of cauldron and fire.

Saturated by the energy of the currents, the Oracle's words ringing in her ears, she surfaced from the pool of interlocking energies. He was there, looking as stunned and overwhelmed as she. The link between them was palpable now, a shimmering, vital energy that had not been evident before. It felt... not new. Not old, it just... was. Like something ever-present but overlooked. And alongside this recognition was another as well. A dormant flame had relit inside of her--a long-neglected ember, stoked and warming her again. She'd not noticed its absence--how absurd, how blind.

She looked at Snape, his hair fallen loose from its tie, wind-reddened face lending him an unaccustomed aura of health. Had she been blind to the power of those eyes, she wondered. What had kept her from sinking into the liquid velvet of his voice or from reaching for the steely edge of his intellect when she was too tangled in thought? She thirsted for him. How had she not noticed that she was parched?

She had to touch him, to whisper her new knowledge into his skin, to remember the calming rush of equilibrium when their magics blended. He was silent but for ragged breathing barely audible in the wind. Even with eyes shut, she could feel his body singing to her, calling her to move closer, to affirm their link and anchor the magics.

The pull was overwhelming; she knew better than to succumb completely, they should understand it before allowing whatever *this* was to so utterly draw them in. And yet, would it hurt to touch her hands to his just for a moment? She gasped as he looked at her--hunger and adoration in equal measure radiated from him. His breathing was shallow now, and his eyes dilated... he seemed frozen, and so was she, waiting, hoping for him to confirm what she knew. Leaning towards him, her heartbeat raced in response to the whisper of motion as he moved at last.

She shivered, remembering, just as she had on the hillside that morning months before. The same wizard whose magic had ignited a flame in her that she'd feared permanently extinguished, whose eyes had pored over her like a treasure lost but never forgotten, had risen from the lush ground as if eager to leave a bad job behind.

Speechless, she watched him stand and walk back through the enchanted border without a glance in her direction. Shocked, she was helpless to respond as he nodded curtly at the boundary line, saying only, "I believe we are done here, Miss Granger."

It had been hours before she could bring herself to follow.

She hadn't cried since that day when her tears had fallen unchecked, absorbed by the earth whose own injury made hers feel insignificant by comparison. But she often felt the rushing feeling that presaged tears, pushing it back ruthlessly every time. They had a job to do, and she'd be damned if she'd let that man derail her work.

Weeks passed, and the experience of that day lay heavy and unspoken between them. Hermione might have thought it a particularly vivid dream but for their discussions confirming that Master Wu had, in their opinion, indeed pinpointed the source of the magical disruption. They debated the relevance of the partial Animagus forms he had taken and the misty animal shapes Hermione witnessed struggling in the magical current. They analysed the esoteric words of the Oracle, but the tension between them made it difficult to explore its possible connotations. They couldn't begin to address the fact that Wu had transformed into what Hermione surmised were the animal shapes she saw struggling to form beneath the surface. Isolated from the outside and from one another, they spun in circles.

The concrete evidence of what Voldemort had broken gave them little insight as to how to repair it. Escalating news from the outside, after a day or two of inexplicable calm, along with their own unspoken need splintered them, too...Snape absorbed in researching Chinese philosophy and literature in an attempt to discern what the Oracle meant; she, attempting the transformation that had stymied her since the days after her break with Ron. One never knew, she thought. Maybe if she could achieve the animagus transformation, though it would be merely a fraction of Master Wu's feat at the node, the Oracle's words might make more sense.

Their days were filled with research, in library and lab, and practice--primarily, Hermione reflected, alone. She became increasingly frustrated and intermittently frantic as the weeks passed without any progress making the Animagus shift. At least in Transfiguration class her snuffboxes had had tails even when she'd just been a beginner.

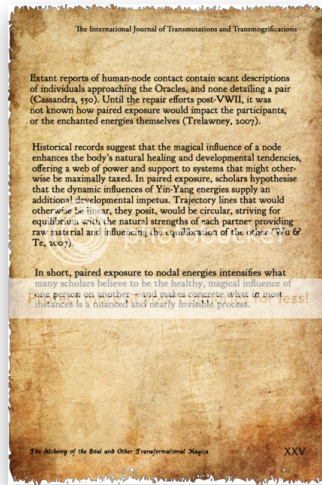
Snape, on the other hand, grew calmer, even eerily serene as time went by. Maybe she should take a turn with his materials and he could try to liberate *this* animal self from confinement, she thought with a snort, earning a quizzical look from the wizard. They'd never spoken of it, but they shared an implicit understanding that for him, changing into a doe would be a last resort.

Maybe it was a side effect of his newfound calm, or perhaps something about the new "evidence" he began to insist she read, but in recent days, Snape had begun to suggest, and then insist, that the reasons for her difficulty making the shift lay in her isolation. Despite their working partnership, she acknowledged, they went about their tasks in relative solitude. Hermione, for her part, couldn't bear to work more closely with him and resisted his newfound desire for proximity. But her irritability only escalated as she continually failed to achieve the transformation, and her temper grew shorter and more unpredictable as the weeks passed.

But why she should also be freezing cold despite the summer air outside, she wondered as she pulled the blanket more closely around her, was a mystery. Right after their trip to the Oracle, she'd been so hot. But the fire that had warmed her in the node seemed to have burned out--only sharp sparks popping now and again to remind her. Perhaps a trip somewhere warmer and wetter was in order. How could she be expected to transform into her Otter form in a cold, dry stone room? Was it any wonder she'd had no success at all?

Hermione bounded to her feet, blanket discarded on the sofa. Without a glance at Severus...whose head was buried, as usual, inside some book that was too big to be

allowed, even by her generous standards--she flounced from the room. Honestly, he probably wouldn't even notice she'd gone.



Dark eyes followed her from behind an illuminated copy of *the Ching*, and he smiled. His research was yielding good results, though she was still resistant to hearing him out. The labyrinth of philosophy and theory that he'd been studying was, at long last, making a shadowy sort of sense.

At the very least, he thought, it gave him a yen to get out of the library and take a stroll outside.

Lakes were nice this time of year. Perhaps he'd take a walk near one of his old favourites.

3

Chapter 3 of 6

Voldemort is dead and gone, but the wizarding world bears more than the usual scars of war. Severus and Hermione find themselves in the middle of what they hope will be the solution that will keep their world from unraveling. Author's Note: This story will appear on the archive in two formats, graphics heavy and text only. The content is identical, only the formats differ.

The powerful summer sun beat down, heedless of the young woman standing on the banks of the muddy water.

In the heat of the day, especially in the oppressive heat of a day like *this* one, even the murky depths of the Hogwarts Lake might do as a place to cool off. But the witch standing with arms crossed and brow furrowed wasn't interested in a cold swim, nor the rising temperature, or even the putrid smell of the shoreline's stagnant water.

Instead, her attention was focused intently on the fact of her feet. Perfectly ordinary, utterly human, covered in altogether regular skin, hanging about-or, more accurately- standing about, firm in their refusal to be anything *but* feet.

"Bollocks," she muttered, wincing as a petulant kick brought her bare toe into collision with a moss-covered rock.

"Charming," drawled a deep voice. Only her stiffening neck signalled displeasure at his unwelcome appearance.

"Who asked you, Snape?" she snapped, barely glancing at him over her shoulder. "I would think you had more important things to do than watch me--" She pushed over the mossy stone with a slightly bruised foot.

Fail.

Again.

"Oh, but it's ever so entertaining, Granger." He snickered. "Your pig-headed insistence on doing this alone despite reams of evidence--"

"Considering that it's you who's provided most of the so-called evidence," she huffed, "you'll forgive me if I don't jump for joy at the prospect of putting myself in what I'm sure are your vastly *superior* hands while attempting a human to animal transformation."

"*Attempting* does appear to be the operative word, now, doesn't it?"

She whirled to face him, cheeks burning.

"You're one to talk. How about you make an attempt?" She narrowed her eyes, snorting in disgust at his silence. "No? Not keen to feel your Patronus wrought solid? Well then, it would seem I have *no choice* but to go at it alone

He raised an eyebrow. "Considering that we're still not certain that achieving the Animagus transformation is even relevant to the anomalies, I'd rather avoid the... indignity, if it's all the same to you."

For a trice, it looked as if his indignity, and indeed, eradicating some of his presumably highly-treasured equipment would cheer her quite a bit. But the image perked her up only briefly before her expression crumpled into a moue of frustration. Like a burst balloon, air rushed from her with a sigh as she collapsed onto the brittle grass.

"It shouldn't be this complicated, and I *hate* that I can't figure out what's wrong," she grumbled.

He stepped closer still. Was he *trying* to loom over her or did being irritating come naturally?

"You're blocking my light, Snape," she grumbled, but his eyes held her fast.

"Your suffering is heartbreaking," he said. "However, it is also immaterial. I'm meant to be your *partner* on this project, Granger."

"Partner? Is that how you would describe your behaviour, of late?" Her voice was shrill, and she cursed the hot tears rising to choke her. "If you'd quit being so bloody difficult, maybe we could make some progress," she muttered. If he'd been difficult to work with before their visit to the node, he was simply *impossible*, now.

"It's what we are, Granger." He glared at her, pointedly ignoring her outburst. "Like it or not." The summer air crackled around them and she wrenched her gaze away. She'd not risk sinking into those bottomless eyes, and she didn't think she could bear it if he turned away first.

She scrambled to her feet. "Then I suppose I should get back to work and figure out why I can't manage a transformation that three fifth-years figured out. With no help."

"Granger." The sharp edge of his voice cut. "You are being intentionally obstinate."

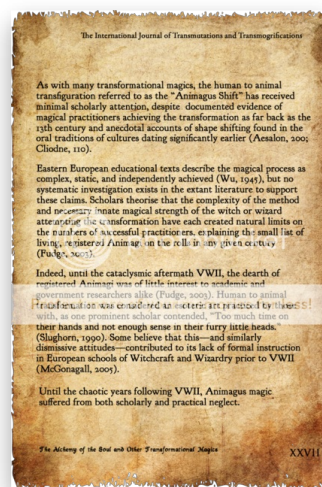
"Am not."

He scowled, and she wondered when she'd become as belligerent and difficult as he.

"Delightful. You've progressed from toddlerhood to adolescence. My *favourite*."

Despite herself, her lips twitched, and she reached sullenly for the battered shoe he held between them.

Partners, indeed.



The cool air of their underground library chilled her skin, flushed after the heat of the lake and the frustration of another failed transformation attempt. He had some nerve following her, she thought. Why he thought Legilimency would increase her potential for success, she couldn't understand. And since he'd been less than convincing, supposed evidence aside, she had no intention of letting him get anywhere near her thoughts--not when memories and dreams of him lurked in their nooks and crannies.

She glanced around their shared workspace. The roomful of tables stacked with books and flashing Arithmantic calculations in process gave the bustling appearance of important work in progress. *More like an illusion*. It was, nonetheless, a fine space for escape when frustrated, Hermione thought as she dropped the battered Portkey onto the nearest table. She turned towards a pile of half-finished Arithmancy equations, moving as fast as she could without actually appearing to run away. There was plenty to do that required her undivided attention.

Perfect.

"Wait just a moment, Granger." Snape's tone brooked no disagreement. She ought to have known, she sighed.

"Why? There's nothing to discuss. I'm quite clearly incapable of making the transformation." She couldn't prevent the quiver in her voice.

"Stop. Right. There." He spoke sharply. "You will sit down and discuss this at once instead of running from me like a child."

"I'm not," she muttered.

"Then explain to me why it is that every time I mention collaborative magic for achieving the Animagus transformation, you scurry about, looking for an escape hatch? He pinned her with his glare.

Hermione squirmed.

"I just don't believe it's necessary." She refused to meet his eyes. "I'm fairly certain that Potter, Pettigrew and Black didn't use Legilimency while they were working their Animagus transformations."

"That's irrelevant. We're involved in something entirely different and you know it. Three Gryffindor fifth-years had nothing complicating their simple minds that interfered with making the shift. They were so blasted sure of themselves, arrogantly convinced that their places in the world were perfectly laid out for them, that with enough practice, they succeeded."

"Are you implying that I'm not sufficiently confident to accomplish this myself?"

"No, Granger," he growled as he made his way to where she stood in the shadow of the laboratory door. "I'm suggesting that you are far too *complex* to easily make the shift without a partner to focus and anchor you."

She could feel the warmth of his body as he drew near, and she shivered. The tilt of his lips told her that he noticed, and she held her breath as he closed the gap between them. "What I want to know... Hermione--" The velvet of his voice lingered on the nuances of her name. "--is what you are so desperate to keep me from seeing inside your mind."



He savoured the flavour of her name on his tongue. Years of practice using his voice and intonation to dramatic effect in the classroom made it natural to caress her with the rich sound. It was a small luxury, he admitted, an intimacy that he might escape with to warm him in the cold silence of the night, alone in his bed.

What are you so desperate to keep me from seeing, Hermione?

"I'm not desperate." But her voice was small, and he'd had far too much experience slipping between the shadows not to know that she was hiding.

He was closer to her now than he'd been since their morning on the node months before, and he felt her shiver. It wasn't hard to interpret her avoidance these long months. He'd done what he could to make it easier for her, to relieve her of the weight of the longing he could barely contain. He wouldn't have her living with unspoken worry that he desired more than she wanted to give. Walking away without burdening her with the irrational and misplaced heart of Severus Snape was the best he could do.

He had, he'd believed, no other choice. Memories of the day at the Oracle had sustained him thus far, and he'd spent weeks studiously avoiding any contact with her that might stir the sleeping dragon inside him. He wasn't convinced he could endure what he knew would only be her horror and disgust were she to see the tidal wave of yearning the node had uncovered.

But now, months after delving into the elemental currents with her, the materials he had been studying left him wondering if perhaps they'd overlooked something important. The concepts he was tackling in the manuscripts were unfamiliar, and he didn't yet feel the mastery that would allow him to apply them with confidence. But they couldn't afford to overlook anything, even a tentative possibility, not when the fate of the wizarding world was wound up in the tasks they were set.

It was only the inkling of an idea, he acknowledged to himself. Pondering the amorphous alchemy of materials set off only in their interactions, and the memory of the overwhelming power of his magic intertwined with Hermione's when they'd reached for one another in the earth's currents--these were his tentative landmarks in this unmarked territory.

It also didn't hurt that over the last few weeks, there'd been an inexplicable loosening of the fear that had lay coiled in his gut for longer than he could remember. He grew more peaceful about what had once been, what he had lost, and the unknowns facing him next. He was ready, he was hopeful. But he hadn't wanted to push her until he was more confident in his theory, but this might be his only chance. If she'd let him near enough, if she'd agree.

Besides, an opportunity to be so tantalisingly close to her was one he could not pass up.

She was skittish, and before she could slip away from him again, he brought his hand to stroke her jaw. He took a sharp breath at the white heat stirring his blood, touch stoking the unfamiliar fire in his body. One look at her flushed face and he knew. *She feels it too*, he thought, his heart hammering. Her breathing grew shallow, and he could barely remember what he needed to do.

He whispered, "Let me," just as she leaned her flushed cheek into the curve of his hand.

She brought heavily lidded eyes to meet his, guards down for the first time in months. He saw a flicker of wariness, but it faded and then...

It felt like a door opening, a release of warm air, and a cascade of images rained down on them both.

There he was, focused on a tricky equation, sooty hair tied back to reveal the proud lines of his profile, the determined set of his jaw. Here, absorbed in his reading, and there, bursting with energy as he tested an idea with mortar and pestle and the raw power of his hands and materials.

He lingered, breathless, over the memories she'd secreted away and felt a glorious flood of hope, like the watering of seeds that he'd long believed too dry and desiccated to take root.

Not sure what he sought, he was nonetheless certain when it appeared.

Tucked behind a wall of craggy rock, blue sky caressed a mirrored lake. On the rocky shore lay a tarnished cauldron, parched and empty. Next to it sat shards of driftwood split by the sharp edge of a silver axe. Between the two, brown eyes wide with indecision, stood a small, white tiger.

Snape hesitated as he stood on the shore, stagnant air heavy around him. He had the uncanny sensation of having been here before, but that couldn't be, not inside her mind. He looked at the cub as she watched him with lazy familiarity. After a long moment, she arched her back into a languorous stretch, as if loosening her sinuous body after a long sleep.

All at once, a bone-deep understanding of what he must do washed over him. Raising his hand towards the water, he revelled in the visceral connection between the flow inside of him and the shimmering lake.

It wasn't only the water that he sensed. He could hear the cauldron singing in his blood. Its austerity and stoicism were painfully familiar as it lay, abandoned, its value too often defined only by what it held. But he would bring it what it needed; now he could. The most important part of the cauldron, after all, was the hollow space within. A wave of his hand righted the cauldron and filled it with the clear water until it spilled over to wet the rocks below.

The cub watched the parched rocks grow slick with the overflow of water. A few steps forward brought her to the cauldron, the sweet water a blessed gift. And as the tiger bent her graceful head to drink, Snape could feel Hermione's body fill with an energy that he only now noticed had been scarce. Through the filter of her mind, he felt the liquid stretch of her muscle and sinew; the shifting of bone and tendon as her body seemed to melt.

And transform.

Into a sleek, white tiger cub.



Hermione-the-cub stood at the feet of the tall man, paws scrabbling for purchase on the slippery stone floor.

Cold.

The Hermione mind in its tiger body dimly registered the fact that she had transformed, that she was cold, and that a source of delicious heat was directly in front of her. A niggling detail tugged at the human inside the tiger like a piece of yarn that might be fun to chase, but she couldn't be bothered when her paws felt like ice. Instead, she scooted forward, sliding a bit, and rubbed her furry face against the black form in front of her.

Mmmmm... Warmmmm.

The Hermione mind in the tiger body took note that, apparently, tigers purred.

It also took note of the sensual power of the hands that reached down to scoop her up. It was okay to let the hands lift her, they wouldn't let her fall. The sinuous hands stroked her, ruffling her crystal-white fur and sending her into rapturous bliss. There was a warm mouth murmuring something into her ear, puffs of breath sending tingles through her blood.

She could focus only on the rhythm behind words she could scarcely understand; but Hermione-the-tiger recognised melody and so she hummed along, bringing her body in line with his, lying against his chest, her soft head tucked under his chin. She shivered at the deep vibration in his chest and nestled closer, enjoying the sensation of his lips against her silky fur. It had taken such a long time to get unstuck, and she was so very tired.

Yes. You purrrrrr.

Now he was moving, she thought distantly; his gait brisk, and she sleepily thought that he must be full-grown, a confident tiger.

No, not a tiger.

He was a *wizard*.

She was a tiger.

Wait, no, she wasn't a tiger, she was a witch, but *now* she was a tiger.

Agitated, she twisted in his hands.

But the long fingers stroked her and he was making the most lovely soothing noises and murmured something that might have been, "Stop thinking," before she finally fell asleep, nestled in his embrace.



She woke, disoriented, in his arms.

Distractedly, she noticed that she had arms now, too.

Transformed back, then.

With a jolt, she noted their position, sprawled together on the library couch, her

body pressed against him; his arms wrapped firmly around her even as he slept. She wrestled with the battle now raging inside of her. She'd not soon forget nights spent dreaming of being in precisely this position, and gifted now with these moments, she'd prefer not to waste them. So many weeks of distance--initiated by him but, she admitted, perpetuated by her even after he made overtures to repair the hurt he must have known he'd caused.

She sighed and ran her hand along Snape's shoulder, eager fingers stroking a lock of hair that had escaped the queue that usually held it away from his face.

He'd broken through, she thought ruefully, and he was right. Despite her resistance, he'd persisted. The wizard who held her close even in his sleep hardly resembled the one who left her alone to piece together the wreckage of a magical connection and power she'd believed a treasure belonging to them both. She wondered what had wrought the changes in him over these long, lonely weeks, and what else she might have missed from behind her fortress walls.

Silent moments passed, and she dozed again. And then, from the twilight of half sleep, she felt him reach for her, felt his hands cradling her head and the touch of his mouth to hers, searching, tentative, and then exploding with unleashed need.

Maybe she was dreaming again, she thought fuzzily, as his fingers tangled in her hair. She lost herself to his kiss; his lips, ravenous, insistent as he devoured her and filled

her at once. Her body swam with desire, hot in her belly, melting at the touch of his hands and the sound of his voice as his moan of pleasure took shape.

"Hermione," he rasped. The longing in his voice shot through her in a way even his passion could not, pulling her from sleep and shattering what little remained of her detachment.

It felt like a dam collapsing, the weight of restrained sorrow at once unchecked; her body shook as months of unshed tears flooded her, spilling over at last.

His arms were still around her, she realised, and she had the confusing impression that he was trying to soothe her. His hands stroking her hair, whispers of words she could barely understand, and she felt momentarily calm again, just as she had as a tiger in his arms.

Animals, he can comfort; humans baffle him.

"I'm all right," she murmured, embarrassed, trying half-heartedly to move from the circle of his arms. "Don't concern yourself with me, I'm fine." She struggled to regain control of her emotions but couldn't free herself from his grasp. "Please let me--" she whispered.

"Wait, Hermione," his voice was rough, but he released his grip on her. "I'm sorry--" She was confused by the anguish in his tone.

"Sorry for what? For kissing me?" The edges of her words curled with acid, and he flinched.

"For kissing--"

"Never mind. I know the drill."

"The--What?" He rubbed his eyes, confusion evident in his voice. "Don't walk away, Hermione."

She shook her head, but her voice was lodged in her throat.

"Please..." She saw what that one word cost him and paused. He brought tentative fingertips to her lips--still tingling from the pressure of his mouth on hers. Her throat tightened at the naked longing in his eyes. "Would you deny... this?"

"You did." The words burst from her of their own volition.

"I did what?"

"You denied it, you walked away as if I... as if what we'd ... what we experienced at the node was nothing special, that the whole thing was some silly field trip you agreed to in order to humour me," she said tightly.

He hadn't made a move to respond, and she rushed on before she lost her courage.

"I know that you didn't touch me then, didn't kiss me," she faltered. "But you might as well have done, the way it felt. To me at least," she whispered. The tears hadn't stopped flowing. They were like a river of their own and having been set free, would not easily be contained.

"I..." he hesitated, a look of abject shock on his face. "Nothing special?" he echoed.

She snorted. "I believe we are done here, Miss Granger," she echoed, his words of that morning still slicing through her like a hot knife.

He flushed, and she again moved to rise from the chaise and make what she hoped would be a dignified exit.

"Hermione, wait," he said. "Please."

Perhaps it was the pain in his voice, or possibly the fact that his body burned with heat that she never felt from him even in the rare moments when they'd worked side-by-side. It called to her, a siren's song to fall back into his embrace and be warm again. She waited for him to continue, struggling to keep from sinking into the pull of his body and the memory of his fingers tangled in her hair.

"I thought it was the enchantment of the node--" he said quickly, not meeting her eyes. "It frankly never occurred to me that--" He gestured to her, to him, mutely tracing the invisible bond that she'd felt since that day. "--that *this* was anything more than a magically induced illusion. My illusion." He looked up and gently wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I thought that my... desire for you was my thrice damned heart wanting--*again*--what it could never have.

His admission hung in the air between them and she held it to her, gingerly, as if it might shatter if she gazed at it for too long. And then she saw his need, his rising fear, and found words again.

"It didn't feel like an illusion to me." She caught his eye, and he watched her warily. "Feeling you--your magic--that day was like finding something that I didn't know I'd lost. When we both came back to ourselves, before..." Her voice hitched and she closed her eyes, struggling to regain her footing. "I felt as happy, and whole, and *alive* as I'd ever felt." She opened her eyes once more. "And then you just... left," she said flatly. And fell silent.

The weight of memory enveloped her again and she wondered if it might be merciful this time and bury her entirely. If she sank into the ground, giving herself up to the earth as an offering, perhaps he would let her go. Absorbed in thought, she almost missed the sound of his voice, low and deliberate.

"I have been known... that is to say, it must be acknowledged--" He paused to clear his throat. "--that I have--" He peered at her from under his eyelashes. "--under extreme duress, of course... been known to use rather... poor judgment." He looked up. "At times."

She gaped at him for a moment, untangling what he'd said. But the pressure in her head and the tingling in her chest built...

Until finally, peals of laughter burst from her, unrestrained.

"At times?" She repeated. The tears on her face ran hot with the absurdity of this, of him, *of them*.

To his credit, she thought, dizzy from laughter coursing through her, he stayed alongside her as firmly through the laughter as he had through the tears.

What sort of man utterly disregards the evidence of his own eyes and all his senses? She looked at him, his body rigid like a coil ready to spring at the slightest sign of danger. *This* man, trapped for too many years, cloaking himself beneath thick layers of darkness. Skilled as he was in subterfuge, he could still miss what was right in front of his nose.

She wasn't much better herself, she realised with a grimace. When had she started to shut herself away and suppress what used to come naturally? When had she cut herself into pieces and hidden away the most vital parts of herself?

Lost in thought, she missed the cautious smile that flashed across his face.

"Working on a stubborn knot, are you?" he murmured.

She smiled. "I am."

"Care to share the puzzle with me?" he asked, cautious.

They had shifted to sit side-by-side on the chaise, a whisper away from touching. He looked so uneasy, she thought, like a cat pushed from his perch one time too many, now wary of trusting its sanctuary. Deliberately, she took one fine-boned hand between her own, tracing the graceful lines with her fingertips. The shiver that ran through him thrilled her.

"I've just been thinking about why it is that we expect independent pieces of a puzzle to operate smoothly on their own when they were intended to work in synchrony."

He raised an eyebrow. "*That's* what you were thinking about?"

"Well," she said, blushing, "more about secrets, and fear, and isolation--" She paused,

abruptly remembering the damage caused by Dumbledore's penchant for keeping vital pieces of information to himself. The tight expression on Severus' face reminded her that he, too, had been used as a piece in a much larger game.

"Yes, well, I suppose we can both agree that sharing information is preferable to not." His tone was guarded, as if she might blow his world apart with a word.

"Indeed. And it would appear that you and I have suffered the consequences of not putting that adage into practice." She caught his eye, tension stretched taut between them.

It took only a heartbeat for him to absorb her meaning. Visibly, his body relaxed, and she could finally breathe again. Eyes glittering, he seemed to remember that he still had his hands wrapped around hers. As his thumb moved to stroke the smooth skin of her wrist, she thought that perhaps breathing was overrated.

"We have," he murmured. "So then, might you have particular empathy for the oblivious actions of a novice in the art of clear communication who misread a rather important... exam question," he said softly.

Breathless, caught in the intensity of his black eyes, it took a moment for his words to penetrate.

"Exam?" she echoed, confused for a moment.

"Yes, and a vital one, at that," he whispered. I hope that I shall have the opportunity to revise the fateful exam." His lips brushed her ear, and she shivered.

She cleared her throat, stalling. Had she ever seen Severus Snape... playful? She gasped at the sweep of his mouth on her ear, and down the sensitive line of her neck. Playful and seductive. She could work with that. If she could just concentrate...

"I do believe that revision may be appropriate here." She worked to steady her voice as she turned to bring her mouth to his jaw, brushing her lips over his beard-roughened skin--hoping against hope that she was reading him correctly. "Though I think it would be helpful to first embark on a bit of review. Better to take the requisite time to prepare before leaping in again to such a daunting exam. Don't you agree?" She held her breath. Waiting.

"Yes, indeed," he murmured. She could feel his breathing quicken in the thick silence as she sighed in relief. Her lips were soft against his neck, and she revelled in the rising power between them, the staccato of his heartbeat like a storm breaking. "I should be quite *displeased* to fail this exam... again." And this time, his voice was richer, more confident.

She smiled and nipped at his earlobe, earning a soft yelp.

"Just imagine what you could achieve with the proper tutoring," she murmured.

Of the many things she was learning about Severus Snape, Hermione thought, the various ways in which she could make him laugh might shape up to be one of her favourites.

4

Chapter 4 of 6

Voldemort is dead and gone, but the wizarding world bears more than the usual scars of war. Severus and Hermione find themselves in the middle of what they hope will be the solution that will keep their world from unraveling. Author's Note: This story will appear on the archive in two formats, graphics heavy and text only. The content is identical, only the formats differ.

For most people, Snape mused, the words, *the morning after*, probably didn't conjure the image of piles of books and what appeared to be a bottomless supply of ink. Leave it to him and Hermione to redefine the art, he smirked. To be fair, though, none of their experiences had been typical, though he'd not trade them--not that first night or any of the days that followed. And despite his usually solitary habits, the first true collaboration and companionship he'd ever experienced fit him like the warmest cloak he'd ever worn.

Hermione didn't said a word that first morning when they entered the library together, but simply enlarged his work table, appropriated the chair across from his, and took to narrating questions, dilemmas and frustrations in a steady stream of exasperated muttering and the occasional enthusiastic outburst. Snape enjoyed both her proximity and what he once would have considered her "chatter" far more than he'd have predicted, and she in turn seemed pleased to have him close by and genuinely *available* for the first time since they'd been set to work as partners. And not just for his encyclopaedic knowledge of potions or other magical disciplines, he realised with a jolt, but from all appearances, she seemed to simply want to be *near* him.

He wasn't sure if it was a delayed result of the months spent in bed recovering from the snake bite, or perhaps the deepening effect of the texts he was studying, or maybe, he realised, it was the influence of prolonged nearness to Hermione, but carving out moments to just be--without pressure to create or perform or *prove* anything--had quickly become essential to his days.

He enjoyed their down time the most, he thought. Transformation to her tiger form had become a part of their evening routine, a relaxing end to what had become increasingly frustrating days. Gradually, Hermione slipped more quickly from tiger cub back to her human shape, and lately, she'd not shifted to tiger form at all, sidling up to him without need for a furry mask to give her courage. Their time at night on the library sofa had become their refuge, a period where academics and news reports from

the outside were strictly prohibited. Only sustenance was permitted there, food and conversation and rapidly escalating touch that made him feel alternately nourished and starved.

The days passed in a blur of Arithmantic equations and maddeningly failed attempts to discern the key variables that would reveal the antidote for their broken world. Why had they thought that Hermione becoming an Animagus would be the break they needed? It's not as if the tiger cub knew anything about--

Wait.

"Is it possible that we've been approaching this all wrong?" Snape muttered.

"What do you mean?" Hermione looked surprised, a welcome change from the offended glare she'd shot at him earlier when she realised he'd been checking her work.

"As if I'd miss something obvious, Severus. Really."

"We keep looking for an intellectual answer to the puzzle, like it's a problem to be solved," he said.

"Isn't it?" she retorted, pushing aside the page of equations with a huff.

"Possibly not," he replied. "We persist in taking it apart, me doing some pieces, you doing others. But maybe the snag is that we're recreating the core problem when we do it that way."

"Well then," she asked, "what is the core problem?"

He rose, wandering around the room as he spoke. "Well, this all began with the creation of the Horcruxes, right?" She nodded. "Voldemort didn't just rip his own soul. He ripped apart the mechanism that makes the world work."

"Right," she said. "And now, the gears that used to line up and work together are grinding and breaking."

"Exactly," he said. "The pieces used to fit, but now they act as if they don't belong together."

Something was niggling again, something about--

Pieces in a puzzle... steps in an incantation... ingredients in brewing--

"Wait," he said, heart racing. "It's not mechanical, that's where we've gone wrong." The words were tumbling over each other in his excitement. "What is the procedure for brewing a potion, Hermione?"

He could see that she was bewildered, but she would humour him, he knew, and address his question with the utmost gravity.

"When you prepare a potion," she began, "you combine ingredients in specific amounts, in a specified order into a cauldron--a heated cauldron..." She stared at him, mouth agape.

He couldn't help but grin.

"Where are those references on the Five Elements, Hermione?"

"You mean the ones that you said a few months ago were filled with folklore and hogwash?" She smirked.

"Don't be cheeky, just bring them to me," he snapped.

She eyed his unsteady piles of books and he pointed. "Start with that one."

In his hands, the large book vibrated with potential. He remembered the illustration he needed. It had intrigued him ages ago when he was making his way through the volume, drawn him despite deep scepticism of the content and irritation as every promising lead brought them to a dead end. Brightly coloured, the images moved about out in a circle, one flowing into the other--the five elements from which Chinese philosophy believes everything is drawn.

Not a circle, not precisely, he realised as he took a close look for the first time. He felt Hermione beside him, peering at the diagram.

"Do you know how this works?" she asked.

"No clue," he said. "But if what's wrong is alchemical and not mechanical, maybe there's a way to get at it with a potion..."

She was nodding absently and he had the distinct impression that she wasn't really listening.

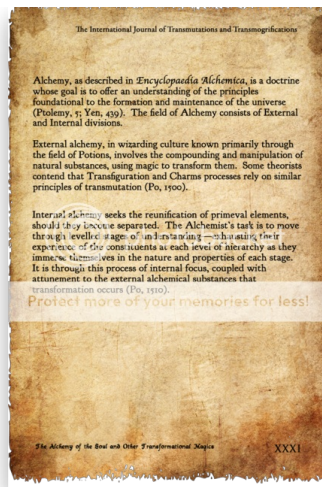
"Hermioine?"

"Hmm?"

"Have you heard a word I've said?" His lip curled with amusement. He could so relate to her absorption in whatever new idea had caught her fancy.

"Hm?" she started, looking a bit guilty. "I was thinking," she apologised.

He laughed. The shocked and slightly embarrassed look on her face only made him laugh harder. "I understand," he said. "So what is it that distracted you?" "Alchemy," she whispered.



Alchemy.

His silence was making her nervous. "Severus?"

She felt his arm snake around her and pull her close. "Now, I'm thinking," he said.

"Must we take turns with that?" she asked. "Wouldn't it be more productive to think out loud? You know--conversation?"

He snorted. "I generally prefer to speak once I know what I have to say."

Before she could decide whether to feel insulted, she felt his lips brush against her forehead. His words were murmured as if to leave room for plausible deniability. "I find it irresistible that you show me every single step in your thinking. All your energy and excitement is right there, front and centre. I wish I could do that, sometimes."

He rested his cheek against the top of her head and she trembled with the knowledge that here, at last, he'd laid bare a small part of his heart to her.

"I'm very impulsive, sometimes," she said. "You're so articulate; every word has its place. The thinking is crystal clear."

"Impulsivity hasn't ever done much for me but get me into spots I wish I'd never been," he said. "It's not been often, but inevitably disastrous."

Hermione nodded. Harry's description of the memories Severus shared in what he believed were his last moments knotted her stomach.

"So," he said. "What about Alchemy?"

"I realise that you are the Potions master," she began. "But maybe this isn't about a potion at all." She looked up. "We know that Voldemort damaged the magical Ley lines, right? What if what he damaged in the Ley lines was something about the elements--I mean, we know that what's damaged is elemental magic, but this is different. What if it has to do with the elements as described here, and that's what we've got to fix? Maybe that's what runs through the Ley lines and in the nodes."

"The Elements," he echoed. She nodded and pulled the book to her lap, laying it open in front of both of them.

"Look, Severus. They look like they depend on each other," she said as she traced the kinetic circle from one elemental point to another. "Metal nourishes water; water nourishes wood; wood feeds fire; fire makes earth, earth makes metal," she read. "What happens if one of them breaks away or stops functioning?"

She watched as his eyes roamed over the symbols of the cycle, the progression of creation and destruction; each piece in a delicate dance with the others, each with a purpose and a place. "Not one of them, Hermione," he murmured. "What happens if they are all out of balance? Torn and crippled so that they can't do what they're meant to?"

She was shaking too hard now to hold the book.

"Is that what I saw in the node? The animal forms that couldn't hold their shapes?"

"I didn't see that," he said. "I only heard... I heard music, but discordant. Like a symphony that had been through--a war," he snorted.

"Broken."

"Yes," he whispered.

"How do we fix it?"

"I don't know, Hermione. I've felt just like that for as long as I can remember. I don't even know how to fix myself."

She winced. "Who said that you're broken?" she said. "Besides, if there's anything that this diagram makes clear, it's that everything changes."

Everything changes.

"Yes," he said, nodding, "and perhaps that what we've believed static... is not."

"Static?" She wrinkled her brow. "Why didn't I think of this before?" she muttered.

She turned from him then, slipping her wand into her hand. A deep breath centred her, and she brought herself to languorous evenings spent curled against Severus in the library, memories filling her with warmth and hope. Riding the waves of emotion, she brandished her wand.

"Expecto Patronum!"

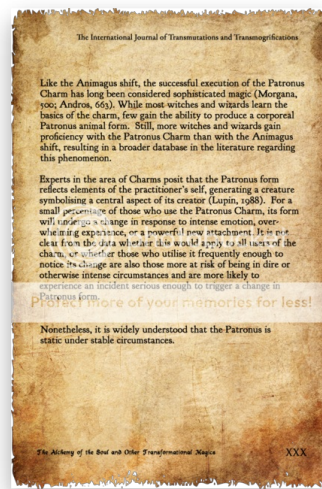
Hermione and Snape watched, surprised, as a large black tortoise erupted from her wand. Slow and serene, it glided across the room. She almost missed him reaching for his wand, casting his charm nonverbally as they both silently eyed the tortoise drifting around the room.

Nothing could have prepared them for what erupted from his wand.

Instead of the doe that they both expected, the creature that flew across the room, the lines of his muscles taut and his translucent pelt shining--

Turned his head disdainfully to face them--

And roared.



They watched the two animals circle each other. The white tiger, sleek and graceful, pranced around the steadily moving tortoise. Vibrant for figures made of mist and emotion, they looked oddly in synch for two such dissimilar creatures.

"I thought your Patronus form was a doe," Hermione said quietly, eyes trained on the translucent animals.

"It was." She was startled by the sharpness in his tone.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Are you upset that it's not a doe anymore?"

Her anxiety cut through him, but he was too distracted to focus on her at all. Did he have so little sense of self that his Patronus patterned itself after whichever woman held his heart? He hunkered down to sulk.

"I don't fancy the idea that my Patronus form shifts to resemble the current object of my affection," he muttered.

"But it hasn't," she replied, too absorbed in the mystery to register that for Severus Snape, this amounted to a declaration of eternal devotion. "Look, mine has shifted, too. It should also be a tiger, shouldn't it?"

He paused, considering. "Perhaps. But," he gestured to the slowly fading creatures that had continued to eye one other and were currently nose to nose, "my Patronus has assumed *your* Animagus form," he said unhappily.

"How do you know for sure?" she asked, leaping to her feet. "I was certain that my Animagus form would be an otter since that's what my Patronus form has always been," she said. "And if my Animagus is a white tiger, why is my Patronus a tortoise?"

"Perhaps your otter finally developed a healthy sense of self-preservation and grew a shell," he muttered, still disgruntled by the inexplicable change in *his* Patronus.

She scowled. "Very funny. Obviously, our core assumptions are wrong."

"Such as?" he asked.

"Such as," she retorted, "the relationship between the forms, for one." She thought for a moment. "We always just assumed that the Patronus and Animagus forms would be the same. Obviously, we were wrong."

"What are you suggesting?"

"I'm not sure what I'm suggesting yet. But Master Wu shifted into multiple Animagus forms at the node." He nodded. "Have you ever heard of a wizard who could do that?" she asked.

"Never, but you'll recall that we have no idea whether that's meaningful, and if it is, what it means." He spared a moment to rue the behaviour of the elusive Taoist wizard whose inexplicable actions were their only, slender guide.

"But that's just it." The excitement in her voice was contagious. "You don't know what your Animagus form is because you've not attempted the shift. When was the last time that you cast a Patronus, Severus?"

He shut his eyes, reluctant to allow the memory to draw him back into its grip.

"During the war," he murmured.

"The night that you left the sword for Harry?"

He nodded, unable to prevent the image of the silvery doe from filling his mind's eye.

"Severus," she said, "That was a long time ago." She moved closer to him, but he refused to look at her. "Severus, listen. I don't think that your Patronus changed to match my Animagus form." She hesitated for a moment. "I have a feeling that my form changed in response to *you*."

It took him a moment to process what she said. *Changed in response to me?*

"In what possible way does a white tiger originate with me, Hermione?" he asked. "Doe, remember?"

"Yes, I remember. Doe. Your devotion to Lily, your commitment to protect Harry. I remember, Severus." He looked up sharply at her clipped tone, her expression was fierce. "I don't know *how* I know that you were a tiger first," she said. "But I do know that my cub recognises *you* as another tiger. I didn't remember that until just now when

you--" She gestured towards the still prancing creature.

"Another tiger?" he echoed.

"Yes, *another* tiger. Familiar, powerful, safe." She took a sharp breath. "More than safe. Like you had something that I needed." She paused. "And you gave it to me."

"Me?" He echoed. That magnificent creature couldn't possibly be him. It was far too beautiful, too virile to be a reflection of his heart.

"Yes, you--the tiger who was you."

"The tiger who was me." He blinked and then scowled at the smug look on her face. The idea of her exquisite tiger cub coming into being because of *him* left him breathless.

"I'm not an Animagus," he said, stubborn to the end.

To his surprise, she leapt to her feet and it struck him that if she didn't have all that hair, he might be able to actually see her thoughts exploding inside her mind.

"I didn't cast a Patronus before..." She blushed hotly as he raised an eyebrow.

"...before I shifted that first time. But I'd bet that it wasn't a Tortoise, then." She challenged him, arms folded.

"Well, then, state your hypothesis."

"Well," she began, "Perhaps the Patronus form isn't always identical to the Animagus form, but *foreshadows* it."

"Why would it?"

"Because..." She stumbled. "Well, I don't know why. But I think it does."

"What do you believe happens to your Animagus shape when your Patronus changes?" he asked. He could hardly keep the excitement from his voice. She heard it, though; he could tell by the way she beamed at his question.

"Let's find out, why don't we?" She grinned at him, and his heart leapt into his throat.

"Hermione, wait..."

But before he could move to stop her, she'd done it. One moment, she was standing before him, hair wild and cheeks flushed. And in the blink of an eye, a small black tortoise sat at his feet, scratching her sharp claws on the cold stone floor.



Being a tortoise was not nearly the fun being a tiger cub had been, she thought, once she'd transformed back to herself. No fur to get stroked, no purring or snuggling to be had. Severus had dutifully lifted her tortoise-self from her spot on the floor to sit beside him on the chaise. But, alas, there was no cuddling to be done with a hard-shelled creature, she supposed. Though the look on his face when she'd transformed back made it well worthwhile.

"You were right," he said, stunned.

"I was right," she echoed.

Without a thought for propriety, she flung herself at him and he held her close, clutching her with a ferocity that frightened her. She could feel his heart hammering against his chest and she wanted to kiss that precious pulse point in his neck, the one that lay opposite the ragged scar. She settled for wrapping her arms around him.

"You terrify me," he whispered.

"Is that a bad thing?" she murmured into his chest.

He laughed, and it was glorious. She smiled with relief.

"It's not a bad thing, then?" she teased.

"No," he chuckled. "It is most definitely *not* a bad thing."

"Ron used to say that I was 'brilliant, but scary'."

"You are," he agreed. "But that's not why you terrify me."

"Why, then?"

"Your willingness to fling yourself into whatever you do," he said. "The energy you bring to every thought, every feeling--"

"It's too much?" The fear she felt constricting her chest would surely rise to choke her now, she thought.

"No!" he said swiftly. "It's *not* too much. It's just so... different from what I'm accustomed to." He paused, and she felt his heart speed up again. "It's partly my nature and partly what I've been taught, I suppose." She held her breath, listening. "To hold back. To shield my thoughts." He laughed, ruefully. "Occlumency is a mixed blessing, you see. It's meant to keep intruders out--" He paused. "--but it works just as well to keep me--my thoughts, my emotions, my hopes--in."

She nodded. It was easy to imagine how a naturally reticent boy in a politically volatile environment would learn that safety lay in his natural reserve.

"But you." His hand stroked her cheek and she lay her own atop it, startled to feel him trembling. "You have no fear."

"I do," she contradicted. "It's just that when I'm afraid, I don't want to be alone." She paused. "And I told you already, I can sometimes be a bit... reckless. I suppose."

"You suppose, do you?" He chuckled. "You say that as if I've not had ample opportunity to notice."

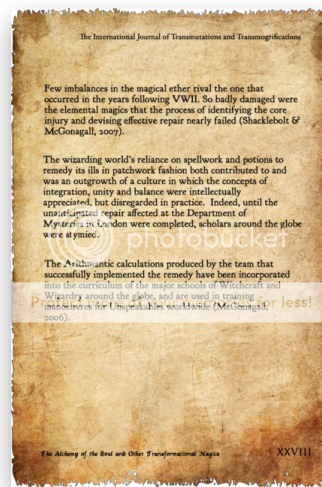
She heard the laughter in his voice and since she could breathe again, lifted her head so that she could look at him.

"I suppose you would have," she whispered, entranced by the intense look in his eyes.

"I like what your recklessness does to me," he murmured. She leaned forward to kiss his lips, soft and chaste, and felt a rush of energy flow through her. His breath came fast and she tilted her head to whisper in his ear.

"Alchemy, Severus."

"Alchemy," he echoed.



"I just don't understand it," Hermione muttered as she pushed aside another piece of ink-smudged parchment.

"Don't understand what?" Severus asked, lifting his head from his work and wincing. Parchments lay in disarray, empty ink pots and broken quills interspersed among the wreckage. He'd assiduously avoided watching her work, keeping his head down and his attention focused on the article he was reading on the alchemical properties of water. In Chinese. He'd apparently neglected to notice the attack of the grumpy Niffler, he thought with a smirk.

"The equations just won't balance," she grumbled, oblivious to his amusement.

He walked gingerly to her side of their worktable, dodging fallen parchments and silently casting *Evanescio* on a drying ink spill on the floor. He peered over her shoulder at the runes slashed into the parchment, red and purple symbols crashing into one another, wrestling for dominance--collapsing instead into a smoky pile at the bottom of the page.

Kinetic Arithmancy. He thought. *Such a showoff*. He caught her eye and smirked, and she shrugged.

"It's the most effective method for simulating and predicting process, but it's not working. And it's made a huge mess of my parchments."

He snorted. "Yes, well, the wizarding world thanks you for sacrificing your materials in the face of the ongoing devastation of random~~or~~natural disasters and fairly predictable human idiocy."

She rubbed her eyes and laughed. They were both overtired, he thought. Too many late nights and restless sleep did not make for clear thinking.

"May I take a look?" he asked, lesson learned about intruding on Hermione Granger's work process without prior permission. She nodded and pushed the parchments towards him, leaning back in her chair with a sigh.

The parchments were, indeed, smoking, and almost petulant in their refusal to balance.

"So what have you done here?" he began, tracing the curve of her equations as they reluctantly returned to their positions in order for him to examine them.

She'd used the Tree of Life, he noticed--an unusual choice, but one that resonated with him as well. Symbols spread across the page. Runes, letters and symbols spanning time and culture teetered, one on top of the one another--rising first from the bottom of the page in a solid trunk built of Chinese foundational runes, building with Rado and Kunaz, and branching into the main boughs from which gracefully shaped letters dangled. She'd incorporated the Chinese symbols for each of the five elements, he noticed, and was attempting to introduce the symbols for Qi and Shen to the rune Laguz, but the rune kept skittering off the page. As he watched, the rune Eihwaz took a dramatic spin, knocking the others from their perches and causing the letter and symbol pileup he'd witnessed earlier.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "They do tend to the dramatic."

He chuckled and smoothed the page, jerking his hand away from the heated surface. "Dramatic and hypersensitive, it would appear," he added.

"Yes, well they are not accustomed to being asked to work together. They're apparently still negotiating." She peered at the parchment again. "It should work," she said softly. He nodded.

"Indeed, it should." He moved the parchments to the centre of the table. "Whatever is awry here, you're unlikely to identify it tonight," he said. "Perhaps it's time to put the equations aside and take a break."

She nodded and he watched her lift an ink-stained hand to massage the back of her neck.

Watching the movement of that hand beneath her tangle of hair, his stomach clenched with the unspoken anticipation that had been hanging between them for weeks. Lingering touches, heated glances, and the not-so-occasional snuggle on the chaise had not strayed from the chaise. He knew that she was waiting for him to open the door for deeper intimacy, and at the same time, he was acutely aware of his own efforts to pace himself.

There was no question that he wanted her. He'd been drawn to her long before their visit to the node. Her response to him suggested that she wanted to be with him, as well. But he wanted more than a physical relationship and he certainly had no interest in a casual one. There was something elemental in the energy she stirred in him.

He felt generous when she was near; he wanted to shower her with every ounce of energy he could muster. What was his was hers. What he felt for her, how he felt about *himself* when he was around her, shook him profoundly. Yes, he wanted her--oh, how he wanted her. But the fear that that the moment he reached for her in earnest, the always-lurking Severus Snape brand of poison would be released, had kept him remote. At least this way, he'd imagined, they both might be safe for a little while longer. Just in case.

Optimism and hope were emotions he'd not had much opportunity to employ. It would appear that sometimes, they materialized even without invitation.

He watched her work out the knots in her neck and wanted nothing more than to run his hands along the smooth lines and gently ease the tension accumulated there. Perhaps there was tension elsewhere that he could attend to while he was at it, he thought.

Courage, man.

"Taking a break at the work table was not quite what I had in mind, Hermione," he said. Her tired smile unclenched his throat just a bit.

"I was actually wondering," he began, hoping that his voice didn't sound as shaky as he felt, "if you would care to accompany me back to my chambers for some dinner and perhaps a glass of wine."

Her face lit up, and she suddenly looked far less tired.

"I would love that," she whispered. Relief flooded him, and he marvelled at the warmth in her eyes and the hope radiant in her expression. His stomach clenched again with anxiety. *Please, let me not bollocks this up.*

Afraid to speak another word, he handed her a small piece of parchment.

The home of Severus Snape can be found at number 7, Unspeakable Row, Department of Mysteries, Ministry of Magic

It was at once a reminder of the looming danger he still faced post-war--even ensconced as they both were in the depths of the Department of Mysteries--and a tangible expression of trust.

She absently stroked the parchment as she focused on the address, and he caught a glimpse of the tears that she dashed away with an impatient swipe of her hand. When she was done and the parchment reduced to cinders, she stood, taking the arm he offered.

Neither paid the slightest attention to the long smudge of ash that lay on her fingers as she curled them around his arm as they stood to go.

5

Chapter 5 of 6

Voldemort is dead and gone, but the wizarding world bears more than the usual scars of war. Severus and Hermione find themselves in the middle of what they hope will be the solution that will keep their world from unraveling. Author's Note: This story will appear on the archive in two formats, graphics heavy and text only. The content is identical, only the formats differ.

The walk to Severus' rooms was long, the hallways twisting in unexpected ways, and Hermione pondered how far under the streets of London the Department's arms reached.

Walking arm in arm with Severus, distracted by the scent of his skin, the warmth of his arm beneath his jacket sleeve, she forced her attention outward and wondered which aspect of being Secret Kept made hallways she passed every day unfamiliar. Even the corridor to her chambers seemed to take another course every time she walked it, as if it had consulted with the stairways at Hogwarts for lessons in misdirection. The path to Severus' rooms seemed even more convoluted, as if the bones of the earth had gone out of their way to hide him from prying eyes and harmful intentions.

And now, he'd invited her in. The energy between them hummed with promise, and the closer they got to his chambers, the more intense it grew.

"Here we are," he said as they approached an expanse of stone wall. Hermione focused on the address he'd shown her, and about Severus protected by layers of carefully placed magic and at once, a carved wooden door appeared like a gift from the heart of the stone. The texture of his protective enchantments tasted sharp and metallic, like medieval armour made magic.

His rooms resembled hers only in their skeleton, she thought as he escorted her across the threshold. Sitting room and kitchenette were scattered with books and parchment, sparsely furnished and yet undeniably *his* in the details. A long black robe draped neatly over a wooden chair, potions bottles here and there, labelled in his distinctive hand, and on the mantle, a small silver cauldron.

He'd moved to stand behind her, and she felt the intensity of his desire, tinged with the faintest shadow of uncertainty rippling just beneath the surface like the frantic beating of hummingbird wings...so like the butterflies fluttering in her belly. She shivered as his hands swept the hair from her neck, moaning as he dropped soft kisses along the length of the sensitive skin there. This was nothing like their chaste snogs on the couch; this was like being dipped in molten liquid and melted with a touch.

"Severus," she gasped, leaning back into the heat of his body.

"Hmmm?" His deep voice sent a shiver to her belly, and she could hardly breathe. He didn't stop, his considerable attentions focused solely on the soft skin behind her ear, his hands roaming, seeking bare skin beneath her robes.

She reached a hand behind her to stroke the back of his head, pulling him closer, running her fingers through his slick hair. He growled with approval and she pivoted to face him, her body thrumming with anticipation.

His black eyes bore through her, all the hope and fear and need of a man restrained for too long spilling free at last. Even stripped of all disguise as they both were that day in the node, she had not seen him this naked. There were no words now, none that could traverse the rubble that lay around them. All their work, months of searching for answers, the gradual dismantling of barriers erected so long ago...all of it brought them inexplicably to this ragged precipice.

And now, here they stood. The urgency of their mission had grown inseparable from the intense need to join together what surely were two halves of a potentially vibrant whole. This connection that had grown between them had a power all its own, elemental in its intensity...thrilling and terrifying and inescapable.

All she knew was the roughness of his cheek and hot breaths and sweet lips at last. Her hands were trembling as she wrapped her arms around him and brought his body closer to hers. He let out a harsh breath as she pressed up against him and she could feel the tension in his frame as he held himself back.

What is he afraid of?

"Severus," she pleaded.

He froze, breathless.

"Severus... please..."

And he broke.



The words ripped through him, a blade shredding tissue paper.

Out of nowhere, the old man's insistent voice collided with Hermione's breathless one. A wave of pain spilled over him, saturating him with the remembered horror of being trapped in a prison constructed brick by brick by his own destructive hands.

Oh, no... no, no...

His heart raced, shame and fear flooding him. He had no right to this woman, no right to the light in her eyes when she looked at him, no right to the desire filling him...not just for her body, but for her heart and her spirit.

He was only a tool, he thought; only existing as a means to gain power, or in an endless effort to repair what his vicious hurt had broken. It didn't matter what he wanted or what he needed. This was not his lot... It was not for him to feel *magical* in the presence of a woman or to sink into the bliss of finding the Yang to his Yin...to join together, body, spirit, and soul.

His survival meant only that he lived to serve another master, his task to decipher the rules by which he must exist...only in the service of the other.

Severus... please...

As if he'd ever had a choice.



He pulled away from her as if burnt.

She never imagined that she would hear him whimper. Not in pain.

"Severus?" She whispered. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head and sank to the floor. Tremors shook him, and despite the implicit protest in every sharp angle of his body, she wrapped herself around him, holding him against her firmly. Stiff and unyielding, it was as if he had been petrified by the yellow eye of the basilisk, doomed to remember only his own desiccated reflection, frozen forever.

"No, Severus. Come back," she said, clinging to him to still her shaking limbs. He was curled into a ball, kneeling on the rug like a man awaiting a death blow.

"Until you permit yourself to want something with every cell of your body, Miss Granger, you have nothing to lose. What is loss or fear to one who has no hope?"

His words from that day months ago echoed in her memory, shaking her as they had not even when she'd first heard them. Was this the price of hope, then? The blinding awareness that now there was everything to lose?

And this was what terror looked like, she realised, the knowledge knocking the wind out of her like a blow. She recognised it, the blinding certainty that you were no more than a speck of humanity on the gleaming edge of fate's blade. It cut and cut until there was nothing left except the shreds of who you once thought you were. If she was honest with herself, she could point to tatters of her own, shoved behind a burning drive to demonstrate beyond any doubt her right to exist in this world. So, what of hope?

They lay together on the ground, her arms wrapped around him as he shook. All she could offer him was hope, though she wondered now how much of her own remained. If tatters were all she had, all that was left of the soul that had entered the wizarding world, heart open, eyes blazing with passion and anticipation and energy, then those were what she would share. But her resolution didn't relieve the ache in her chest. There was more, there had to be something more that she hadn't understood, she thought, frustrated. There had to be *something* that she could *do*.

In a flash, she could see in her mind's eye the magical currents trying to take shape...trying simply to find their own essential form. Not to reign, triumphant, not for power or accolades...only seeking their true centres and the natural relationships that they shared with one another. Interlocking, interdependent, peaceful and whole only in the presence of each another.

The shadow of understanding soothed her. She could relieve him of the burden of being saint and saviour combined. Whatever expectations he had lived with, she refused to perpetuate. Neither of them could possibly satisfy impossible demands set by a world in conflict with itself. The best she could do for them both would be to give him her simple presence and show him in the most honest of ways that she welcomed his. She would walk with him wherever his spirit led...bringing only herself, limping and unsure, but the truest offering she had.



He felt her body against his, her arms around him, but he couldn't bring himself to move away. Through the haze of pain, he felt her move, and then could feel the smooth wood of his wand as she pressed it into his hand.

No, two wands. He stirred, confusion breaking through brittle layers of pain paralysing him. And then it all happened in an instant.

...Power, white heat rushing through him.

...Her hands, stronger than he'd remembered, wrapped around his, gripping their wands.

...Parched skin drinking in her breath, burning with her whispered words.

"They shattered it, Severus. They killed it in themselves and did it to us, too...all of us. They demanded that we be only part of who we are...smothering the rest. Who we were was innocent and honest...it was ours and it was whole and it was all we had to bring to this world. Nobody has the right to do that. The *bastards*."

He stirred again.

"How dare they?" He felt the searing heat of her rage, and felt it mirrored in his chest.

"I don't care what that damned Oracle meant," she whispered harshly. "I don't care anymore what the wizarding world needs. They can find someone else to fix what they broke." He felt her grip tighten. "If you want to know who I am, and who you are, just look."

She cast the charm silently but she might as well have been shouting it from the castle turrets.

A bolt of energy shot through him, her magic, sinuous and powerful, meeting his...cajoling it, challenging it. Challenging him to stand up and fight for himself...fight for his right to exist and for hers.

He felt it build, fuelled by scant memories of what might have been and glimpses of what could yet be...

Melting, no...softening, flowing with smooth power. She, ablaze, held steady in the circle they created together. Warm...he'd always sought the fire...cauldron and hearth. He was always so cold, fingers stiff and bones aching from the endless ice. This felt like being warmed from the inside out, not like the weak flame that only ever melted the top layer of frost.

Something was taking shape, old forms shifting, ready to show themselves. He could move now. He lifted his head and there she was, as dazed as he by tumbling emotion and crushing urgency. Their hands rose as one, wands aloft as two forms burst from their confinement.

Two creatures of mist and shadow.

Fluttering wings, and a flash of fire.

A musical note so pure that it made his heart burst with the joy of it... sound transformed to sensation as it filled him with peace, and hope. And love.

He didn't know when he'd wrapped his arms around Hermione, but was grateful for the anchor as he watched the phoenix manage to glide and strut simultaneously as it approached the wary dragon, nestling itself authoritatively under a scaly wing.

He couldn't help himself as the glare of the phoenix stopped the dragon's spewing, the fiery creature bemused but oddly calm under the phoenix's wide-eyed gaze.

He laughed.



She felt buoyant in the current of his laughter.

Joy.

Freedom.

Abruptly unbound from chains she hadn't realised she'd worn, she realised that it was not only he who had just shed the burdens of unjust needs and inhumane expectations.

"We have to get out of here," she said.

"Indeed," he murmured.

She stepped into the shelter of his arms, offering hers in return. He pulled her close, shaking with emotion. And then he understood.

"No, not out of here," he said. "We have to get to the Ley line. There's one here, that's the one we need."

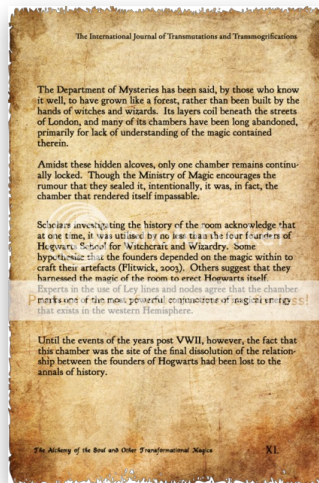
"How do you know? Where? Severus, are you sure?" She was frantic. "We don't have to. I won't let you be used again...won't let us be used."

"I don't know how, I just... It's not for them. It's for us...for you. Do you trust me?"

A heartbeat sometimes feels like an eternity.

"Always."

He shivered in her arms.



They stood outside the door to the only chamber in the Department of Mysteries whose door always remained impassable. Black and sleek like the other doors in the Department, it had no doorknob.

"Here?"

"Yes," he muttered. "I don't know how to get in. But can you feel it?"

And she could. From behind the closed door, the pulse of the world thrummed as surely as her heart did in her chest. The ragged beat pained her; she didn't know how much longer it could go on. So tired...they all were so tired.

She brought her hands to the door and rested her cheek against its slick surface. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her tears mix with the smudge of ash on her fingers, muddy and insubstantial. His hands pushed against the door, too, and she brought one of hers to rest on his. They might not make it in, but no matter what, they would not be alone on the outside. Fingers interlocked, pressed against the smooth wood, they stood...witness to the need beyond its threshold.

With what felt like a sigh, the door swung open.

Cool air enveloped them, choppy even in the absence of wind.

They stepped inside the vast room. A chamber, inside and outside simultaneously, dimly lit by a blanket of stars shaded by thick, dark clouds.



He could hear the spirits crying now, their voices ragged and exhausted.

They weren't asking for him, but calling to her...she had what they needed. But their wounds were so vast, and he felt her shudder.

"I can't, I changed my mind." She clung to him, and her heart galloped beneath his hands. "Let's go. We have to get out of here."

"You can, Hermione." His voice was solid. The spirits weren't calling to him, but they were holding him steady, grounding him. He knew all about terror and the urge to hide yourself inside the deepest pit you could find until the earth just buried you there and left you in peace. "I'm right here with you."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't know what they want," she gasped, panic staining her voice. He held her as she trembled and shook with rage at the injustice that their world had perpetrated...that it had failed so absolutely to nurture this passionate woman's trust in herself. Right here, right now, what she needed most was to genuinely believe that she was capable of being what none of her books or formulae could ever replicate.

"Let them tell you," he whispered. She shivered, and he pressed his lips to the tender skin of her temple and waited until she had stopped shaking. He felt her shift...not to animal form, but to a sharper version of herself. No longer so innocent, no longer so sure or so quick to rush in. Steadier: anchored and receptive. Her lips brushed his; her trust enveloped him even as she stepped from the safety of his arms.

Slowly, she made her way to the centre of the chamber. Shards of rock stood in hostile formation; an army of stone protecting the torn, tender spirits beneath.

She slipped her shoes from her feet. This was sacred ground.

"I'm here."

The earth rumbled in answer, opening itself to welcome her into the circle of standing stones.



The rock beneath her bare feet was hot, glistening with the sheen of embedded ore. Hard and unyielding, sharp edges sliced the tender soles, blood anointing the rock surface with blistering drops. The spirits below sang in rapture, recognition, and welcome.

Hermione fell to her knees in the enclosure. "*Show me what you need.*" She whispered to the energies that she knew tumbled beneath the earth, her fingers stroking the slick surface. There were no words in answer, only a flood of memory like water erupting from beneath the rock.

A young girl, buoyant in the summer sun, ocean to her back, the white sand in her hands taking shape under her touch. Castle walls and murky lakes sprang to life alongside winding roads and forests populated by creatures beyond imagination...a universe overflowing with promise and possibility. The sleek sand vibrated with joy from the magic that ran through her. Whole. Powerful in its innocence and with the promise of ebullient energy to share with a depleted world.

"I'd forgotten," she murmured as she remembered herself, the summer before her first year at Hogwarts. She had been so happy. Nervous, yes, but mostly ecstatic to be joining the world of others just like her, others whose enchanted blood sang to them and who could hear the whisper of the swirling wind and the stretching branches of the trees as they reached for the sky.

But they couldn't...or wouldn't...see. They treated their magic like all the other elements at their mercy. They'd forgotten that it blossomed in the lush earth and nutritive water; it flowed through the rich metal in the bedrock of the world and sang in the vast wood of the forests and searing flame of their hearths.

The spirits beneath her shook with the pain of betrayal. It had gifted them, and they cut themselves into pieces. It shared its bounty and they separated their vibrant whole into shards.

Oh, Merlin... The Sorting Hat.

"Gryffindor!" it had shouted, and she had smiled as she made her way to the table of cheering students. "It must think that I'm very brave, then," she'd thought, uneasy. "But the hat did say that I am smart and loyal and ambitious, as well." Confused, but eager to join, to fit in like any other, she'd developed and nurtured the fire inside of her. Her intelligence, the passion of her persistence when faced with challenges, dogged bravery, and spontaneity. Good qualities, all in all. Qualities that the Headmaster valued, that kept her at the top of the form and in the centre of the war that had been brewing for decades.

She'd glanced at the other tables that day and on countless days after, wondering what it was like to belong in the other houses. During long periods when Ron or Harry would push her aside for trusting her own judgement or instinct instead of theirs, she would look over at the other tables, wishing that she could turn away from the qualities so prized in Gryffindor House, or could at least be valued for those merits that went beyond the Gryffindor creed. But she was more an outsider than she had imagined when she came into this world...unwelcome by genealogy and despite her obvious talent, inferior in the eyes of many whose lives had never been without magic.

She saw only one avenue: to prove beyond any doubt that she belonged in this world. Only her achievement, she thought, might earn her an unhesitant welcome. Her fine mind, if not her glistening magic, should grant her a place.

The stones beneath her trembled again, and she felt the wind whipping in frenzied rage.

She saw it more clearly now. The fabric of their world fraying as generation after generation of students at Hogwarts were sorted; splitting them, so young, into houses that would nurture only part of what made them whole. 'Stay away from those others,' it seemed to say. 'Our way is the right way to be.' How was it possible that the hat sang year after year about unity and yet forced them to fragment...to reject portions of themselves that didn't fit their House's mould and to despise others who embodied qualities different from their own?

"No more." She whispered to the standing stones, and they whispered their assent.

"No more." His voice was rough, but its caress was like the smoothest silk. She hadn't seen him come to join her but knew with every fibre of her soul that if he hadn't been welcome, the stones would have barred his entry. Besides, she wanted him near...*needed* him near...and she reached for his hand, clasping it to her chest.

He knelt beside her, his dark hair whipping in the wind. The spirits sang their greeting and he bowed his head.

Ashamed? Why is he ashamed?

Hermione didn't notice the tears on his cheeks until they had fallen to the stone beneath them, mixing with the drops of her blood until nobody, not witch, wizard or Muggle, would have been able to determine where the blood ended and the tears began.



The spirits beneath the earth's surface had called to him in their unfamiliar voices, bidding him join her. Severus recognised the sounds of pain, their injury plain, and the stirrings of redemption in their entreaty. Feet bare, he approached the enclosure just as she had, and like her, anointed the stones with what he long ago believed to be his impure blood.

Hermione is here, I'm not alone.

The guardian stones had parted for him, and he entered just enough to watch as Hermione joined the symphony, her cries of recognition soon saturated with pain. He reached his hand to touch a standing boulder and he could see, his own memory overlapping hers as he remembered her development, her growth like a plant whose light source comes from only one, narrow direction.

And the Hat. How could he not have thought about the Hat? Hundreds of years of splitting...defining children by some qualities, but penalizing them for others. How else could the Gaunts have become so stunted? Twisted through generations of certainty that they were superior, their arrogance fuelled by inflated pride in the gleaming silver of their locket; dismissive of the fire that gave it shape and sheen, and the earth that nurtured it at its breast and gave it substance.

How else could Merope have believed simultaneously in her complete superiority and utter worthlessness? Flesh and blood and magic and fear...and dreams of reshaping the world so that there is no mirror left anywhere to remind you that other boys with dark hair and absent mothers grow strong without hate.

Growing in a place with no windows to the outside, no view to the land where the steel in the skeleton of the earth nurtures the water hiding in the darkest recesses where nobody dares go, where the forests flourish with roots far beneath the surface despite the droughts that sometimes come and leave the earth parched. Only searing hate delivered with mother's milk and later, the heady rush of power as it sweeps through you...and whose cost you deny even as it burns away every bit of humanity you ever possessed.

Severus held his face in his hands and wept. For Lily, whose fire had drawn him, and in whose flame he had burnt himself without regard to the cost. For his housemates, who strove for dominance as if it meant safety when even their sparks of magic weren't enough. Mostly, though, he wept for the child and the young man who believed that his knowledge and sharp tongue would draw power to him, and that without power, he might as well cease to exist.

He mourned the hopeless, desperate wish to be safe and in control...and that despite the skill he wielded through the wooden wand he despised and in the cauldron whose contents he could shape like clay, it was not sufficient to keep the sharp blade of hatred from cutting down the first woman he had ever loved. Ravaging him along with her.

No amount of penance, no repair could undo the wages of hate. He'd worked at it tirelessly, and when his last task had been completed, had been prepared for his time in this world to end. Waking in the cradle of the earth, as weak as a kitten and as helpless, he'd wished mostly for some sign of forgiveness, a signal of reparation completed.

Instead, he was tasked with the impossible job of deciphering an old man's actions and...he understood now...repairing the damage done by centuries of divisiveness. He could only be grateful that some of that little boy remained...long dormant remnants of the child whose face lit up with eager anticipation at the thought of the magical school where he would belong.

He felt Hermione's hand stroking his hair, her caress warm and sure. How had he merited being here alongside her, this Muggle-born witch...this fierce woman whose heart had been as injured as his own? They had both touched the dark, confronted the parts of themselves forced to hide in the deepest recesses of shadow. But they had found each other there, and in the space where they touched, there was light.

He brought his lips to the palm of her hand, pressing a kiss to the soft skin there. The whisper of her sigh joined the wind's journey through the stones. The rocks were stained with their blood and tears, and with the ash of the enchantments that protected him from harm. So when the ground shook and the standing stones unfurled like triumphant petals in bloom, the surge of strength bursting from the ribbon of iron running through the rock sounded like a shout of joy. They turned to each other, the air around them vibrant with triumph.

The skies opened, showering them with cleansing rain...the depleted soil rumbling in thanks for their sacrifice and surrender...

...and extended an invitation to them...

Dance with us.

Hermione squeezed Severus' hand, and he knew what she would do...sure he could not follow. In an instant, she turned her face to the clouds and with a cry of joy, transformed. Her tiger cub frolicked in the falling rain and Severus watched, wanting nothing more than to join her. In a flash, she was on him, playful but insistent. Her tiger eyes watched as the water washed over him, letting his body greet the element they had healed, and another that they might now heal together.

He remembered the day she'd first transformed, the water he'd brought to her when she was parched. He was the tiger, she'd said. He could be this, he could do this. He understood how to turn the destructive edge of a sword into the enriching container of the cauldron, understood the injury and the miracle that magical water in potions form could mete out. Severus closed his eyes and willed himself to just *be*, opening himself to whatever was essential in himself...acknowledged or long since denied.

Muscles stretching, tendons straining, he felt his body melt and reform. The ecstatic roar of the cub greeted him and he tumbled with her on the slick stones.

And as the water bathed them, they felt the rocks beneath their paws shift, yielding and transforming, until an ocean of sand, like white crystals, surrounded them. They ran together in the soft sand, watching the light refract as it struck the crystalline grains. The cub yipped, and began to dig, burrowing into the ground, excavating lush earth beneath. He joined her, the smell of fertile soil filling him. Water suffused the earth and it drank it joyfully. They rolled together in the soft earth and splashed in the waters. On his feet again, he shook the water from his fur and felt his body shift once more, a glance at Hermione revealed that she was shifting again, too. Two tortoises revelled in the puddles of water, dancing with the spirits of elements too long isolated. Water and metal, released, rewoven, healing at last.

When he raised his head to look in the distance, he saw the forest he'd not noticed earlier...an explosion of colour and life too long forbidden. He watched the movement in the trees, vibrancy tucked beneath the branches. Ambling towards the forest, he felt his body shift again...azure dragon wings a signal for the rain to stop. Hermione's dragon was smaller, but a magnificent yellow, like the sun and the light on the sand.

He savoured the feel of this magnificent form, and his connection to the roots of the trees unfurling below and the knowledge that they had been healed and nourished at last. The Hermione dragon beside him glowed with an unearthly fire and with an awful certainty he knew what she would do.

How often had passion and rage destroyed someone he loved? The fiery heart in his chest pounded as he watched the dragon shift into a Phoenix so red that her feathers seemed to burn. The Phoenix sang in triumph, and he hung back until she approached him, her beak nipping at the scales on his wings. He threw a blast of fire over her head, and he would swear that she laughed as she flew alongside the flames.

She was daring him, he knew it. Daring him to break free from the bonds that'd held him captive for so much of his life. Daring him to join her and be free.

She flew so high, burned so bright, that he feared she would disappear in a burst of fire. Would a Phoenix Animagus rise from the ashes? He had to follow; if she burned he would burn right behind her. Where she went, he would follow. He launched himself into the air, dragon shifting midflight to brilliant Phoenix, catching up as she swept through the trees on the edge of the standing stones.

The trees below were shifting. They had been barren, like a forest emerging from a long winter. But as they circled above, the branches filled with leaves of brilliant green, flowers blooming where fruits would, one day, grow. From this vantage point, he could see the roots diving deep into the soil, and he imagined the paths they forged deep beneath the surface. His Phoenix memory told of centuries of trees that had burned, nourishing the soil with their ashes, nourishing another generation of trees.

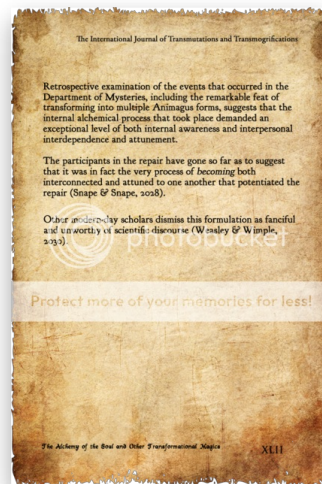
Like him, the world had its cycles and rhythms. Life, death, regeneration and renewal...cycles in balance, the fabric of the universe intact. The blade that split them into shards bred generations of wizards who forgot; and brought a Tom Riddle into their world. And Riddle, reaching into the soul of the world, tore it almost beyond repair in his quest to reverse the laws of nature at any cost.

He spread his wings wide, circling, flying alongside Hermione, and in a burst of elation, soaring above her. She thrilled with delight and met him above the clouds. Together, they checked the seams and bindings of the universe and found them strong. Side by side, they revelled in the sensation of the world made whole.

Gradually, they descended, the standing stones peppered with foliage and the silver sand bordered by lushly growing grass. He knew she was watching as he prepared to land on the patch of green. This fiery woman had taken the lead so many times; this time, he would step forward first.

He signalled her with a telltale ruffle of feathers. His heart lurched and he hoped that she would understand what he was going to do, and that she would follow.

Still descending, riding the current of cool air, two luminous red Phoenixes nuzzled together, even in flight drawn to one another...and side by side, burst into flame.



Her skin had cooled again by the time she woke. They lay on a sparse patch of grass within sight of the standing stones. Hermione blinked, she was sure they'd been more crooked when they had first entered the room. The chamber felt different altogether, she thought. The fractured vibration was nearly gone along with the splintered rocks. Flowing energy washed over her, as if the earth sought to share its bounty and its joy.

If the energy were made of sound, she thought, it would have been a symphony. Like an orchestra playing in the distance, Hermione could feel the pulsing rhythms and soaring tones of intricate song. It was growing, swiftly surfacing from the world's core.

She turned to Severus as he lay alongside her and reached over to tangle a finger in a loose strand of his hair. Her heart leapt as his eyes opened, and his gaze swept over her, languorous, heated...a finger following the trail of his eyes with burning touch.

Her heartbeat raced as the energy of the room swelled...they must finish it now, she realised distantly, distracted by her building desire, her heart and body's needs in synchrony as his fingertips traced swirls on her belly.

She wanted this; she wanted *him* with every cell of her body...heart, mind and spirit. *My choice*.

"Severus," she whispered, and he reached for her with both hands. She moaned at the feel of his hard body against hers, wanting nothing more than to rip away the strips of cloth separating them and feast on the touch and taste of him. *No more barriers*.

"I want you, Hermione," he murmured. "I want all of you, every fantastic, exasperating, annoying, irresistible bit of you." He punctuated each word with a sweep of his lips against hers, his hand finding bare skin and seeking more.

Eager, ravenous...

Yes, yes...

She twined her limbs around him as he lifted her into his arms, carrying her to a clearing of lush grass beneath the shelter of overhanging trees. Under the reflected light of a hundred thousand stars, they swam in the depths of their desire, the edges of his once-battered heart tempered in the searing heat of her welcome.

It was like the melding of materials unjustly separated, jubilant in their reunion. She thrilled at the touch of his bare skin and shivered at the heat of his eager body moving against her. Her hands stroked the planes of his broad back, unconsciously tracing fiery runes there, her mouth on his, drinking him in like a woman long parched. And his lips, so hot on her skin; his voice, smooth as flowing water; hooded eyes following the trail of those nimble fingers, surprising her with their intensity as he explored and aroused, focused as if memorising the landscape of her form and absorbing the texture of her soul.

Severus captured her gaze with his and the longing on his face made her cry out...he must know how much she believed in him; how much coming to know and love him had changed her. He was part of her...inextricably, and the joy of that awareness coursed through her even as she felt the gravity of it in her bones.

She reached her hand to his lips, fingertips stroking until he captured one and drew it into his mouth, sending shivers through her body.

"Severus... please..." she whispered. His eyes were bright, and it made no difference which of the tears on her cheeks were his and which were her own.



The warmth in his chest might have been from his pounding heart, though his body was burning so hot that it was hard to tell.

Severus, please... Only her voice now, hers and the truth...finally, *finally*...that he was free to choose his path: To anchor the repair with this final joining, here with the elements swirling around them, or to carry her from here and love her only as a man loves a woman and not as a proxy for the universe.

What he knew for certain was that he could not...would not...walk away from her ever again. Not from compulsion or obligation, but because of a bond so true and powerful that he would treasure and protect it as long as he drew breath. He'd found the essence of himself, and some of it was in her.

"Yes, oh, yes." This was for him to choose...freely and fully, he thought as he brought his mouth to hers again.

And if the universe benefited, he'd not begrudge it...so long as they were left alone for a while after.

He reached for her again, her body slick with desire, her hands roaming over his chest, his belly, stroking him with feathery touch. Her touch inflamed him and he wanted only to sink into her...to bury himself in her wet heat, finally finding the merger and balance he'd yearned for.

She sighed at his caress and arched into his touch. His mouth, sucking, licking, anointing her with his breath...and drawing deep moans and shouts of pleasure as he teased and tasted the most secret parts of her, the centre of her pleasure and seat of her desire. *The Cauldron*, he thought, surprised...she is my cauldron and I am the flame.

He shifted atop her, and she wrapped her legs around his hips and drew him to her, her hands stroking him...he moaned and thrust into her eager hands. She guided him to her centre, and as he sheathed himself inside her, they cried out together with the intensity of their bodies joined...at last.

Hard and hot and slick, they clung to each other, rocking together. She cried out, her hips rising to meet his stroke for stroke. Her mouth found his, her tongue thrusting, lips and teeth and hot breath devouring him. With each thrust, each swipe of her tongue and groan from her throat, his pleasure swelled, twisting and rising. He knew from her frantic cries and urgent movement that she was not far behind.

They clung to each other as they moved in unison...their journey impossible to make alone. Burning and tender and the heart of the most intense pleasure he had ever known...she cried out her completion and he felt the waves of her pleasure as if they were his own. The ground beneath them shuddered as if the magic they had harnessed and healed awaited their completion.

He stroked Hermione's hair, fingers tangling in the snarled curls. She laughed and kissed him again...and again and again until he was hard and hot once more and thought that perhaps, this would be a satisfactory way to spend all of eternity.

6

Chapter 6 of 6

Voldemort is dead and gone, but the wizarding world bears more than the usual scars of war. Severus and Hermione find themselves in the middle of what they hope will be the solution that will keep their world from unraveling. Author's Note: This story will appear on the archive in two formats, graphics heavy and text only. The content is identical, only the formats differ.

They lay together through the night, spooned against one another, until the warm thread of morning pulled them from sleep.

Hermione stirred, cushioned by the soft grass, disoriented for a moment. Cool air swept through the chamber, chilling her bare skin and providing one more reason to stay nestled in Severus' embrace. *As if I needed an excuse.* She wondered fleetingly whether the chamber might provide them with necessities should they decide to stay here...never to leave. Drifting into half-sleep, it was only the purposeful movement of Severus' hands along the soft skin of her belly that woke her. *I could get used to this.*

She smiled and hummed her appreciation as he caressed her.

"Well, that was not precisely what I'd had in mind for our activities last night," he murmured.

"Wasn't it?" She laughed and rolled to face him, enjoying the flash of humour in his eyes as she pulled him closer.

"Not quite," he drawled as he dropped kisses along the line of her jaw. "Bonding with the elements and risking life and limb for the soul of the wizarding world fell rather low on my list of priorities, oddly enough."

"I hope that last night's activities made up for the interruptions of the evening," she teased.

"Ah, well it's possible that I will need to revisit those just to verify..."

She laughed out loud. "I have always admired your thoroughness," she murmured, distracted by the movement of his mouth along her jaw and in particular by the wandering touch of his hand lower and lower.

He chuckled, renewed his attentions on a spot right behind her ear. The one that, he'd discovered, never failed to make her moan.



It lay where she'd discarded it in her last fit of pique, atop a pile of crumpled parchments and empty bottles of ink. The variables were still smouldering at the bottom of the page. The occasional rune rallied valiantly, rising from the heap and spinning in frantic search for a place to perch.

Why hasn't it balanced? He watched as she pulled the parchment closer, smoothing the crumbled page with both hands. The hours had not been kind, he thought. For as liberated and grounded as he felt, his hands, and hers...he saw, bore the remnants of the night. Blood, tears, mud, and rain had left traces on their hands, and her parchment bore the marks now, as well.

"Any change?" Severus asked, reaching for the page, grimacing at the blots his hands left on its surface.

"None," Hermione replied, slumping down in her chair. How could it be, he wondered, that the world was still askew?

"Hermione?"

She shot up at the edge in his voice. "What is it?"

He gestured to the parchment, spinning again with kinetic motion. The runes and symbols that had been stagnant for weeks leapt from the page, dancing and twisting...almost *eager*. But now, instead of tumbling end to end, only to land in a smoking heap at the foot of the page, their movements were easier, slower. One by one, in a sequence as lovely as a choreographed dance, they settled into their places, humming happily.

In an instant, the Tree exploded into colour...its roots burrowing into the soil that had appeared there, its trunk stout and tall. The branches reached out, leaves bursting with life, vibrant.

Balanced.

Hermione looked at the equation...the Tree of Life...that had acquired three dimensions, movement, and *life*, along with its equilibrium.

"It needed more than ink," she whispered. "It needed..." She hesitated.

She looked at her hands and at the Tree that seemed to have absorbed the remnants of the night from her skin. Not hers alone, but theirs, he realised *Them*.

"It required a Significator," Severus said. "It..." His voice caught in his throat.

"It needed *us*, Severus," she whispered as she stepped forward to wrap her arms around him.

She seemed to understand, he thought. Seemed to realise that all his joking in the chamber aside, being the agent of change...of life...rather than the overseer of death and despair was... overwhelming.

"Us, yes," he said softly, burying his face in her hair. "How absolutely astonishing."

He felt her smile, though he couldn't see her expression. When she lifted her face to his, he couldn't help but smile, too.

"What do you say we retire to your rooms...I never did get to see much beyond the sitting room," she said.

"Yes," he murmured. "I believe that there is a chamber there that requires our attention."



Severus' private chambers reflected so much more of *him* than the outer rooms, Hermione thought sleepily. Guarded and austere, the sitting and eating areas were about brisk efficiency with only a touch of the person who dwelt there showing through.

It wasn't that his bedchamber was so revealing, or that it was so dramatically different from the space outside. Hermione looked around the warm room, bedclothes tucked securely around her though she privately thought that Severus was a far better blanket. It was really just that there was a bit of softness in here that didn't show outside. That was it, she realised...sharp edges were both a necessity and safety for him. But here were the parts of him that nobody could be allowed to see.

She sighed happily. He stirred, dropping a sleepy kiss on her head, and then on her lips as she turned to greet him.

"Good morning." She smiled. "Or is it afternoon? I've lost track entirely."

He laughed. "I have as well. And if hunger is any indication..."

Hermione's stomach rumbled and she snorted softly. "I can't remember when we last ate."

The chamber, like all living and working rooms in the Department, heard their need and responded with...

"Must be morning if it's eggs and toast," Severus remarked. Together, they made room on the bed for the tray piled with food and tucked in. After the initial edge of hunger was sated...it had been an awfully long time since they'd eaten, thought Hermione, talk turned to what might be happening outside.

Thoughts of events *out there* as Hermione often thought of it, had so long been fraught with guilt and fear that it felt oddly liberating and a bit strange to think of it now. But the chamber had provided them with a paper along with their meal...a *Daily Prophet*, whose front page told them that they'd been away for two days, including their last bout of sleep, and that a great deal had changed since they left the node in the chamber.

The main headline, spread across the entire front page and over a picture of a beaming Kingsley Shacklebolt, proclaimed: *Escalating Natural Disasters Come to a Screeching Halt: Minister of Magic says, "We knew we could beat it." Details, page 21.* Hermione snorted and threw the paper across the bed. "Hogwash," she said. "But predictable. Though I might have expected better from Shacklebolt, actually," she added.

Severus huffed in agreement. "No matter," he said. "He will do what politicians do. It's clear that far more goes on beneath the surface than the majority of the populace will ever know."

Hermione nodded. Solemn agreement and tacit acknowledgement of his years of unsung sacrifice and contribution to all of their safety hung in the air between them. She reached for his hand, and his fingers threaded with hers...a bond woven by choice and fashioned in spite of layers of barriers. *Or perhaps, in part, because of them,* she thought.

"I'd like to go to Diagon Alley," she said, and he looked up, surprised.

"You would?"

"I want to walk down Diagon Alley. With you," she continued, eyes shining. "Hand in hand." She smiled. "I want to wander the aisles of Flourish and Blotts and see who drags who out of there for want of nourishment."

"Diagon Alley. Flourish and Blotts. Yes," he murmured. She saw him hesitate, wondering what it would feel like for him to walk those streets again, a man so different from the one the wizarding world believed they knew. A man so different from who he had believed himself to be only months before.

"Where would you like to go, Severus?" She asked. "It's been so chaotic for so long, I can't even imagine..."

"Hogwarts," he said abruptly. "I want to walk the halls of Hogwarts and know that I shan't be chased from there ever again."

She squeezed his hand, heart aching for the man who stalked those halls and bore the acidic glares of students and faculty alike...especially that last, awful year. "I would like to be there when you do," she whispered. He nodded...his bowed head enough confirmation of his feelings.

"And I should like to visit Dumbledore's Tomb," he added softly. "I've not been."

"Not even when..." She cursed herself for her impulsive words, though he didn't appear troubled.

"No, not even when I was Headmaster," he answered. "I couldn't do it, not then." She nodded, waiting, listening. "I loved and hated him both," he continued. "And until it was all over, I couldn't stand in his presence with all of that still thrashing inside me."

She nodded again. How immobile he'd had to be for so terribly long in order to restrain the *battleinside*.

"I think that visiting Dumbledore's tomb must be the first thing we do, Severus," she said. "Today, now."

"Today?"

"There is no reason anymore to wait, nothing preventing you...us...from going where we want, when we please."

He nodded slowly, as if assimilating altogether new information. A quicksilver smile flashed across his face, and she tilted her head in question.

His eyes were sparkling again. "I was just wondering if our dragons would fit through a particular window that I believe contains a rather large hole," he smirked, then laughed at her confusion. "Never mind, I'm sure they've repaired it by now." He tugged at her hand, "Come," he said, suddenly eager to leave, "let's go."



The white marble shone in the mid-morning light. The lake just beyond sparkled with life and Severus thought he saw the peering eyes of merpeople and selkies just beneath the surface. He took a deep breath and approached the tomb, Hermione just behind him.

He stroked the smooth stone, remembering the hours spent staring at it from a distance...from a hidden copse of trees that summer... after; from the windows of the castle that long, dark year when he barely ventured from the grounds apart from times he was compelled by the barbed chains of magic.

"You did your best. I know you did." He didn't know what he would say until the words fell from him, a flood of emotion directed to the surface of the rock, and to the spirit of the man whose will had been as impenetrable. "I always wished that you'd had as much compassion for me as you did for the others," he whispered. "But I forgive you, Albus." And inexplicably, he did.

He turned to Hermione and wiped the tears from her cheeks. She held him until his tears fell, and past the point where he'd managed to quell them enough to pretend they hadn't.

And when he looked into her eyes, he recognized the fire there...and the reflection of his own, fire he'd never before recognized as his. The shifting was seamless, his and hers both.

Two phoenixes, fiercely plumed and exuberant launched themselves from the surface of the white marble.

Wings outstretched, they circled the lake, riding the current of the wind. They sang to each other in the sky, pure notes...crystalline and fine, drops of peace and hope swept into the jet stream. In unison they flew, Phoenix sense taking them where they must go.

They were off to find Fawkes...he needed to know that it was finally time to come home.

