

The Pink Bezoar

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Chapter 1 of 1

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9th January 2004, 11 p.m., in the barn of the Hog's Head.

"Hold her, Abe. She's wriggling."

"She doesn't like it, Snape."

"Hold tight if you don't want her to be hurt. The timing charm has to be aimed very precisely."

"And why in hell do you need it precisely on midnight of the coldest night of the year? I've harvested more bezoars than you have greasy hairs on your head and never bothered about timing. When it's ripe, it's ripe."

"Because it's a pink bezoar. Shut up and hold her."

"Have a care, Snape. She's one from the Ministry, been sent by the Special Section at Magical Law Enforcement. Sometimes they forget, but sometimes they reclaim them for transfer to Merlin knows where."

"Keeping a clandestine jail, eh? The things one has to do in order to stay in shady business."

"Like supplying dead Potions masters with special bezoars. Not that I understand why you want a pink one."

"I don't expect you to."

"You owe me a whole batch of InferAbsinthium, though. And ointment for my knees."

"Just hold her."

Aberforth gripped his wand tighter. A gust of wind blew through the vent in the roof of the barn, swaying the single lantern hanging from the rafters. The dim light flickered briefly on the curled horns and across the pink collar before reflecting off Abe's thick glasses. In the feeble glimmer, they shone an opalescent white like a blind spider's eyes.

Holding his wand with tense effort, as if he was turning a heavy crank, Aberforth drew three slow circles in the air. The cradle of invisible ropes narrowed around the white goat. She bleated and tried to shake her fluffy head, but could manage only a slight, quivering nod before she subsided. Her flanks were shuddering.

Snape took careful aim at the animal's stomach and began to wave his wand in a minute but complex pattern, as if he was covering the body in a fine lace of spellwork,

moving inch by inch towards the neck and the head.

There was no sound in the barn except the faint rustling of the straw or the occasional bleat from the goats tethered at the other end of the pen. Both men were intent on their tasks; the white plumes coming from their mouths sometimes interrupted when one or the other was holding his breath.

The unseen embroidery that poured from Snape's wand had reached the goat's shoulders when someone rapped thrice, heavily, on the door of the Hog's Head.

"Damn them, the pub's closed," muttered Aberforth.

The banging grew louder. Snape stopped mid-spell.

"Fuck. I cannot concentrate with this racket."

Abe sighed.

"Roasted Nargle shit on a slippery stick. Stay here, Snape, until I throw them out, and don't do anything to Dolores until I get back. I'll ward the door."

The younger wizard frowned but lowered his wand. Abe straightened up, massaging his lower back, and stepped through the low door leading to the bar.

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The banging was now frantic, but Abe took his time, carefully weaving the double-bottom wards he usually put on the entrance to the barn. He had barely finished affixing an old, tattered poster of the Chudley Cannons over the last layer of the spells when the main door of the Hog's Head exploded inwards.

Hurled inside among the wreckage of shattered planks and torn bolts and accompanied by a strong gust of snowstorm, a slight figure bundled in witch's robes rolled in the judicious mixture of grime and sawdust covering the hard stone slabs of the Hog's floor.

"Huh," said Abe.

Still sprawling, she raised her head, showing a thin slice of white face through a mass of tousled, frizzy hair.

Abe snorted in disgust.

"The youngest Head of Magical Law Enforcement in over two centuries. Only you MLE fellas would use Bombarda on a door, you and the Death Eaters, and there aren't any left of them, are there, Granger?"

"Stop being an arse, Abe, and help me up."

He scowled, bent stiffly, trying not to upset his old joints, and offered his left hand. She seized it, got to her feet and stood amidst the rubble, teetering just a tiny bit while she brushed the sawdust off her robes.

"Threw you out of the Three Broomsticks, did they?" asked Abe in a slightly warmer tone.

"I just fancied something stronger," she replied with utmost dignity, stumbling to the bar. It took her only two tries to climb onto the bar stool.

"My door, if you don't mind?" said Abe. Between the session in the freezing barn and the shattered door, he could feel his rheumatics flaring from the knees upwards to his poor hips.

"Right," said Granger. She turned awkwardly and aimed at the windswept opening. "Reparo!"

The debris of heavy oak and rusty iron lifted and flew with a mighty clatter, reforming themselves as they slammed into the doorframe. The main bolt was on the wrong side, but Aberforth thought he wouldn't push it for the moment.

Granger hesitated for a fraction of a second, then added gravely: "Fortificum Obsidio."

"So that's the countercharm for Bombarda," said Aberforth with interest. "I thought..."

"You didn't hear that," she cut across. "Anyway, you're not authorised to use it. It will be an InferAbsinthium for me, Abe."

"I'm not authorised to serve that. Don't have any."

"Stuff it, Abe."

He peered at her over the top of his glasses. She wore dress robes: black velvet with a narrow trim of gold, but they were crumpled, torn in a few places and there was still sawdust clinging to them. It was in little details like that that you could recognise Muggleborns – they still tended to dust themselves off with their hands rather than using a cleansing spell. Her eyelids were red and puffy; her face was pale. Her hair writhed like a nest of young Acromantulas, but her mouth was set and, more importantly, she hadn't yet sheathed her wand.

"Don't waggle your eyebrows at me," he said, turning to get the bottle on the second row of the top shelf. It was labelled 'Mrs. Scower's Magical Mess Remover.' "You look like a Medusa, you do." He Summoned a tumbler from under the bar and plonked it on the counter, then poured. Smoke curled up, and the thick green liquid hissed and splattered when it hit the inside of the grimy glass. Granger grabbed it as if it were the last lifejacket on the boat.

"Had another row with Weasley?" asked Abe, taking out the dirty rag and starting to wipe the splashes off the bar.

"Had a row? No, not exactly," answered Granger, putting her glass down. "Another one, Abe."

The fiery drink hissed and smoked again, frothing in the glass. Livid flames were dancing on top of it.

"Bloody hell, Abe," said Granger with scientific interest. "Your glass doesn't look dirty – it looks like it's been washed in boar fat and old harpy shit a thousand times over. I think it's the grease that's holding it together. Anyway, I didn't have a row with Weasley. I hexed him into the next millennium, and it wasn't again; it was for good."

Abe froze, rag in hand. "You killed him?" he asked cautiously. Not that he cared about Weasley, but he had to know.

"I don't think so," replied Granger meditatively, "but I doubt they'll be able to put all the bits back."

Abe's mind was racing, calculating how much time he had left before the rest of the MLE blasted his door again. Admittedly, Granger had reinforced it, but it couldn't hold long against a dozen simultaneous spells, not to mention more. He poured a third glass.

"When did it happen?"

Granger downed her drink in one.

"Half an hour ago," she said with a beatific smile. "That's why I'm late. Abe, was someone there?"

That was easy to answer. "Nope. No one."

"You're sure?" she insisted. There was a slight slur now in her voice. "A wizard, reading the Daily Prophet?"

Well, there had been Snape, but Abe was pretty sure she wasn't referring to him. Besides, he had worn his usual glamour: blond, stocky, lavender robes.

"Nope."

She sighed a long, beautiful sigh, put her head on the bar between her arms and closed her eyes.

Abe assessed her with a professional's eye. If he was lucky, he had at least half an hour before the raid; there was Toby snoring upstairs, and there was Snape in the barn.

Snape could look after himself, he decided. With a tired grunt, he began to climb the stairs.

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The bar of the Hog's Head had been cut from the same dark, stern granite as the rough walls and the floor, a long, long time ago, for the Hog's was already there when the Founders, those brash younglings overflowing with newfangled and politically correct ideas, had laid the first stone of Hogwarts' foundations on the boulder-strewn hills above the Black Lake.

Unlike the shiny bar of the Three Broomsticks, this one was covered not in brass, but in decent pewter, and Abe took great care to wipe it as little as possible. Therefore, it was a dusky, cold shade of dull grey, but it felt nicely cool to Hermione's flushed face.

However, it grew quickly warm, uncomfortably so, under her hot cheek. She muttered in her sleep and stirred in search of a fresh place. Unfortunately, she had her wand still clenched in her fist, and when she turned her head to the other side, she poked herself in the eye.

The rickety stool had been unmercifully designed to topple over at the slightest provocation, and it gleefully fulfilled its mission.

Ouch! For the second time that evening, Hermione found herself on the uncompromising floor of the pub. The venerable layers of dirt helped soften the fall, but the impact took the wind out of her, and for a moment, she lay curled up on her side, eyes closed.

When at last she opened them, her half-dazed gaze fell upon a bright orange, moving design. The lines broke and reformed quickly, like flickering flames, and the garish colour was giving her an atrocious headache.

She shut her eyes, opened them again, shook her head and tried to focus.

With a fierce scream, she pointed her wand at the Chudley Cannons poster and poured all her hate into the hex.

The poster sizzled, curled up and cracked down a vertical line that widened up like a cat's pupil and began to rotate, a whirl of black water down the drain. Hermione felt the pull and tried to resist, but it was too late. She glided down the funnel and into the darkness.

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There was at first a velvet of nowhere that reminded her of the numb, weightless feeling she had in her fingers when she scooped something up from the very bottom of her beaded bag. Then the darkness contracted and spouted her out.

It was almost as dark here, she thought, but it was a different sort of night, full of a soft rustling, cold drafts and a familiar odour. She could feel her weight; she was sitting on straw; there was a stone wall against her back. Groping around, she touched, on both sides, something that felt like open boxes, full of hay.

Mangers.

This had to be Abe's goatshed, his sanctum sanctorum, which she had never seen.

Well, she was going to see it now. There was a first for everything. Murmuring "Lumos!" she lit her wand and moved forward cautiously, crouching like a seasoned Auror.

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As soon as he had heard the blast on the other side of the wall, Snape had snuffed out the single lantern and had backed into the deepest shadows. Abe's spellwork was excellent, but you never knew.

He ground his teeth when he saw Granger tumble through the partition and silently cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. Granger was always bad news.

The barn was permanently warded against Apparition. There was no other exit, except the small air vent in the roof, but flying took a great amount of energy, and he couldn't maintain a good Disillusionment at the same time.

Stunning the bint was out of question. He owed Abe too much, and besides, there were the bezoars to consider.

A sudden draft of air brought a whiff of wormwood and alcohol, and he wrinkled his sensitive nose. Was it? By all the dark gods, yes, it was, and she was carrying it rather well.

He watched Granger take her bearings and get to her feet, vacillating ever so slightly.

She proceeded to explore the barn, progressing along the opposite wall, skulking like a warrior on the prowl and exploring every nook and cranny with a goofy smile plastered on her face. He saw her reach the end of the shed and come back towards the entrance. The goats, disturbed in their sleep, were shuffling softly between the bales of hay, pattering in the straw.

She was now almost level with him. He held his breath and pressed into the wall, addressing a brief prayer to Hecate. She had almost passed him when Dolores gave a long, whining bleat.

Granger turned at lightning speed. "Hominum Revelio!" she cried.

The Disillusionment Charm glided from him like cold water.

Granger took two startled steps back.

"But... but you're dead!" she blurted out.

Severus mechanically patted himself and cursed inwardly. He had forgotten to renew the glamour.

Then, to his astonishment, a large grin cracked her somewhat smudgy face. "So, it was true! The Death Eaters snatched your corpse and transformed you into an Inferius! Harry was so worried about that! Why, this is wonderful!"

Severus felt his jaw drop. It must have given him a very convincing expression, for Granger added, "I was dying to try this new spell for subduing Inferi..." and muttered something in a language Severus didn't recognise, although he wouldn't have been surprised if she had learned it from Bill Weasley, then she clapped her hands. "Now you'll do everything I command, and I order you to go after Ronald Weasley...here, take this hair...and do to him whatever you will."

Severus grunted noncommittally. She shot him a considering glance.

"Maybe," she said shrewdly, "I'd better get you out of here; you don't look too bright. Follow me."

Snape did some fast thinking. If he obeyed and followed her to the exit, he had a chance of pushing her back through Abe's wards and getting rid of her. From the reek of InferAbsinthium, there would even be a good chance that she would pass out on the floor of the bar, in which case he would, maybe, get his pink bezoar after all. Tricky, but not impossible.

She took his hand. Snape was sure it was cold enough...it was almost freezing in the barn, as Abe thought any temperature control was adverse to bezoar quality, but he tried to relax his hand into a proper deathly limpness. She frowned a little, but led him to the place where she had come through, between the two mangers, and confidently walked into the wall. It didn't budge.

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He had given her a little shove in the back, but it was entirely her fault if she got her nose squashed on the rough stone. After that, she had revealed a previously unsuspected richness of vocabulary, and she had tried all the "Open up" spells known to wizardkind. When even those reserved for the special units of Magical Law Enforcement had failed, she sat down in the straw and rested her head on her knees.

There was nothing for it, except waiting for Abe to come and free them...she had probably triggered a special defence when she had messed with Abe's spellwork in the first place. And... she might be useful, yet. So he sat beside her.

"What was that about Weasley?" he asked.

She looked up at him. In the livid glow of the Lumos, she was ghostly pale, and her eyes were reddened, but she looked sober.

"You're not really an Inferius, are you?"

"Obviously not."

"You can come back, you know. Harry has cleared your name and everything."

"Judging by the fact that you wanted me to gnaw Weasley to a bloody pulp, it's still dangerous out there in your world."

She sighed.

"He's been stringing me along for years. Jealous, yes: wouldn't let me go to another, but wouldn't have me, either. I did everything: I learned to cook; I graduated from knitting socks to jumpers; I went to all the Chudley Cannons matches. As soon as the match was finished, Ron would dash to the vestuary. I spent so much time around the changing rooms that I became a laughing stock..."

A small snort came from the goat stall where she had found Snape. Hermione stopped, then resumed:

"...not to my face, of course, but Molly's invitations grew scarce, and Ron was always on some trip to Romania or to Egypt or dispatched on special missions for Arthur's department. Last September, I had planned to invite him for my birthday. I went to the hairdresser with Ginny...she was still being nice to me...and while we waited, Ginny took the Daily Prophet from the coffee table and made fun of the personal ads...you know, the lonely hearts type. Rather pathetic, but there was this one that felt... I don't know. It caught my eye.

"When I came home with wine, a takeaway and my hair done, I found a message from Ron saying he was sorry, but there was this unique opportunity to go with the Cannons to a special all-weather training camp in Greenland. So, I ate the takeaway, drank all the wine by myself and answered the ad in the Prophet. He answered back and, for the first time in ages..."...a note of incredulous wonder crept in her voice..."I could actually have a conversation with someone. Whoever he was, this person read, and he thought...he was actually able to discuss the books, analyse theories, suggest a new perspective... and he was funny too, in a dry sort of way. It was like being born again.

"After almost three months of anonymous correspondence, I suggested we should meet. He was silent for a week, then he wrote back, and we agreed to meet this evening in the Hog's Head." She gave a little forced giggle. "It seems we both wanted discretion. The only token would be that we'd both have the Daily Prophet open at the personal ads page.

"Still, I didn't want to actually meet someone behind Ron's back, so after work, I went down to the shooting range and waited until everyone had left...Ron is always the last one to complete the five required rounds. He took the longest time to clean and polish his wand after he finished shooting, but at long last it was gleaming, and there was nothing left to do except put it away in its holster and turn to face me because I was standing between him and the door. So I told him and then..."

Her voice broke, and she hid her face against her knees. "Then he shouted and said that he wasn't surprised in the least, that I had always been available for anything with trousers and a pulse, that it was for the best because he was sick of me stalking him, and he wished the best of luck to my new conquest..."

The nearest goat gave a short, dry cough, and Snape shifted uneasily.

"So?" he asked.

"So," she answered, raising her head and in a much firmer tone, "I hexed Ron then and there and left him on the floor of the shooting range. Then I broke into the Aurors' cupboard and drank their Firewhisky. Then I came here for my date, and he wasn't there. I was late, but he didn't even come...Abe said there was nobody." She tossed her head back and laughed.

The goat coughed again, but this time it was a string of deeper, more urgent coughs, and Snape jumped up.

"Look, Granger, would you mind helping me? You just have to stop her from squirming while I cast the charm."

"Oh... all right," she said, following him to the stall while he lit the lantern again.

"Hurry up," he said. "She shouldn't cough it up before midnight; in fact, she should cough it up exactly at midnight if it's going to be of any use."

"Why?" she asked, narrowing her eyes, then her gaze fell on the pink collar. "Oh! Is that...? And is she...?"

"You are wonderfully articulate, Granger," he sneered. "Just hold her."

"Only pink bezoars need a time signature," she said slowly, "and the only potion they're used in is Morticordis."

"Copied word for word from the Magical Forensics Handbook. Congratulations, Granger, your memory is as good as it ever was."

"That's a Dark Potion, Snape. The person doesn't die and may even feel better, but they'll have lost all need or capacity for love, forever. Their heart is dead."

"In this case, it concerns only the customer, Granger, if you don't mind. It won't work for anyone else as the bezoar has to be harvested on their birthday at the exact hour of birth."

She took two steps backwards.

The goat was fretting now, stamping and pulling on the invisible tethers while she coughed. Snape swore under his breath and bent, feeling for the leg restraints, ready to tighten them. Suddenly, Dolores bucked and kicked out. He swerved sideways, felt the Prophet slide out of his pocket, tried to catch it, slipped on the wet straw and fell on one knee.

Granger had already picked up the folded paper.

SHY WIZARD SEEKS WICKED WITCH.

"You... You..." she whispered in a horrified tone. "No!"

"Then hold her, and you'll be rid of me."

"NO! I mean, don't do it!"

She caught his wrist, and he froze, looking in her eyes.

Someone banged on the door of the pub. Several people, judging from the noise.

"In the name of the law, open up!"

"Fuck, Granger, they've come after you," he hissed. "Couldn't you have hidden or otherwise disposed of him?"

"I... I'm sorry."

"Not as much as I am. I bet the anti-Apparition wards are already in place."

"I'm... I'm going to give myself up. Just stay here."

"You just failed to open that door. You'll have to wait till they blast it apart."

She hung her head lower.

"On the other hand," he said slowly, "there could be a solution..."

She looked up.

"But you would lose your job..."

She snorted.

"And we might have to leave for another country..."

The goat retched and heaved. The noise was almost lost in the deafening banging; the door had begun to creak.

"Fuck," said Snape, bending to pick up the bezoar. "Five to midnight; it's no use."

She gave him the brightest smile he'd ever seen: "Then let's get out of here."

"Put your arms around my neck," he said, "and hold tight."

It was a superfluous recommendation; she clung to him like a Devil's Snare.

Holding her by the waist, he gave a kick and floated up to the air vent. There was a bit of squeezing through it, but in the end both of them were crouching on the roof of the barn. Severus was breathing fast.

"How much do you weigh?"

"Um... About eight stone?"

"Is that so? Anyway, we won't get far with the double load."

She wrung her hands. "What can I do?"

"Cast a levitating charm on yourself, foolish girl," he snapped. "Are you a wanted witch, or not?"

"Oh," she said. "Right. Wingardium Leviosa!"

He drew her close and wrapped her in his arms. She buried her nose in the rough wool.

He looked up at the sky. It was a new moon; nice and dark.

Down below, the main door crashed in.

He smiled at the few stars and took flight.