

Time's Arrow

by Proulxes

More ancient time travel! Hermione and Severus are thrown into an adventure that will explore the very origins of time itself....

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 9

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"Life is an unfoldment, and the further we travel, the more truth we can comprehend. To understand the things that are at our door is the best preparation for understanding those that lie beyond." Hypatia of Alexandria b. AD350-370

"It matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be." Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore b. AD1881

Prologue

It was hot and airless in the small alcove of the library. Dust motes danced in the thick beam of sunlight that illuminated the parchments and scrolls on the little desk by the window.

Outside, the noise from the busy marketplace could be heard. Muffled cries from the market sellers mingled with the calls of seagulls and the thin wail of the reeded instruments outside on the temple's steps.

Within the Serapeum itself, a low murmur of voices could be heard from the lower levels, animated discussions from which only the odd word or phrase could be clearly distinguished. Closer to the figure in the bright alcove, other distractions fought for attention: the susurrations of parchment and papyrus rolls being withdrawn from and replaced on shelves, the scuff of sandals and boots on the ancient stone steps and passageways, the scratch-scratch of nib on paper, the sighs of the students.

The tall woman, sitting hunched at the littered table in the sunlit alcove, bent over the ancient papyrus scroll, one hand holding a parchment roll open, the other absently twirling a thin, bronze stylus in her fingers, did not appear to notice. All her attention was fixed on the words before her.

Her brow furrowed in fierce concentration as she traced the line of spidery Greek letters with the stylus, ignoring the beating heat of the sun on the back of her hand. *Just as the change is always other and other, so the time is too, though the whole time in sum is the same. For the now is the same X, whatever X it may be which makes it what it is; but its being is not the same. It is the now that measures time...*

"... Lady? Are you there?"

The woman frowned but said nothing, brushing a strand of her hair behind her ear and stabbing her stylus into the thin wax of her tablet.

...considered as before and after. The now is in a way the same, and in a way not the same: considered as being at different stages, it is different...that is what it is for it to

*be a now...but whatever it is that makes it a now is the same...**

Quick, anxious steps on the stairs that led up to her quiet space were coming closer.

"Hypatia? Lady?" The voice was louder, breathless, insistent.

She sighed and rubbed her forehead in irritation, her train of thought broken. "I'm here, Orestes."

A young man appeared at the top of the steps, his curly, black hair standing up in crazy waves from a scarred forehead. He was breathing heavily, as if from some exertion, but he halted as soon as his eyes settled on hers, hovering and tentative. "Are you alright?" the young man stuttered. "I heard about the disturbance in the city precinct...."

She made a quick, disparaging snort. "It was nothing. Two Christians arguing with one another over a trick in the market place." When he didn't comment, she shifted the parchments self-consciously about on the table. "It was nothing," she repeated, darting a defensive glance up at him.

He was staring at her, his arms crossed over a small, linen-wrapped package against his chest and a frown drawing his brows close.

She snorted again. "One was trying to pass off walking quickly over hot coals as some sort of divine miracle. As if the divine can be reduced to parlour tricks and such nonsense. Do sit down, Orestes. You are blocking the light."

The youth slowly lowered himself to sit opposite her, the package still cradled in his arms. "I heard that the Prefect was called to break up the fighting," he said stubbornly.

She rolled her eyes. "Fighting? A few stones hurled and a lot of shouting."

"You should take more care, going about the city as you do. It is not safe for a woman to be so...."

She felt a hot flush of anger in her chest, and her chin raised. "'So', what, Orestes? I ride about the city as I always have done. It is my prerogative to do so."

Orestes muttered something under his breath that sounded like, "...*arrogance*," and she felt her anger softening.

"Perhaps," she murmured quietly. "Enough squabbling, Orestes. I shall do as I always have done, and no doubt you shall continue to scold me for it."

She waved off his half-formed protest, leaning forwards instead and pointing at the linen-wrapped article in his arms. "Is that the new astrolabe?" she asked, changing the subject deliberately, her voice raised in excited anticipation. "I didn't know that Borusius had finished it - show me!"

Orestes smiled at her impatience and placed it carefully onto the table top.

She reached forward eagerly and pulled the linen covering to one side, revealing a brightly polished circular device, some eight inches or so across, composed of a series of interlinked plates, each one decorated with intricately etched designs. Letters, symbols and numbers vied with each other. The plates were formed in different metals. Bronze, steel, copper... and a mixture of other alloys which were not so commonly used.

She couldn't help herself. "It's beautiful," she breathed. Her fingers brushed over the top plate, the intricately carved metal net that formed the outermost layer of the astrolabe, and she felt a familiar and thrilling sense as the metal called to her. She shivered at the sensation, half afraid of her body's reaction. "And Borusius was able to incorporate my design for the mechanism entirely?"

Orestes nodded. "He's some sort of magician. I don't know how he is able to create such intricate perfection."

"How many times do I have to tell you, Orestes? There is no such thing as magic," she snapped, fighting the blush that fought to stain her cheeks with colour. "Only logic, reason and method. Have I taught you nothing?"

Orestes grinned again and bowed his head. "As you say, Lady," he agreed with mock seriousness. "Logic, reason and method."

"And the divine," she added firmly, still not prepared to let him off the hook.

He leaned forward. "*However* that may be revealed," he whispered and quirked an eyebrow.

"You are incorrigible," she threw back at him, but her fingers, tracing lightly over the finely engraved wheels of the astrolabe, brought her attention back to the mechanism on the table.

"He smelted the bronze as you instructed - the black sand is buried within the central piece." Orestes pulled a humorous grimace. "He said that it nearly killed him to deliberately put something so impure into such a beautiful creation."

Hypatia smiled as she pictured the huge smith, his heavy brow furrowed in concentration as she had explained her designs, her measurements, and the specific materials that she insisted he use. It had taken hours to go through the specifications, and at the end of their meeting, when she had asked if he thought such a thing could be made, the smith had settled back into his chair and pulled his fingers through the great tangled beard he wore, snagging the fingers roughly in the wiry strands.

Hypatia had watched for his answer, her breath caught in her throat, heart thundering beneath her ribs. The artisan blacksmiths of Alexandria were the best in the world, and Borusius was the best of them all. If he could not achieve the level of perfection she was asking for, the delicate precision needed to make the mechanism function as she had designed it, then her ideas would forever remain trapped in mere theoretical discourse. The relief when the giant smith had grunted his assent had sent her head swimming.

She picked the astrolabe up and made to flip it over in her hands, but Orestes caught her fingers in his. "Careful," he admonished. "With all that Numidian sand in there, the metal could snap easily. Borusius was practically weeping at the prospect."

Hypatia nodded and turned the mechanism over gently, taking care to support it as fully as she could in her hands. She smiled as the tiny cogs and wheels of the complicated mechanism came into view through the finely wrought holes in the back of the device.

"The sand is key," she said softly, almost to herself. "Earth in metal, sand in glass."

She turned the astrolabe carefully once more so that it was facing upwards again. The markings were correct. She could see the relationship between the stars, the path of the sun, the division of the skies into measurable units. She squinted past the rete into the heart of the device, her eyes focusing on the intersecting plates behind it. The stereoscopic projection looked perfect, a looping, scaled network of astrological lines mapping the night sky...

"Lady?"

His quiet question startled her. She felt herself flush in embarrassment that she had been caught up in thrall at the beautiful, intricate thing.

Orestes cleared his throat and she saw him tactfully avert his eyes. "Why is this one so... different?" he asked softly. "It is easily twice the thickness of Theon's astrolabe, with so many more plates, and the *rete*... I've never seen one so detailed. What...?"

She smiled at him, feeling the delight sparkle through her at his question and a thrill of nervousness as she wondered if the machine, despite all her careful calculations would actually *work*. "Do you remember what Aristotle teaches us about time?"

Orestes tapped his fingers on the parchment covering the table. *He's a good student*, she thought, *intelligent and dogged in his desire to learn, although his emotions all too often overwhelm his reason.*

"He speaks about time being in relation to movement," he began tentatively.

"Yes," she agreed. Placing the astrolabe carefully down on the table before her, Hypatia's fingers found the tiny switch at the side of the astrolabe, hidden beneath one of the edges, and carefully touched it. Her heart in her mouth, chest thrumming with sudden nervousness, she flicked it downwards.

Immediately, the device began to emit a whirring and clicking sound, and the plates of the astrolabe began to move. The golden *rete* moved slowly, and within the body of the device, the plates circled and moved at different rates, shifting and aligning beneath it.

"Oh Lady...," Orestes breathed. "This *is* magic...!"

She made a sharp, disparaging noise. "I've already told you, Orestes. You are as superstitious as those monks in the precinct. There is no such thing as *magic*. It's a mechanism. Cogs, gears and wheels, driven by springs of coiled steel."

She crushed the rebellious thought that stole into her mind at the thought of the black sands at the heart of the device.

"If we had magic - we would know everything," she continued. "We'd know the future, what form the universe really takes.... We would not be scrabbling around in the dust of our own ignorance, clutching at dreams and visions. We could see the Wanderers' paths in the sky... understand the depths of the oceans... cure all ills... be masters of life itself." "There. Is. No. Magic." She punctuated her words with a stab of her fingers on the table.

She didn't mention the reaction that her body had to the black sands. For how could she explain the desperate calling that she felt when she had first encountered the strange material - a dark, glass like residue from a huge, ancient crater to the west of the city.

Orestes stared at the whirling astrolabe. "It's beautiful," he said eventually. "But I still don't understand. What does Aristotle have to do with it?"

"Aristotle claims that 'time is a number of motion in respect of before and after'," she recited. "I simply calculated the changes that we might see to the night sky if we accept that the stars and planets are in motion as he suggests."

Orestes' eyes widened as the implications of her words hit home. "But... but...," he stuttered. "That means... you have charted the universe, through *time*," he whispered.

The astrolabe whirled quietly before them.

"Yes," she said, watching him closely, wondering if he could work it all out for himself.

Orestes stared back. "Such knowledge," he breathed. "You... you could predict the future... predict the pathways of the Wanderers... understand the very universe itself...."

Hypatia carefully reached out and flicked the little switch upwards, pausing the mechanism. "Perhaps more than that," she whispered. "It is a first step down a path that Aristotle himself suggested."

Orestes' brow furrowed as he fought to follow her train of thought. She watched him study the device carefully, noting the specific markings that were carefully etched into its surfaces.

"What is that inscription on the rim of the *mater*?" he asked, running his fingers lightly around the outer circlet of inscribed bronze. He squinted at it, his lips moving slightly as he read the unfamiliar symbols.

She shifted self-consciously on her seat. It had been a moment of vanity, she was certain, but her instincts had insisted on naming the device. "The name of the thing increases the power of the thing," she murmured, thinking of the black sands at the astrolabe's heart, hoping against all sense and reason that she was right about the power that they held.

"*El... Tirin...*" Orestes stumbled over the words, looking up at her in confusion.

"I have named it for what it is," she said quietly. "Or what it might become... in the language of the Numidians, the symbols say *El-Ouak-Tiriner*". Time Turner."

"You cannot mean...?" he suggested, disbelief clearly evident in his voice.

"Yes," she said calmly.

Hypatia carefully picked up the astrolabe in her hands and considered the time it had taken her to conceive and produce the plans for it, to say nothing of Borusius' skill and effort. The diffused sunlight from the window above reflected warmly from its surface.

It was a truly beautiful mechanism, both in terms of its design as well as its function. Even though it was still now, she could still feel its *potential* in her hands. She frowned at the odd sensation in her hands, sensing the black sands as they curled and twisted, trapped within the carefully smelted metal inside the device. She could sense a restlessness within the machine itself, an echo of that same uncomfortable sensation that had caused her palms to prickle and her skin to itch when she allowed the black sands to run through her fingers.

It pulled her close and terrified her in equal measure.

"But Aristotle tells us that such a thing is not possible!" Orestes protested, drawing her attention. "Travelling through time is inconceivable."

"Is it?" she argued, hunching forwards over the table towards him. "Pliny talks about the cyclical nature of time... the Stoics believed that all things come from and return to the Mind Fire... Parmenides goes further, maintaining that time, motion and change are illusions." She paused, flicking a glance towards the window and the market place beyond. "While the Christians, of course, contend that time is linear, beginning with the act of creation by God and ending with the end of the world. A finite line... like an arrow, shot from a bow. Humans are born, live and die." She moved her hand like a blade along an imaginary line as she spoke, punctuating her explanation with a sharp, chopping motion.

"I believe that this device will allow me to test those theories. Any evidence to the contrary will confound that linear view... and perhaps..." she sat back, regarding him steadily, "*perhaps* I can make a difference to the madness out there, the madness that sees men fight and kill each other over the existence of one God or another."

A few seconds passed.

"How?" Orestes blurted out.

Hypatia stroked the finely wrought metal of the *rete* with the tips of her fingers. Of all her experiments, perhaps this would be the most extraordinary.

She took a deep breath.

"We are going to bury it, of course."

The pressure from his bladder was insistent.

He turned to the old toilet with its poorly mended, cracked cistern lid, raised the seat and grimaced slightly as he let a stream of urine flow into the pan. He noted dispassionately that the colour was quite dark. After he finished and tucked himself back into his skiddies, he reached around the side of the toilet and poured some bleach into the bowl before flushing it. The smell of the disinfectant was harsh in his nostrils, and he recoiled slightly as his eyes began to smart.

He turned on the taps at the sink and waited a few seconds until the water stopped running a sickly yellow colour, then washed his hands, shaking them dry before wiping them on his underpants. His face itched, and he raised his head to look at himself in the old mirrored cupboard above the sink.

Dark, shadowed eyes stared back at him from a face that was gaunt and ravaged. Three weeks' worth of stubble darkened his jaw. His nose, broken once more in prison, had healed reasonably well, but there was further evidence of his recent stay, at the pleasure of the Ministry, in the crisscross of small scars on his forehead and brow line. It had been hard for some of the warders in Azkaban to accept that he had been as innocent as he had claimed. He turned his face to the right and looked at the raised scar tissue on his neck. The regenerated skin was shiny and taut, the scars only partially covered by his beard growth. He ran his fingers lightly over the bumpy, twisted skin and hissed as the nerves in his neck reacted sensitively to the touch. How the guards had enjoyed learning that little weakness, he remembered grimly.

Slowly, he pulled back his lips from his teeth and opened his mouth. His teeth, never his best feature, were yellowing and uneven. He could see where he had lost two molars on the bottom right-hand side of his jaw, but the damage had healed with no evidence of lasting infection. He grunted in satisfaction and hunted about in the small bathroom cabinet for a toothbrush, finding one that looked relatively unused as well as a miraculously unopened tube of toothpaste.

He brushed his teeth, paying careful attention to his gums, scrubbing until he could taste the metallic tang of blood along with the spearmint of the toothpaste. He spat out the residue and rinsed his mouth. Carefully, he replaced the brush and tube in the cupboard and closed it.

He straightened up in front of the mirror and paused, looking critically at the stained shirt that was hanging off his frame. Quickly, he fumbled with the buttons and pushed the shirt backwards, off his shoulders, until it fell to the floor.

Always thin, he was prepared to accept that now he looked emaciated. *Thirty-eight years old what a catch....* His lips twisted sardonically as he looked over the mottled flesh that was stretched over his chest and ribs. His hips jutted forwards above his boxer shorts. His collarbone cast a shadow over his thin chest, and his ribs were clearly evident. A network of bruises and poorly healed cuts and gashes traversed his body, his arms, his upper legs. He remembered the origin of most of them. Some of them had occurred in this room. He shivered involuntarily. With his shirt off, the unpleasant chill of the air in the unheated house was even more penetrating.

Turning away from the mirror, he swept up the crumpled shirt from the floor and padded back to the bedroom. He was fully awake now and not likely to be able to get any more sleep. He had better think about finding something to eat and lighting the back-boiler so that he could get some heating into the house.

A

Three hours later, the ancient coal-fired boiler lit, and three tins of chilli con carne and one of peach segments consumed, Severus Snape was beginning to feel a little easier.

He sat, stretched out in the ancient armchair in front of the boiler, warming his feet in front of its glass-fronted door. He had found his stash of Muggle clothing, a pair of plain black jeans, a flannel shirt, and an old sweater, and the clothes felt comforting and warm. He had raided his father's chest of drawers for fresh socks. He could not bring himself to wear the old man's Y-fronts and so had elected to wear no underwear until he could replace his own. His stained shirt and old boxers were the first things that he had burned in the back boiler after he'd got it to light. Shortly, he would take a bath, once the water had heated up sufficiently. His skin was itching to be thoroughly clean again.

Idly swirling a glass of his father's best whiskey in his hand, regardless of the early morning hour, Severus caught himself watching how the liquid clung to the sides of the tumbler as he rolled it around and around. The early morning sunlight was weakly illuminating the kitchen in which he sat. Dust motes circled lazily in the convection currents from the heater, tumbling unhurriedly through the atmosphere. He looked around the kitchen again, his eyes moving from the formica table tops to the old gas cooker with its eye-level grill and slightly ajar oven door. Every surface was in need of a thorough dust and clean. Severus remembered with a faint pang the times when, as a young boy, he used to help his mother keep the kitchen neat and tidy. "Respectable," his mother had said. "We must keep things respectable, Severus."

Thoughts of his mother threatened to sour his relaxed frame of mind, and he turned his attention away deliberately. He flicked a glance at the plastic, wall-mounted clock over the twin tub in the corner of the room and noted the time and date. December 7th, 1998. Then he took another slug of the whiskey and revelled in the delicious sensation of the burning liquid as it journeyed down his gullet. He had lots of time.

**A*

She came awake in a hot, suffocating embrace. Outside the small bedroom, she could hear enthusiastic shouting and undefinable banging and scraping noises, as if large pieces of furniture were being dragged across the floor.

Behind her, Ron moaned in his sleep and clutched her more tightly, his heavy arm around her waist and chest, his hand possessively about her breast. Thick, hot breath on her neck and shoulders made her more uncomfortable, and the old eiderdown wrapped about her tightly only added to the sensation of being trapped and restrained.

She flicked her fingers, and her wand came into her hand, enabling her to cast a quick Tempus Charm. Before she could read the flickering green numbers in the air, there was a discreet knock at the door, and Molly Weasley entered the room, balancing a teapot and two cups on a tray. Molly froze for a moment on the threshold, seeing Hermione tucked into the same narrow bed as her son, but then Hermione saw the older woman seem to shake herself and then smile as she came bustling into the room.

A look of mutual understanding passed between them, and Hermione relaxed a little too. It was one thing sharing a room with your friend because of the pressure of accommodation, quite another to be discovered in his bed by his mother.

"Good morning, dear," Molly said, fussing with the tea things as she set them down on the empty bed beside her. "Is he awake yet?"

Ron groaned, flashed his mother a bleary eye and rolled away from Hermione, stuffing his head under one of their pillows. A few moments later, his snore caused both women to smile. Hermione struggled to sit up without jolting Ron too much. She was still fighting the blush that was staining her cheeks and neck.

She had not intended to sleep with Ron again last night. There was a desperation to the way he had clung to her. Since she had come back to the Weasleys' house from school on December 17th, Ron had barely let her out of his sight, following her around the house and gardens, making every excuse to cuddle and hold her. Sleeping with him had become an extension of their mutual neediness, and she could not help but feel that it was an attempt to cover up the horrible emptiness that both of them felt now that the war was over and all they had to cope with was the peace.

What was even more disconcerting about the situation was the fact that Molly was so seemingly accepting of their sexual relationship. Before the war, Hermione suspected, her reaction to finding her son in bed with his girlfriend in her house would have been entirely different.

She stared at Molly as the older witch fussed with the tea tray, preparing both cups, then lifting the lid of the teapot and stirring its contents with a whispered charm.

The Tempus Charm had dissipated, and her watch was on the dresser at the side of the room. "What time is it?" Hermione asked.

"Nearly nine," Molly replied, pouring a stream of tea into a cup. She set it beside Hermione on the little rickety bedside cabinet and flashed her a thoughtful look and a slight smile. "I'll leave you... two... to get up. Bill and Fleur will be arriving soon, and to be honest, I could do with a bit more help getting the kitchen organised. Harry and George have moved the tables, but I fear for my crockery if I let them set the lunch places."

Guiltily, Hermione made to push the covers away, but Molly stopped her with a hand on her arm. "No, don't," she said quietly. "I didn't mean it that way. Ginny can help me, or Arthur for that matter, if I can get him out of his shed.... Please take your time."

Ron let out another whimpering snore.

"More nightmares?" asked Molly.

Hermione nodded and shivered. "Both of us," she said simply and clutched the counterpane to her chest.

She felt out of control, like she was riding a Hippogriff and could not dismount. She was nineteen years old, and she felt forty. Her life was mapped out before her and consisted of marriage, children, and watching Ron tinker in his shed.

"You are welcome, dear," said Molly quietly as she shut the door behind her.

A

Severus trod heavily downstairs. Without thinking, he pushed the door open to his front room. The curtains were drawn back, and the watery light of the December morning slanted through the dirty window panes. It was raining. He could hear it spattering on the glass in the quiet of the room. Rain in Cokeworth... of course. He walked over to the window, deliberately ignoring the coffee table as he moved past it. He parted the net curtains and looked into the street. No one was about. The houses on the opposite side of the road were in shadow. He could see Christmas decorations in some of them. One was boarded up and looked abandoned, neon graffiti was sprayed over the metal cages that covered the windows and door of the property, a confused jumble of words and symbols layered aggressively over each other. He looked further down the street and saw nothing but the usual parked cars, rain covered tarmac, and broken pavements.

He stretched his back experimentally and heard it crack as the vertebrae at the base of his spine shifted. He sighed and scratched his face. The cheap disposable razors in the bathroom cupboard had been rusty, and he hadn't trusted them to do the job without leaving his face and neck cut to pieces. He looked bad enough already. Mentally, he added razors to the shopping list in his head, alongside new underwear, food, decent toiletries, and engine oil.

He needed to go out.

He felt a moment of uncertainty, which he quickly quashed, ashamed of himself. Of course he could walk around these streets. "Don't be so fucking stupid," he muttered under his breath. Reluctantly, his eyes slid to the low coffee table in the centre of the front room and the Ministry parcel that had been carefully laid upon it last night. His eyes rested on the gold and purple packaging, the primly rolled scroll poking out of the end of the packet, and the dark tip of his wand. He tightened his jaw into something like a sneer, tuned on his heel and went to find a pair of shoes he could wear.

A

Hermione walked downstairs into a chaotic scene of noise and activity. The long table in the centre of the room had been laid, and there was loud laughter and chatter as Molly organised her family around her. George and Charlie were supervising the potato peeling, charming the skins to wrap themselves around each other until each could be banished into the compost bin. At the cooker, Molly was frying bacon and sausages, the fat spitting and hissing as she cheerfully removed the cooked rashers and added more.

Harry and Ginny were preparing sprouts, heads close together as they competed to strip the little vegetables in time with each other and the loud music playing on the radio. Percy was talking with his father near to the sink as the charmed scrubbing brushes washed the pots and pans from breakfast. Arthur had a slightly glassy expression on his face as listened to his son, but he smiled and nodded while Percy gestured enthusiastically about something with the half-eaten bacon sandwich in his hand.

At the table, little Teddy Lupin was sitting in his highchair while his grandmother Andromeda carefully spooned porridge into his mouth. As Hermione paused on the bottom step, she saw George send a potato peeling directly at Percy's head and then hold his hands up innocently as his older brother wheeled around furiously to remonstrate with him.

Hermione sighed. Family. Christmas was about family. She felt a harsh lump in her throat suddenly as her vision began to swim.

A

Severus had dug about in his old wardrobe and found the army surplus greatcoat that he had bought as a teenager from an Oxfam shop in Manchester. Although it smelt a bit fusty, like everything in the house, it was serviceable and reminded him a little of his old frock coat. Digging into the large pockets, he was also pleased to find a crumpled-up fiver among some old tissues and sweet wrappings. That, plus the little Muggle money he had already liberated from his emergency stores under the floorboards of his bedroom, was enough for his grocery shopping for now. Kicking his feet into a pair of old shoes, he shrugged the coat on and did up the discoloured brass buttons. The coat was made of heavy woollen fabric and felt good on his thin frame.

Thus suitably clothed, he grabbed the small bunch of house keys from the kitchen table, and then he pushed open the back door and walked down the concrete path across the back yard to the coal shed by the back gate. The gate was set flush into the high wall at the back of the house. It was secured by two bolts and a large iron padlock.

Severus paused before the old coal shed and pulled open the rickety wooden door. He felt down the damp brickwork until his fingers rested on a small key that hung on a nail. Long fingers flicked the key into his hand, and he withdrew it. Fastidiously, he brushed away the dirty cobwebs from his sleeve and then used the key to open the padlock on the back gate. Without thinking, he pocketed the padlock and shut the old gate behind him firmly with a well-practiced tug.

He ignored the large brown eagle owl that had swept past him and was now perched on the coal scuttle by the back door.

A

She could still feel Molly's arm holding her tightly about the shoulders, and Hermione blew her nose and smiled a watery grimace of gratitude.

"Alright now, dear?" she said quietly.

Hermione nodded. "Better now. Thank you, Molly," she said, her breath hitching slightly on her reply. "It was just seeing everyone, you know... together..."

Now that her stupid crying fit had abated, the others had got on with their work, encouraged to do so by Molly's urgent shushing.

Andromeda shot her a look of sympathy and understanding that made her feel even worse.

"I know you miss your mum and dad, sweetheart," Molly said. "But I hope that you will look at us now as your family... particularly now, after all...." She smiled encouragingly at Hermione and flicked her eyes upwards at the unmistakable noise of her youngest son coming downstairs.

Ron could not be subtle if he tried. Hermione flushed again at Molly's obvious innuendo and fought the sour, panicky feeling that it engendered in her stomach.

"Hermione, love, could you pass the mince pies? Ta."

Utterly oblivious to the atmosphere around the table, Ron headed immediately for a cup of coffee and a bacon sandwich and then flopped down opposite her. He had put weight on since the summer, but the dark circles under his eyes and the haunted expression on his face could not be hidden by any amount of calories Molly that could get into him. He was still rangy and tall, taller than most of his brothers and his father. She felt a surge of affection for him as she pushed the plate of pies across the table towards him. He picked up two in his large hand and began to eat them, messily.

"Oy! Little brother!" Charlie shouted, flicking a peeling at him. "How about some help with these potatoes, then?"

A

The rain was insistent but not heavy. A thin drizzle settled on his face and caused him to wipe his hand through his hair to push it away from his face as he stalked along the street, shoulders hunched, avoiding the puddles on the street as far as he could. He didn't want to get his feet wet.

Two streets along, and he came to the corner shop, its battered front a familiar and depressing sight. A rudimentary series of fruit and vegetable boxes sat outside the door, covered over by plastic sheeting to protect the contents from the rain. Snape paused and picked up two apples from the nearest box before walking up the two shallow entrance steps and opening the door.

The door jangled cheerfully as he pushed it open, and he walked cautiously inside. He relaxed fractionally as he saw that there was only the shopkeeper within, a bored-looking Asian teenager standing behind the high till desk. Snape nodded a greeting to him, then focused on finding the things he needed.

Ten minutes later, and most of his shopping list filled (including, rather surprisingly, the engine oil), Severus was retracing his steps back towards Spinner's End. The two plastic shopping bags swung rhythmically by his side as he walked. He passed a woman pushing a squirming infant in its buggy, her hair drawn back severely from her face in a tight pony tail, and two young men both wearing baggy jogging suits and peaked caps set jauntily on the back of their heads. He kept his head down, right hand shoved into his pocket as he passed both groups, avoiding eye contact and carefully stepping to one side, giving them ground.

At the junction between Sharp Street and Coke Row, Severus paused. His fingers traced the outline of the old padlock key that he had impulsively taken from the coal shed. *Why wait?* He hefted the weight of the two shopping bags in his other hand, turned left and walked stiffly down the side street towards the lock-up garages at the end of the dilapidated cul-de-sac.

His feet scuffed the uneven pavement as he walked, and he wondered if the old car was even still in his father's garage. He hadn't seen it in years, even when he'd spent time at the house between terms when he had worked at Hogwarts. He had wanted nothing to do with anything the old man valued.

The rain spattered on the plastic bags in his hand, and he quickened his pace as he approached the bend in the street, unconsciously squaring his shoulders and bracing himself, lest anyone be lying in wait to jump him around the blind corner. Part of him imagined that drug addicts on the lookout for anything to sell must have tried to break into the garage a long time ago, but he was prepared to bet that Toby's security measures would have been sufficiently effective enough to guard against the usual opportunistic thieves that operated in this area. That was why he'd brought the engine oil, after all.

What we have, we hold, yer little shit His father's voice broke through his jumbled thoughts, and his features twisted at the memory of his dad's face, vivid in the harsh electric light of the dank garage, the smudge of engine oil on his stubbled cheek as he leaned down and stared at the young boy beside him, unflinching.

Severus rounded the corner and relaxed slightly as he saw the little square at the end of the street was empty. Facing him was a series of concrete garages, each door of corrugated steel painted council blue, some scrubbed clean and kept well, others covered in graffiti or fly posters advertising local events or long passed elections. He counted along the right-hand side until his eyes came to rest on the fifth garage, its blue door virtually obscured by years' worth of detritus and propaganda. He looked about him quickly and walked closer to the door, searching for the padlock that would have secured it in place.

True enough, a large iron padlock, somewhat rusted with lack of use, was firmly attached to the lip of the steel door and a sturdy iron hook embedded in the concrete ground. Severus smiled, gently lowered his shopping to the ground and fingered the small set of keys in his pocket.

A

A few minutes later, with the aid of a smear of engine oil for lubrication, the old padlock sprung apart. Severus straightened up, yanking the metal lip of the garage door open and grunting with satisfaction when he heard and felt the stiff hinges of the steel door begin to shift. The door swung outwards and upwards.

He blinked a bit and pushed his cleaner hand through his hair again to clear his eyes.

Within the garage, his father's pale grey Mark II Ford Cortina stood mutely before him.

Snape couldn't help himself from grinning.

"Wish I had a grey Cortina / whiplash arial, racing trim" he murmured under his breath. *"Cortina owner, no-one meaner / Wish that I could be like him."* Lyrics to a song had never been more appropriate, and less so at the same time.

There was a brief and annoyed chitter behind him, but he picked up his shopping without turning around and walked purposefully into the garage.

A

"You coming out for a quick scratch game until we lose the light, Ron?"

"Nah, mate, I'm fine right here, eh, sweetheart?" Ron answered, shifting his hold on Hermione a little, but then encouraging her to sink back against him. Feeling flustered and a little upset by her own reaction she had been relieved when Harry had suggested that Ron go outside with him and a little stifled by the heat of his body Hermione retreated back into her orderly thoughts of gratitude and warmth for the love and support of Ron and his family. *There could not be anything else, could there?*

It was mid-afternoon when Harry, Ginny, Bill, Percy, George and Charlie had laughingly re-entered the quiet kitchen of The Burrow, bringing with them a blast of freezing air and snowflakes as well as the good-natured disagreements and accusations of cheating that inevitably accompanied such family games. Hermione winced at the sudden noise and twisted up and out from Ron's embrace. He looked up at her, his eyebrows drawn together in a hurt question, and she without thinking snapped, "I'm going to the toilet, okay?" before wheeling away and taking the stairs two at a time.

Behind her, she heard Ginny telling Ron to leave her alone for a bit until she had calmed down. Oddly, that was just as annoying.

A

She didn't go to the bathroom, but onwards and upwards, trying to put as much distance as she could between her and everyone downstairs.

She ended up in the tiny attic room, tucked snugly into the eaves of the house, with its peeling wallpaper and low ceiling, sobbing on the camp bed in the centre of it.

She missed her parents.

She missed them.

And she missed the quiet of Christmas.

Only children were supposed to crave the company of others, but Hermione had never regretted not having siblings. She was not spoiled or self-absorbed; rather, she enjoyed her own company and the personal satisfaction of reading, research, and discovery. Home life at the Grangers' had been neat and orderly. Both of Hermione's parents were methodical scientists, both thoughtful and quiet. All three of them enjoyed reading rather than watching television. Hermione's father had had a computer at home, but its use was confined to work emails and some desultory 'surfing'.

Hermione felt fresh tears well up as she imagined the last time that she saw her parents, both reading quietly, her father's glasses perched on the end of his nose as he

became lost in the latest academic journal.

Now she would not have that ever again. The Memory Charms that she had carefully layered on top of each other had proved so strong that to try and break them might cause both of them irreparable damage.

So, no more quiet Granger Christmases.

She cried for a little longer and then pulled herself together, dashing her tears away with rough fingers. She remembered little Teddy, whose parents were dead, not living a happy and oblivious life on the sun-kissed Gold Coast.

She would just have to get over this silly phase and get used to her new life as a Weasley.

She needed to find a washbasin to clean herself up she supposed that she looked bloated and horrible from crying and that would attract even more attention when she went back downstairs.

As she pushed herself off the little bed, she heard a determined scratching noise at the small window of the room.

Hovering outside and trying to gain entrance was a large mottled-breasted eagle owl.

A

Severus spent half an hour working on the Cortina while the rain rattled on the old metal of the garage door. It was enough time for him to establish that Toby had lavished more care and attention on his bloody car than on his family.

Everything was in working order apart from the inevitable flat battery. The tyres were still serviceable, as far as he could tell, and the spark plugs seemed to be completely clear from any rust damage. As a precaution, he changed the oil in the sump and checked the oil filter for any condensation, but he could not find any. He just needed to find a new battery, and the car should start.

As he worked, he steadily ignored both the memories of his father that sprang up around him in this place as well as the increasingly frantic attempts of the Ministry owl who was still trying to deliver its letter.

A

Hermione tugged the little wooden door open and stood back, allowing the owl to flap unceremoniously into the tiny bedroom.

Once it had righted itself, with much hooting and screeching, and found a perch on the little cane chair beside the bed, it held out one of its clawed feet to better enable her to detach its message.

"For me?" Hermione asked the bird, surprised. The eagle owl hooted again, more firmly this time.

Who would be writing to me from the Ministry? Hermione thought to herself as she fiddled with the ties to the parchment envelope around the bird's leg. The only people that she knew who worked at the Ministry were sitting downstairs, and they had no need to contact her so officially.

She freed the letter and turned the envelope over in her fingers. There was her address on the front: Miss Hermione Granger, The Smallest Attic Room, The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole, Devon.

She looked again at the owl, who was regarding her with great disdain.

"I'm sorry, I haven't got anything to eat up here," she said apologetically. The bird shook out its feathers almost like a shrug.

She flipped the envelope over. The official Ministry seal on the rear seemed to be encircled by another design, one that appeared to shimmer and move before her eyes. She frowned and focused more carefully. "Department of Mysteries," she read carefully as the imagery flashed in and out of sight.

Why would anyone want to contact me from there? she asked herself again, but her heartbeat was speeding up and her mind whorled with interest.

She snapped the wax seal below the printed design and opened the envelope.

A

Severus wondered how long it was possible to ignore an owl from the Ministry.

What had started as a spontaneous gesture had mutated throughout the afternoon and early evening into a game of obfuscation, delay, and destruction.

He had walked past the owl at the garage, the metallic rending noise from the old steel garage door shutting having startled it sufficiently to get it airborne. On his way home, tucking his chin into the collar of the great coat to stay out of the swirling, bitter wind and sleet, he was dive-bombed by the wretched bird until he had begun to swing the plastic bags with his groceries inside over his head to keep the bloody thing from actually hitting him. He was grateful that no one else was around in the shitty weather to see the ridiculous sight.

Once home, he had shut the door and stoked up the fire in the stove. Eventually, the screeching from the two birds had grown to such a level that it sounded as if someone was being attacked outside his back door and he had relented and let the bloody things into the kitchen, whereupon he had detached the letter from each bird and quickly thrown the small parchment envelopes into the fire of the stove. Both owls gave him such a look of fury and annoyance that Severus laughed out loud the first laugh he had had in days. It surprised him to hear his own voice, rough and cracked from ill-use and injury.

Accepting a piece of bacon each from his outstretched fingers (each nipping a different digit), the birds flew out of the window in a flurry of affronted feathers.

Three hours later, to his amusement, the smaller of the birds was back with another letter tied carefully to his leg. Having delicately untied the letter and immediately tossed it into the greedy flames of the little stove, he endured about half a minute of angry bird-rant before the aggravated avian allowed itself to be ushered out of the back door.

Then, at ten o'clock, he was startled out of a doze in the battered old chair by the dying stove by the same bird battering on the window of the back door, screeching to be let in.

He winced as he got to his feet and shuffled across the peeling Lino floor to where the animal was scrabbling for attention.

He pulled the door open, shivering at the blast of icy air that surged into the kitchen, and the bird flew past him, landing on the back of one of the old kitchen chairs. This time, as he approached it, the bird seemed to pull its leg away from him, chittering loudly. It was dark brown, small, and mottled in appearance, and Severus idly wondered what breed it could be before reaching again for the Ministry envelope tied to its leg.

The bird nipped his hand sharply and flapped its wings at him. Severus pulled his hand back quickly.

"What?" he asked, his voice slightly muffled as he sucked at the small wound on the back of his hand.

The bird chittered at him again, short, staccato phrases, punctuated with irritable whistles.

Ginny caught hold of his arm. "Ron..."

He flapped his arm, dislodging her. "It's alright, Gin," he said, "she gets like this sometimes. She'll be fine. When we're married..."

"Shut up! Just shut up!" Hermione screeched. She stumbled backwards, away from his outstretched hand, her boots catching a little on the uneven flagstones on the kitchen floor. Her breath was catching in her chest. She could not stand it anymore. *Trapped! Smothered!*

Her magic rushed through her, and she dimly heard the crockery rattle on the shelves of the Welsh dresser in the kitchen. Ron and Ginny cried out, but Hermione didn't listen. She could not think, could not stop. Images rushed through her mind, snapshots of places and people that she had known and lost... locations for safety, long since discarded from the War.

"Hermione, love..."

Instinctive and desperate, she grabbed hold of one of the pictures in her mind as her magic pulsed.

Destination.

Deliberation.

Determination.

Desperation.

A

The constriction of Apparition had taken her breath away. Automatically, she put out a hand to steady herself, and her fingers connected with a slick block of frozen stone.

Instinctively, she ducked into a crouch, wand out in her shaking hand.

She blinked rapidly, heart hammering in her chest, panic closing her airways and sending adrenaline rushing through her chest and limbs.

Quiet. So different from the Burrow's heat and noise....

She made herself take a deep breath.

Dark... cold rain.

Trees and gravestones.

A churchyard... She was in a churchyard.

She panned her wand around her in a semicircle. More grave markers and dark bushes. Yew trees and fir, some rhododendrons, their leaves glistening with moisture, bowed and still.

Breathing out, she stood uncertainly, belatedly checking herself for signs of Splinching. *Nothing missing*, she noted with relief.

The cold was beginning to permeate her clothing, making her shiver. She folded her arms around her torso as she looked about, trying to confirm her exact whereabouts.

Her breath caught as she recognised the old church with its square bell tower and squat nave. She remembered the footpath that weaved its way around the ancient stones and overgrown memorials. Strange that she should have grasped hold of *these* memories, *this* image to fuel her Apparition! Echoes of her previous visit, clutching onto Harry's coat as they stared down at the very gravestone that she stood over now, washed over her. The fear and uncertainty that had suffused her then, in those frighteningly dark days before Voldemort's downfall, was profoundly mirrored in her current emotional state.

Ron had not been with them then, and he wasn't here now.

Her throat constricted. *Then*, lost and confused by the riddle of the Hallows and the search for Voldemort's ruptured soul fragments, all she had wanted was to see him again, feel the comforting strength of his large, warm hands on her upper arms and hear his gruff reassurances. *But now...?*

Shit.

Shit.

Now Ron's hands were stifling her. The long length of him covering her in bed restricted rather than protected. His reassurances were hollow in her ears.

This wasn't war; this was the rest of her days.

She realised that she was shaking, and the wool from her Weasley jumper felt scratchy under the skin of her hands. She felt the smooth wood of her wand and the crackle of the letter from the Department in her fists.

Shit.

What am I going to do?

Satisfied that she was alone in the churchyard, she slid her wand into the charmed pocket in her jeans and squinted at the envelope in her hands.

It was *the* opportunity for research into memory and time, the chance to hold an apprenticeship with one of the leading researchers into theoretical Arithmancy. It was independence, something in which she could make her mark... make a difference, all bound up in an invitation to meet a Master Peverell from the Department of Mysteries. She shivered slightly at the name, reminding herself that the Hallows were all but out of reach. Still, compared with a future of domesticity and suffocation, the letter seemed like a lifeline.

But Ron couldn't see it.

Her throat hurt. Tears felt like acid in her eyes.

She clutched the letter to her chest, feeling her heart thunder underneath the crisp paper in her fingers.

In her mind's eye, she saw Molly's disappointed expression, mixed with the implacable protectiveness the Weasley matriarch felt for all her children. *She'll never forgive me. Remember when she thought I'd two-timed Harry?*

A sob escaped her mouth, driven out like bile.

She saw Ron's dear, familiar face and began to cry harder, her knees sinking into the wet grass at the base of a headstone.

A

A sudden scraping noise caused her to look up. To her horror, she saw the black outline of a man almost upon her.

Snatchers!

She cried out in alarm, instinctively twisting away from the man and overbalancing, falling into the muddy puddle to the left of the gravestone. *Where's my wand?* she thought frantically, scrabbling to right herself, pushing her hair out of her eyes. Cold water splashed on her neck and soaked through the wool of her jumper. The cold of it brought her up short, made her stop, reminded her that she wasn't a hunted fugitive any more and that the Dark Lord was dead. *Oh God, am I going mad?* She forced herself to calm down and look again at the man who had surprised her. There was something familiar about him... if she could just *think!*

Like a ghostly vision, Professor Snape took another hesitant step towards her into the diffused light from the church tower, his feet scuffing the gravel again. She stared at him, her mouth open in utter shock. *Him? Here? What on earth...?*

"Wwhat are you doing here?" He seemed as surprised as she was. His voice was the same as she remembered from his trial still deep and resonant, but scratched, as if he was forcing his larynx to work.

She tried to speak, but all that came out was a strangled, "You!"

He stood still for the moment, looking dumbly at her, as if in shock.

She struggled to her feet and stared at him, her mind a whirl of questions. He jerked forward towards her, and automatically she flinched backwards, still trying to get used to seeing him in front of her in this of all places. Embarrassed by her initial reaction, she stuffed the letter from Master Peverell back into her jean's pocket and stood straighter.

"Miss Granger," he began, but then stopped speaking as they stared at each other. Hermione allowed her eyes to roam over his face. He looked dreadful. Always thin, he now looked positively emaciated. Dark shadows bruised the skin under his eyes, his cheeks were sunken and pockmarked with dark stubble. He had cut his hair! It still fell in greasy bangs around his face, but was shorter at the neck and sides. She looked him up and down, unable to stop her features twisting in sympathy. *What on earth is he wearing?* Some old shapeless army greatcoat was wrapped about his person. *Is he sleeping rough?* Her eyes came to rest on the flowers in his hand. *White lilies*, she thought. *Why...?*

He caught her eye and straightened, his face resolving into a familiar sneer. "What are you doing here?" he asked abruptly, and she saw the hand gripping the flowers tighten, the flowers pulled almost behind him in a defensive gesture.

Her heart had ceased its frantic beating, and she was feeling calmer. She cocked her head on one side. "I heard that you were released," she said quietly. "It must have been horrible in there."

She saw him flinch. "That's none of your business, Miss Granger," he said sharply. "I asked you a question. What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at some sort of party by now with your fellow saviours of the free world?"

The irony of the question helped her to recover further. *If you only knew*, she thought. She looked at the gravestone, then at the ground at his feet. She was suddenly exhausted.

"No, I'm not," she replied quietly. "Look, do... do you mind if we sit down, Professor?" She looked beyond him to the small wooden bench. At least it wasn't the ground.

He seemed torn, but then his lip curled, and for a moment, she thought he would make some sort of withering comment. But as the seconds ticked by, she saw his face change and something speculative flashed across it. He gave a mocking little bow, gesturing with the bunch of lilies in his hand that she should precede him to the bench.

Merlin, it's cold! Slowly, so as not to startle him, she drew her wand and cast a Warming Charm, sitting down onto the rough wood with relief. As an afterthought, she added a Silencing Charm too a variant of one of the protective Wards she had cast during the War. She needed to think and the spell created a quiet space around them both.

After a moment, she felt him settle beside her and was surprised that he allowed his leg to rest against hers, despite the narrowness of the bench. She realised that she was shaking and gripped her knees, willing her legs to still.

A few seconds passed. She began to feel warmer. His was a curiously calming presence next to her, in his old coat and tatty jeans. Not quite the imposing Professor from school any more.

But he hasn't been that for a while, she realised with an uncomfortable shiver. She remembered his trial. He had looked much smaller then, too... much smaller than Ron, or even Arthur, when the Weasley's had stood flanking either side of him in the bleak courtroom. A thin, wiry man, all sinew and tension, like a fox in a trap.

She darted a quick look at the hand he had grasped on his lap. The fingers were clawed defensively on the cellophane around the flowers.

As if aware of her scrutiny, his leg jiggled, and he exhaled sharply. He seemed on edge. Nervous, even.

"Well, Miss Granger?" he asked. "We are sitting down. Why are you here?"

"I...I walked out on Ron tonight. I think," she said. *There.* She had said it. She felt her world begin to crumble again and fought the sob rising in her throat.

He snorted disparagingly, as if this news was unimportant and childish.

Bastard, she thought. *I'm not at school anymore.* She pulled herself together, the sob replaced by ire.

He seemed to notice her annoyance and shifted a little on the bench beside her.

He coughed. "That... does not explain why you are here tonight," he said gruffly. "Here, by..." He gestured sharply with his long fingers at the graveyard. "Here..." he said again.

She breathed out slowly. "I don't know why I'm here, really," she said. "I wasn't sure where I was when I arrived. It was only after I saw Harry's parents' graves that I knew for sure."

"You Apparated without a clear idea of your destination? That was a very stupid thing to do."

The familiar sneer was back in his voice, and she felt herself flush defensively. "I was very upset. I didn't Splinch myself. This wasn't the first place that I thought of, just the one that came to me at the last second. Besides," she added wryly, "I've had quite a bit of practice Apparating quickly."

He didn't reply, and she sniffed, still looking at her hands. He twisted his wrist and looked at his cheap Muggle wristwatch.

"You... walked out...?" he prompted her impatiently.

"I've had a job offer for when I leave school this year. Well, actually it's just an interview, but..." The tiny diamond from Ron's ring glinted in the light from the bell tower. She didn't need to say any more.

"I fail to see...?"

She made a small exasperated noise and waved her ring finger at him. "Can't you...?"

Surely his much vaunted Slytherin cunning would be able to read these signs!

"I am perfectly capable of seeing your finger, Miss Granger," he replied testily. "It is the implication of your words that is difficult to discern."

"Bloody wanker," she muttered under her breath and gripped her knees again. *Stay calm. Keep calm....*

"I take it that Mr Weasley does not wish you to accept this job," he said eventually, looking again at his wristwatch.

"Fifty points to Slytherin, Professor," she said sourly, then turned once more to look at him. "Ron wants to get married as soon as possible and start a family. He's a good man, and I owe him all of them, really so much.... perhaps I shouldn't.... But it's the most extraordinary opportunity and..." She cleared her throat. "Ron's been my boyfriend ever since the last battle we got engaged just before I went back to school in September..."

She saw him roll his eyes and felt another flash of exasperation at his reaction. Really did he have to be *quite* so patronising?

"And we've been through such a lot together," she continued, gritting her teeth against his sneering. "He'll be devastated. But it's not just him. If I break up with Ron, then I lose everyone I know. Everyone is related to him, either his best friend or part of his family. Molly will never understand, and Ginny is my only girlfriend and Harry..."

"So, go back to your Weasley, and be happy," he responded nastily. "There are worse things than being disappointed in your career. Really, Miss Granger, your love life is none of my concern. And now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Oh, you don't have the first bloody clue, do you?" she countered, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "Of course you wouldn't understand. You always kept everyone at a distance! It's not just Ron I was crying about I won't have anyone anymore." She sighed and looked down at her hands clenched together in her lap. "I'll be on my own, completely alone. I'll be a pariah cut off from everyone I know."

There was a short pause.

"What about your parents?" he asked awkwardly.

"They're gone," she said flatly.

"Gone?" He seemed surprised. For the first time in their conversation, she felt that she had his genuine attention. *Of course*, she thought, *why should he know about this?*

"I modified their memories and sent them away to Australia so that Voldemort could not find them. After the war, we tried to reverse the charms that I had laid, but it didn't work. Now I can't ever bring them back."

She began to shake as the emotions crowded in on her again. Why couldn't she stop crying? *Stupid, stupid, stupid... pull yourself together, you silly idiot!*

She forced herself to stay in control.

"I just can't spend the rest of my life... cooking and knitting jumpers....," she muttered distractedly. "I really want to go to that appointment, and I don't know what to do anymore. I feel... lost. And I can't talk to anyone about it because everyone is just getting on and they'd tell me to do the same, and I should be able to do that, I should... Oh, this is so bloody stupid."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the crumpled Ministry letter, rolling it between her fingers and staring at the seal of the Department of Mysteries as it phased in and out. She felt Snape go very still beside her and suddenly remembered that she had no idea why he was here... and with lilies in his hand.

Suddenly, she didn't want to think about her problems anymore. She looked at him again. He was staring at the envelope in her hand, as if he recognised it.

"How are you, Professor?" she asked and saw him jerk backwards, his face closing up.

"How am I?" he asked, seemingly confused by her question. "How am I?" he repeated, recovering some of his customary sarcasm. "Why, Miss Granger, I have never been better, clearly." He waved his free hand at his shabby clothes and unkempt appearance. "After all, Azkaban is a veritable health farm, nowadays. Spending three months in there alongside my fellow surviving Death Eaters each of whom I had counted as my friend at one point or another and all of whom I had betrayed by my actions during the wars was one of the most peaceful and satisfying experiences of my life so far."

Oh. Of course. She blushed in embarrassment.

"Well, you're free now," she said in a small, hopeful voice.

"Oh, yes," he snapped bitterly, "it is even more wonderful to be 'free', Miss Granger. I suppose that I should be grateful that I am no longer gainfully employed teaching dunderheads or at the beck and call of a madman. I am 'free', indeed."

"Although, of course," he continued, relentlessly sarcastic, "'freedom' is rather a relative concept, in my case. The terms of my release included placing me under The Trace, as if I were a child. Every time I do the smallest of charms, some little tosser in the Ministry knows exactly where I am and what I am doing. I have no employment prospects, little life savings, and the respectable wizarding media have branded me either a lovesick fool or a bloodthirsty traitor who tortured children...."

"There are worse things than being disappointed in your career," she snapped back at him, setting her jaw. He wasn't the only one who was in a shitty situation.

There was a short, dangerous pause. Hermione held her breath as a range of emotions flickered over his sour and pinched features. Eventually, he seemed to relax.

"Touché, Miss Granger," he acknowledged with a small, wry grin. "Touché."

"So," she continued, emboldened. "Neither of us has particularly good prospects, then. I am stuck either becoming my future mother-in-law or cutting myself off again from all the family I have... And you... well... you....," her voice faded into silence before his expression.

He arched an eyebrow. "I wasn't supposed to survive the war, Miss Granger, but I did."

She said nothing, waiting for him to finish.

After another moment, he cleared his throat. "And now, apart from doing everything I can to disguise where I am and what I am doing to piss off the Ministry of Morons... for the first time since I was a boy... I don't know what I'm going to do." The last sentence would have been impossible to hear, but for her Silencing Charm.

"I-I need... I have something that I must do," he blurted out, his voice sounding loud and raw. He cradled the lilies in his arms self-consciously, and she immediately understood why he was there.

"Oh, Professor," she breathed. "I'm so sorry if I've intruded onto your remembrances."

He seemed to jump a little, glowering at her. "What?"

"I'm sorry," she repeated quickly, not wishing to break the delicate accord that had sprung up between them. "You came here to pay your respects. That's why you're here, isn't it? I can see that. Of course, I'll-I'll leave you alone."

He made a small, gruff sound in his throat as she made to rise from the bench, and she sat back down again, regarding him warily. He looked at her for another long moment, and then he made a small, involuntary gesture with the bunch of flowers towards the Potters' graves.

"I have never missed this moment," he said quietly. "To lay the flowers as the church bells strike midnight."

He seemed to flush a little under her scrutiny. "There's a charm," he muttered. "It-it reminds me... and helps me to focus... I need it so that I can feel...."

Ohhh, she thought. *He must be thinking of Lily....* She remembered Harry's hurried and breathless account of Snape's memories after he had defeated Voldemort in the Great Hall, and she felt a rush of acute embarrassment that this most private of men had revealed so much of himself in those last, desperate moments. She wondered if he knew that Harry had told her about the memories, and then realised that he must know. His devotion for Harry's mother had been the cornerstone of his defence at the Trials after all. She squirmed at the memory of Harry's righteous indignation as he had stood in Snape's defence... and the awful shame and humiliation on Snape's face as Harry had spoken.

"I understand," she said, trying to be gentle.

His eyes locked onto hers, and she felt the faintest whisper of his mind stretch out to her, but before she could respond, he reared backwards and jerked to his feet awkwardly, moving silently over towards the pale marble gravestone before them.

She watched him approach the Potters' grave and saw his shoulders hunch, the flowers heavy in his arms. He stood still, head bowed, waiting for the bells to ring midnight.

The bells!

Quickly, she cancelled her Silencing Charm, and the graveyard was flooded once more with the sound of the bells from the tower ringing slowly to a standstill.

As the tenor struck the first chime, something extraordinary happened. The gravestone before him shimmered, and a sparkling mist at the base of the white stone coalesced into a beautiful bunch of crystal lilies.

The bell struck again.

She stood without thinking, drawn to the lilies, fascinated by the nature of what was obviously a very intricate and powerful charm. Snape's body was shaking with tension.

Three bells.

Four.

The breath caught in her throat as she watched him slowly, reluctantly, withdraw his black wand from the pocket of the great coat.

Five.

She remembered what he had said about the Ministry knowing what he did and when. She was suddenly filled with indignation that they should intrude on his most private moment. Perhaps if she cast the charm, then his actions would remain private....

Six.

She reached over and softly but deliberately placed her hand on top of his. "Don't," she whispered. "The Ministry..."

She felt his shock. His hand trembled for a moment and then stilled under her cold fingers.

"Let me do it for you," she said. "What's the incantation?"

"Semper meminere," he muttered, "Before the twelfth chime, but..."

There was no more time to think about it. She called upon her magic and cast the charm, feeling the power of it rush through her, through his wand, and outwards towards the gravestone.

The crystal lilies exploded into a cloud of fine, sparkling motes of dust which showered both of them. She gasped as the cold particles landed on the skin of her face and hands, suddenly terrified of what would happen. Snape was standing still beside her, resigned... almost as if he was waiting for something more to occur. She was very conscious of their close proximity. The old greatcoat was scratchy against her cheek and smelt slightly stale, as if it had been in storage for a long time. She wondered where he was living, how he was living, what he was going to do with the rest of his life, whether he had anyone to call a friend....

He seemed to be tensing himself, although the hand beneath hers was warm and steady to her touch.

She shivered again and gasped as she felt a build up of magical energy that set her skin dancing. Snape's hand flexed and twisted under hers, his body pulling away from hers as he turned towards...

A raw surge of energy hit her without warning. Her head snapped backwards, smacking sharply into his chin, and she bit her tongue. There was no time to feel the pain of the impact, however, as an extraordinary rush of feelings exploded in her chest, making her giddy with emotion.

She was suffused with love. A love that was all encompassing, so deep and so desperate that it had to be clung onto, like a dying man grasping hold of hope.

She cried out in fear and shock, off balance and terrified.

His arms were around her now, steadying her, clutching her closer to him so that her face was buried in his neck. She could feel the ripples of hot scar tissue underneath her lips.

Her hands came about his waist, and she clung onto him for support, for anchorage.

What the hell is happening? Her breath caught as she rode the overwhelming sensations. She felt strange and powerful, and her body shook with the elation of possession. It was like the first time that she had known magic, using mother's wand to cast a spell, feeling the power of it thrum through her chest. It was knowing that she was the cleverest in the class, being proud of that fact and thrilled to see others looking at her with sour envy.

It was the thrill of mastering the exactitude of potion making. The selfish joy she knew when making amendments and variations of a standard recipe yielded better, stronger, more potent results. *Crush the Sopophorous beans, you old fool.* The delight in mastery of control, the ability to gain access, undetected, to another's thoughts... the savage pleasure in seeing an enemy fail.

Hermione was confused. These memories and emotions were alien to her and frighteningly unfamiliar like jagged bones digging into her skin.

A fresh wave of longing washed over her, and Hermione moaned, clutching the rough wool of Snape's coat tighter. He was nuzzling her face, rubbing the stubble of his cheek against hers, murmuring soothing nonsense in her ear.

I am hers, and she is mine. Bright eyes and a confident swagger, robes swishing as she swung her hips from side to side. A backward glance and she was lost, trotting after the green-eyed witch, charged with passion and filled with despair as she watched her slip further and further away into the arms of another.

What we have, we hold, yer little shit. But she couldn't she couldn't hold on to her! So capable of love, wanting nothing more than to be with that other person who looked at her without pity, who protected her... who cared for her, when no one else had ever, ever...

Hermione cried out as adrenaline pounded through her. She felt a dizzying sense of arousal, of protectiveness, crashing against all the other feelings and memories, almost too much to bear. *Was this Snape?* She trembled in shock at the realisation. Her old professor was holding onto her, pouring everything into her... shuddering with the power of it, desperate, passionate and lonely.

She burrowed even closer to him, burying herself in his skin. *She would save him! She would keep him safe.* She felt his throat constrict as he swallowed, and she slowly began to run her lips over the sweaty skin of his scarred neck, inching upwards towards the sharp angle of his jawline. His hands cupped the back of her head, fingers tangling in her hair. His head turned, and she clutched him even tighter, desperately holding on as his emotions engulfed her, her own need rising up to meet his. She wanted him... wanted more... *wanted...*

"Yes," she mumbled into his delicate skin, "want you... need this...."

He trembled and shook in turn, rocking her, responding to her arousal with short juddering gasps, his fingers flexing rhythmically in her hair.

Abruptly, he froze, and Hermione became aware that the thrum of the magic that had driven her emotions since she had cast the charm had ebbed and withdrawn.

Oh, my God, she thought. *I nearly kissed him.* The extraordinary nature of that thought threatened to overwhelm her.

For a few moments, she continued to stand awkwardly in his arms, too embarrassed to move, trying to control her breathing and make sense of the last few moments.

She became aware of the sound of the bells in the church tower, the cold from the night on her neck and cheek, the feeling of his chest rising and falling erratically against her own.

Slowly and stiffly, he began to pull back, dropping his hands from her head and stepping away from her.

She could not bear to look at him, but at least he didn't say anything. She dragged her fingers through her hair and resettled her baggy jumper on her shoulders.

He still didn't speak.

Hermione's body was still thrumming with the aftershocks of the charm. Her fingers tingled with it, and she rubbed her hand hard against her thigh while darting quick looks around her. Exuberant shouts and cheers were audible now from the village square beyond the churchyard, and the whistle and pop of fireworks made an explosive counterpoint to the jangling noise of the church bells.

Gradually, Hermione calmed. She was grateful to be a logical woman, one who prized Arithmancy and science much more highly than Divination and guesswork. She strove for objectivity in her thinking. Experiencing his memories and emotions had been very difficult, and yet the charm had left behind a strange sense of resolution within her a determination to follow her own path, rather than compromising herself to meet others' expectations. She felt a thin pulse of defiant self-confidence rise within her, in a way that she had not felt it for months.

Midnight. It was a new year. *A new start,* she realised. *I'm not going to be frightened any more.*

She thought of the letter from the Department of Mysteries, crumpled in her pocket... the chance for a new challenge, for a career that would take her away from the memories of past battles and the suffocation of domestic duties... and she wanted it. She wasn't afraid of the future.

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her head to meet his eyes.

She had expected vitriol and bitterness, his trademark defensive spite, but instead, she was surprised to see him staring back at her, his eyes wide, shocked and unguarded. His hands hung limply at his sides.

They stood in a frozen tableau, a thin man in a battered old coat, a shivering young woman in a hideous jumper.

Then, slowly and to her utter astonishment, his face split into a broad, open grin.

He looked younger, boyish even. His dark eyes danced and sparkled in the intermittent flares of the new year fireworks.

This was something new.

She smiled tentatively in return.

"Miss Granger," he said, and his voice was rough with emotion. "May I offer you a lift to your appointment in London?"

*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*

A/N: If this chapter seems somehow familiar, that's because it is. Another version of this chapter has been published before as a stand-alone story called *The Redemption Charm*. That story was exclusively from Severus' point of view. After it was published, I was approached by a number of readers to see if I would consider writing a sequel. I decided that I would because I had a number of ideas that contextualised what happened in that one-shot... and that is how the whole of *Time's Arrow* came about. Thank you to all of you who take the time to comment and review. I really appreciate it! Love and hugs as always to my Alpha / Beta team of beawesley2, Clairvoyant and nagandsev. I own nothing you recognise from the Harry Potter universe (although I really wish I did!)....

*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*

Chapter 3

Chapter 4 of 9

The first time Severus Snape saw Hermione Granger after New Year's Eve was at the Ministry, and he was a different person.

Chapter 3

The first time Severus Snape saw Hermione Granger after New Year's Eve was at the Ministry, and he was a different person.

The Muggle whose identity he assumed that morning was a short, fair-haired man with pudgy features and a beer belly. Severus had brushed past him for a moment in a bookshop on the Charing Cross road and pocketed the sparse hairs that had fallen to the shoulders of the Muggle's coat. It was a simple procedure, and one that he had to undertake once every month now that he was required to attend probation meetings with the supercilious wanker in charge of his parole in the very heart of the Ministry itself.

He walked stiffly through the dark-tiled Atrium towards the lifts at the end of the cavernous space on legs that were too stubby, flexing his upper arms inside a jacket that was too tight across the shoulders, his current level of physical discomfort enhancing the sense of psychological unease that he felt while walking through the place.

The bright golden statues of the Fountain of Magical Brethren loomed over him as he approached the lifts at the end of the hallway, and his lips twisted into a sneer at the sight. *Order is restored*, he thought sourly, allowing his eyes to rest for a moment on the wizard's supercilious expression in the centre of the triumphant scene.

The fountain was a reconstruction of the old one, a nearly perfect copy. The simpering witch still fluttered her eyelashes at the tall, handsome wizard who was so confidently thrusting his wand towards the sky. About them, the figures of the centaur, goblin, and elf gambolled and grovelled, grateful for the mighty wizard's protection. The cheerful tinkling of the magical jets of water into the fountain enhanced the ghastly sight.

Snape's upper lip drew back in a snarl.

At least Thickness' statue hadn't been so fucking hypocritical. The expression on the elf's face in particular drew his eye, and suddenly, he was reminded of that ludicrous campaign that Granger had initiated at school before the war. He wondered what had come of it, what had become of Granger's idealism and her commitment to the cause. He pictured her at Hogwarts now, studying for her NEWTs whilst earnestly knitting endless supplies of socks, her concentration focused, her fingers moving the yarn dextrously between the needles while reciting her latest essay to a dictaquil. He snorted at his own imagination, shoving his pudgy hands into his pockets and feeling the wand jab again at his wrist.

He stomped past the fountain towards the lifts, determined to get the whole humiliating business of reporting in over and done with again as quickly as possible.

It was quarter to eleven, and the Atrium was comparatively quiet for a weekday. A few Ministry officials and workers were milling about before the lifts, some chatting animatedly to each other. One wizard was tapping his foot on the shining marble beneath his feet, checking his fob watch and hissing slightly between his teeth. Beside the impatient wizard, two female members of the Wizengamot stood regally still, court papers clutched firmly to their ample bosoms. Severus' eyes rested upon them. Their dull cherry vestments seemed almost like the colour of old blood in the diminished light of the elevator alcoves. He wondered who was in the dock this morning and squinted more closely at the papers. As he did so, one suddenly turned about, catching his eye, her own eyebrow arched in a question. Severus blinked and looked away, the sudden memory of his own trial causing him to flush and clench his fists reflexively. He felt his wand digging uncomfortably into the skin of his arm and shivered. *Come on, come on... where's the bloody lift?*

After a few more seconds, a sharp *ting!* announced its arrival, and Severus shuffled into the small space after the others, shouldering his way past the uniformed lift attendant and turning to face outwards towards the Atrium. He hated these bloody lifts. Hated the Ministry, hated the terms of his parole, hated...

"Wait, please!"

Snape started. *That voice!* Automatically, he thrust out his hand, wincing as the metal of the closing cage door struck his outstretched wrist. The lift attendant reached forward and pulled the cage door back, shaking his head at Snape's impetuosity. Behind him, Severus heard a groan from the impatient wizard, but gave it no attention as a young witch had come into view around one of the dark-tiled columns running awkwardly towards him.

It was hard to see her face because she was balancing a messy bundle of manuscripts in her arms on top of a large leather-bound book, but he was sure it was Granger.

Her hair was still in the crazy bouffant mess he remembered from the churchyard, although her clothes were different. In the place of the awful sweater and ragged jeans, she was wearing a long blue coat and smart trousers. A pair of spectacles were propped up on her head, keeping her unruly mane at bay to a degree, but she was puffing a long curl away from her cheek as she walked hurriedly along towards him.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" she called breathlessly, and he *knew* it was her.

He was not able to look away as she approached, staring at her virtually open mouthed. *What on earth is she doing here? She should be at school, knitting socks, or organising study groups, or....* She caught his eye and tentatively smiled politely at him, slightly confused and embarrassed by his intense attention. He felt himself begin to flush and grow angry. Was she embarrassed to see him? Ashamed to admit their acquaintance? He felt himself scowl defensively and saw her eyes grow wide in surprise and confusion.

Suddenly, he remembered the Polyjuice. Of course, she would not recognise him! He looked away from her sharply and clenched his fingers into fists. *Idiot... idiot!* What was the matter with him? He shuffled backwards, making a space for her to enter.

"Department of Mysteries, please," she said to the attendant, and the lift sprang into life, rocketing backwards before plunging down.

She stumbled slightly against him, and a few of the manuscripts slipped. She cried out sharply, and without thinking, he put out his hand to catch the falling parchments and steady the heavy folio in her arms.

"Let me," he said, clasping the parchments to his chest. *Let me carry your books for you*, he thought absurdly in a sing-song cadence and felt stupid. She blushed prettily and hefted the heavy leather tome carefully in her arms, lowering it so that her arms could hang down. "Thanks," she said. "It's too delicate for a Shrinking Charm... and it's so heavy!"

The lift slowed to a stop.

"Level Four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures," the attendant intoned in a deep voice.

Snape and Hermione shifted to the side as a number of passengers sidled off the lift.

Now the space was less crowded, and they could move a little further apart. They stood awkwardly looking anywhere other than at each other as the elevator shuddered into movement again.

Snape grasped the rolled parchments to his chest and tried to think of a sensible question that a perfect stranger might ask to a woman he had just met. He gestured towards the book in her arms. "You need that for your work here?" he managed. *Why did this bloody Muggle have to have such a squeaky voice?*

She nodded and darted a look at the other occupants of the lift. "I've just picked it up from the British Museum," she whispered confidentially.

"But... shouldn't you still be at Hogwarts?" he blurted out.

Perhaps it was the way that he had said it, perhaps it was the intensity of his expression, or the assumption that she would be attending that Wizarding school and not another... but he saw her eyes widen with a sudden, terrible recognition.

"Oh, my God," she breathed. "Professor?"

He looked steadily at her, although his heart was racing. He was acutely conscious of the other members of the lift carriage. *How the hell could she see through this disguise?* She met his regard, her eyes widening as each slow second ticked past.

The lift slowed again, jolting to a stop.

"Basement Level Six, Department of Magical Transport!" The attendant called as the lift cage doors opened before them.

Conversations carried on around them

A group of wizards from the Department of International Magical Cooperation, judging from their official robes, pushed forward into the elevator, all discussing loudly their experiences at the conference they had recently attended. There had been a great deal of *magical cooperation* between the French Delegation and their own, apparently.

The lift jolted and resumed its journey.

Detaching one hand from the book for a moment, she reached over to his jacket lapel and pulled him closer to her. The rolled parchments crumpled between them.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed in a furious whisper. "I thought you said you were emigrating!"

Indeed he had. In the car, during the long drive from Wiltshire to London, he had told her many things. Flushed with the extraordinary effects of the Redemption Charm, he had jabbered on at her about setting up his own business, getting far away from Ministry controls, finding his way to some out-of-the-way place where the British Aurors would not care to follow him. He had even shown her the Muggle ticket he had purchased for the ferry crossing.

Best *not* to tell her, then, about the three miserable days he had spent in a hostel in Dover when he realised that the Ministry's parole extended to physically preventing him from leaving the bounds of the country. Every time he had approached the harbour with the intent of boarding a ship, he'd found himself doubled over in agony, retching up his guts at the prospect of leaving. On the third day, he had resorted to magic, trying to break the bonds that tied him... but to no avail.

The smug Ministry Howler that had arrived less than an hour later reminded him once more that the Trace had been activated and asked what his business was on the South Coast.

So his plans had changed.

He frowned. "I have an appointment," he murmured shortly. "And I'll thank you to keep your voice down. The purpose of a disguise, after all, is to remain anonymous."

"I can't believe you are here in London! Do you live here now? What are you doing for work...?"

He raised his hand to forestall any further questions, glowering at her. But she smiled impishly at him, and he realised to his surprise that she appeared to be genuinely pleased to see him.

"Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement," the attendant announced as the lift slowed to a stop once again.

Severus twitched. His floor. He made to offer her parchments back to her and saw her eyes widening as she understood.

"Will you be long?" she asked, her voice slightly muffled by the papers, her brown eyes wide. He felt a sudden, odd twist in his gut.

The lift's doors slowly opened.

"That depends on whether I have been a good boy this month or not," he bit out eventually. "Goodbye, Miss Granger."

He stepped out of the lift and into the corridor, unconsciously straightening his jacket sleeves and standing as tall as his borrowed body would allow while watching the lift doors close.

"Wait!" she called out, juggling the items in her arms as the carriage jerked backwards. "Would you like...?" Her voice was lost as the lift whisked her away.

A

An hour later, Severus stalked blindly out of the Auror Headquarters with his head held rigid and his body stiff. All he wanted was a decent cup of tea and the chance to get away from those patronisingly overbearing, pompous bastards....

"And *were* you...?"

Her voice startled him, and he spun around to find her sitting on the little bench opposite the lift.

She was still wearing her blue mackintosh, but the book and the parchments were gone. He stopped still, looking at her suspiciously, but she seemed relaxed and pleased to see him again.

He frowned. "Was I what?" he snapped, still pissed off and uncomfortable, having spent the past forty minutes justifying every spell his wand had cast or he had uttered in the past four weeks to a teenager in a suit who had cracked his knuckles and asked impertinent questions about his "whereabouts" and "associates". *Two more years*, Snape thought. *Two more years*.

She got to her feet and stood in front of him, their eyes level. "A good boy?" she teased gently.

He flushed hotly, ready to snarl in response, but she put her hand on his and squeezed. Pins and needles skittered under his skin, and he inhaled sharply. Perhaps the Polyjuice was wearing off? The boomslang skin had been almost rotten, but it had been the best he could procure at the time.... She dropped his hand quickly, stepping back.

"Umm... would you like a coffee? Or lunch?" she offered. "The Ministry canteen isn't bad, and..."

"Not here," he said sharply.

"Okay," she replied, unruffled by his ill-tempered attitude. "I know somewhere else we can go. Shall I Apparate us?"

A

They emerged somewhere in Holborn, and he followed her out of the narrow alleyway to a small set of steps cut down into the pavement and surrounded by an ornate cage of Victorian ironwork. Above the entrance was a large sign saying, "Espresso + Food, Grind In, Dine Out".

He hung back, staring, but she grasped the top of the handrail and started to walk down the steps confidently.

"Granger...", he rasped dangerously. "Is this a public convenience?"

She shot him an amused look over her shoulder, rolling her eyes and grinning, clearly delighted by his reaction. "Relax, Professor; I am not going to the toilet with you. Come on this is one of the best cafés in Central London!"

Snape followed her gingerly down the stairs.

The coffee shop was certainly recognisable as a converted Victorian public convenience. The walls were covered in neat orders of lustrous burgundy, deep green, and white oblong tiles. The old cisterns and urinals were even in place, cleverly adapted to house light fittings and a new oak breakfast bar along the wall. The place was busy; Snape counted more than a dozen patrons sitting or standing at the breakfast bar or at the till. Some were on their own, reading books or newspapers while their coffees cooled, others in small groups, clustered around the one table at the end of the narrow space.

Hermione walked forward towards it, struggling out of her coat and draping it over her arm.

She dug in the pockets of her trousers. "The coffee is great here," she enthused. "And they serve it with little cocoa dusted chocolate drops that are to die for!"

Snape shrugged and nodded, still taken aback by his surroundings. She touched his hand gently again to get his attention, and his skin prickled. He wondered how long it would be before he transformed back into himself.

"Tea. Just black tea," he muttered. "Thank you."

She placed their orders and led him onwards towards the table at the end.

He followed her until she flopped down on one of the orange benches that surrounded the table, placing her coat beside her. He saw her arm move slightly and raised his eyebrows as one by one, the other occupants of the table hurriedly finished their drinks and got up to leave.

She looked up at him and blushed. "I thought we could do with some privacy," she said by means of explanation.

"How very thoughtful of you," he replied, sliding into the bench opposite her.

"Well," she said defensively, "It's not for long, and I come here quite a bit."

She fidgeted in her seat, rubbing her hands awkwardly together. "I'm sorry, but this is weird," she blurted. "I can't believe you are here. I mean, I know you are here, but you don't look like you, and..." Her voice trailed off into silence.

"The Ministry allows me to brew certain potions under strict conditions," he said grudgingly. Such as," he waved his hand rather theatrically over his face, "Polyjuice."

She smirked. "I think you underestimate how terrifying you are."

"I think you underestimate how hysterical other people become." He shrugged. "It was my suggestion. I have no desire to be anybody's whipping boy. Anonymity suits me."

"And what do you do for a living?"

"I work in a Muggle market, selling jokes." She laughed out loud this time, a deep guffaw, and he found the corners of his lips twitch in response.

"You ordered a tea and a coffee?" The busy waitress deposited the cups and saucers with practiced ease, then slid two little bowls of small chocolates beside the drinks. Hermione smiled her thanks. Severus pushed his away in distaste.

"No?" Hermione lifted an eyebrow, and her lips twitched upwards again. "More for me!"

Snape pulled what he hoped looked like a disdainful face and leaned forward to add sugar to his tea.

"So," he said, readying himself to ask her what she was doing at the Ministry.

"So." Hermione took a sip from her coffee and replaced the cup in its saucer.

He arched an eyebrow.

A

"You got the job, then," he observed, thinking of the letter she had held so protectively in her hand during their meeting in the graveyard and of the others that had been written to *him* over the past months as well.

She flushed. "Yes. I'm not allowed to tell you what I'm doing, but it is very exciting. Lots of research and... and I feel that I could really make a difference."

"And... Weasley?" he said, flicking a pointed look at her unmistakably bare ring finger.

"He works here too. In a different department."

She took a sip from her coffee and replaced the cup carefully on its saucer. "Ron and I are trying again... together," she added.

He said nothing, surprised by how much that admission irritated him.

"Molly still behaves as if I am about to explode," she continued, then flashed a wicked grin. "I quite like that, actually."

A

"I took my NEWTs early." She shrugged. "After... after New Year's Eve... I didn't want to just follow the rules, so I asked Minerva if I could have special dispensation to sit

them in late January. That meant I could come and work here."

Snape coughed, unused to making such conversation. "What did you...," he began.

"Afraid I did better than you, Professor?" She grinned slyly.

Snape bristled at her assumption that he'd give a toss about what grades she had achieved, but she laughed and laid her fingers unselfconsciously on the back of his hand for a moment. The contact felt strange on his transformed skin.

"I'm kidding I'm sorry," she chuckled. "I did alright. But it all seems such a long time ago now."

A

"Why won't you reply to Professor Peverell's letters?" she asked, fixing him with a sharp look.

Snape startled. *How the hell do you know about the letters?* he thought in surprise. "I do reply to them," he huffed eventually.

She gave him a *look*.

"I mean," she clarified, "why won't you reply more than writing, 'fuck off, Peverell,' at the bottom of them? You don't even read them."

"How do you know I don't read them?" he countered, trying to cover his discomfort by fiddling with the sugar bowl.

"Because I wrote the last three," she replied calmly. "You sent the owl straight back with 'fuck off, Peverell' written on each of them. I was rather offended...."

Snape squirmed slightly in his seat.

"Until I remembered it was you," she finished, popping one of the tiny chocolates into her mouth and closing her eyes in a moment of silent rapture.

A

"So you're investigating the early Christian Church," he said, keeping his tone light and conversational. "I had no idea the Department of Mysteries was interested in magical history."

Hermione's eyes opened immediately.

Snape steepled his fingers in front of his mouth. "That was the Estienne edition of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, wasn't it? The first edition? Published in 1443?"

"How did you...?" She frowned, "You git! Did you use Legilimency on me?"

Severus grinned and shook his head slightly. "It was written on the spine of the book you were carrying. I merely used my powers of observation," he said smugly. *Until I remembered it was you. Cheeky cow.*

She said nothing, but her lips were pressed together tightly.

"And the parchments that you had such difficulty hanging on to," he continued, enjoying the game. "A series of diagrams based around conic sections...?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I told you, Professor. I can't talk about it... any of it, outside the Department."

She made an exasperated noise and flapped her hand at him. "Professor Peverell has invited you to come, and I have for that matter, forty-seven times, and all we get is 'fuck off'! Why are you so reluctant to meet him?"

Snape dropped his hands in front of him and leaned forward "Why do you think for a moment I would want to come to the Ministry *voluntarily*?" he snarled. "I have a life to lead... and a parole to keep."

"I thought you might be interested," she said, studiously not looking at him. "The opportunity to snoop about the Department. See what we are working on. Find out why I *might* be researching Muggle physics and early Christian history."

"Another coffee for you and your daughter, sir?" the waitress asked, bustling about them, collecting empty dishes.

Snape jumped and sat back, flashing a quick, sharp look at the Muggle. *Had she overheard anything?* he wondered, and then he flushed at the implication of the woman's words.

The waitress looked at him, polite but busy, both hands holding empty dishes.

He cleared his throat. "Yes... yes, please. A coffee and a tea and some more of those chocolate drops that she likes so much. And..."

The waitress turned around.

"And she's not my daughter," he finished lamely, much to Hermione's amusement.

A

"So what are you *really* doing for a living?" she asked. "Something to do with potions, I suppose...?"

He tapped the table with a stubby finger.

"*Occasionally*," he replied, deliberately drawing the word out.

"You run an apothecary somewhere...?"

"No."

"Mail order love potions?"

"Not allowed under my parole."

"Teaching?"

"Absolutely not."

She grinned. "I could tell it wasn't your ideal career."

"Combining volatile and hazardous substances with hormonally charged teenagers? It was a dream come true," he deadpanned.

Her head fell to one side, and her eyes took on a calculating look.

"Umm.... Barista?" she hazarded.

"A what?"

She smiled. "They make coffee."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Don't you just need to add water to ground coffee beans?"

"Yes. I suppose you do.... Perfumer?"

Snort. "No. Flashy nonsense."

"Pharmacist?"

"Muggle potions? You need a licence for that."

"Which you have not got...?"

"Not officially, no."

"Right.... Chef."

He shuddered. "No."

"Vintner?"

"Wine making? Interesting suggestion... but no."

"Rat catcher?"

"No poisons," he said flatly.

She tapped a finger on her chin. "Only occasionally potions...? What about the Dark Arts?"

He glowered. "Never. Change the subject."

A

She sat quietly, watching him poke around in the sugar bowl for another sachet of white sugar.

He flicked the wrap of paper, driving the contents to the bottom of the thin packet. "What about all the secrets? All the *mystery*? You won't tell me what you are doing, but you'll give me a guided tour...?" he asked, pouring the white grains into his tea cup.

"I can't tell you what I'm doing," she repeated patiently, softly. "It's *forbidden*. I made an oath. Outside the Department, nothing can be discussed." She leaned forward, her eyes dancing with suppressed knowledge. "But I could *show* you... I know you're interested..." She waggled her eyebrows.

Of course he was interested.

"I don't want to meet Peverell. Or any other bloody Ministry apparatchik," he said harshly.

"Do I count?" she said, affecting hurt in her voice. "I can meet you on a Saturday if you like. Not many people are there over the weekends. I would really like to ask your advice about, um, whatever it is that I might be doing."

The invitation hung in the air, delicately twirling before his grasp. He thought about the routine of his daily existence, how bored he had become... the look on his parole officer's face at the thought of Snape being invited into the heart of the Department of Mysteries... how she had smiled at him... and bought him tea... and *touched* him.

His fingers traced a sigil in the spilt tea on the table. "I suppose I could possibly manage a Sunday afternoon," he allowed grudgingly.

She smiled brilliantly back at him, and then her coat chirped beside her. It chirped again, then exploded into a high-pitched pentatonic scale.

Snape scowled. He avoided all methods of Muggle communication, as did most wizards.

Hermione grabbed at the macintosh, muttering something about a missed appointment and quickly silenced the offending mobile phone.

"Sorry. Sorry. Where were we? This Sunday?" She looked at him, her face a mixture of calculation and eagerness. Unaccountably, he was reminded of hand waving and huge teeth.

What the hell are you doing? he asked himself. Before he could say no, however, her mobile telephone began ringing again, and she pulled it out of her coat pocket.

"Bugger it... I'd better get back," she said, flustered. "I'm sorry it's Ron. I was supposed to meet him for lunch and..." She pulled a face.

Weasley, he thought, and a sudden flutter of irritation shivering through him.

"This Sunday, then, *Miss* Granger," he said smoothly, careful to place the emphasis just so. "Ten o'clock? At the Marylebone entrance?"

She nodded quickly, struggling to her feet. He stood and indicated that she precede him, but as she squeezed past, she stopped and paused. "You will... be *yourself* this time, on Sunday?" she asked. "I mean, after all," she continued in a rush, "there won't be anyone about, and Polyjuice is horrible, and..."

He tried to quirk an eyebrow, but his face was unresponsive to the command, the first signs that the potion really was wearing off. He only had minutes before his body began to change back to its true form. It was time to leave.

"I'll consider it," he said, his voice noticeably deeper than a few moments ago. "Now, *go*."

Chapter 4

Chapter 5 of 9

"What do you want, Mister Weasley?" Severus asked, trying to make his voice sound reasonable. The adrenaline pumping around his system was making his head swim, and the vicious sensation of nausea in his stomach had returned with a vengeance.

Weasley scowled. "Where is she?" he asked.

"Who?" Snape said without thinking.

Chapter 4

Severus Snape hunched further over his whiskey in the far corner of the Elephant's Head on Camden High Street and tried to quell the awful feeling in his stomach. From his vantage point in a dingy booth at the end of the bar, he glared balefully out at the Friday night crowd.

The last time he had felt *this* bad was at the height of the Second War. His stomach roiled and knotted, and his head pounded despite the two variants of pain potion that he had swallowed before leaving his pokey flat that evening. His heart was racing, and he felt lightheaded and skittish with nerves.

In the older days, he would have masked his symptoms with several variants of illegal drugs, but he was worried that The Trace would pick up such brewing activities. He took a deep and shuddering breath, clutching his drink with a sweating hand, remembering snatches of his latest, humiliating conversation with the parole Auror. His eyes strayed unwillingly to the narrow band of ink on his wrist that marked his sentence the thin row of magical sigils, barely visible on the surface of his skin, which bound his magic to the Ministry.

Fuck it.

He tossed the remains of the scotch back, wincing as he felt the liquid burn its way down his sensitive gullet, then pushed himself upright and stumbled from his seat to the bar to order another.

When he had first started to feel unwell, despite the range of Muggle and magical remedies he had taken, he had become increasingly paranoid, convinced that something or *someone* had poisoned him. He had sat in his tiny bedsit, drinking cups of peppermint tea to try to master the nausea in his stomach, fighting the irrational desire to contact the Aurors to demand an explanation.

Eventually, he had been determined to get out of the dingy flat in order to mask the unpleasant sensations with alcohol. During the wars, he had tried hard not to drink too much, fearing an increased dependency on the substance.

But now the wars are over, he thought morosely. It's time to celebrate.

Around his solitary bar stool, the noise of the pub was rowdy and cheerful. Snape shot a resentful look to his left at the small group of city types, their shiny suits incongruous in the deliberately grungy interior decor of the small pub. One young man, his expensive-looking shirt tucked into his trousers, his tie artfully pulled loose around his neck, was telling a story to his mates, his eyes bright and engaging as he delivered the punch line to the roaring approval of his fellows. Someone clapped the storyteller on the back and offered to buy him another. Snape watched the young man look at his watch, something flickering across his features, before he straightened back up and laughingly agreed.

Just like Dad, Snape thought. How many times had Toby told stories like that? Been bought another pint by his mates... just one more for the road? With sudden insight, Snape wondered who was waiting for the young man at home while he was getting pissed in the pub instead? The thought increased the sour taste in his mouth from the whiskey.

His stomach kicked again, and he rubbed at his gut, scowling. The pounding in his head had abated a little, but his skin was still itching uncomfortably. He was on edge, awkward... *unsettled* even. He frowned, picking at the beer mat on the bar in front of him.

Perhaps he should go home.

It had been two months since New Year's Eve, and he was still in London, living in a tiny bedsit in a dingy backstreet a few minutes walk away.

He remembered the concerned and earnest look on the face of his probation officer when he had reluctantly admitted to relocating to the capital: "Why have you moved to London, Mister Snape? Who are you associating with here?"

He had replied carefully, explaining how much better his employment opportunities were nearer to the Ministry about his desire to develop private clients for a new homeopathic remedy business in the Muggle world. He had assured the nosey idiot that he was seeing no one from his past life, all the time watching the tick-tick-tick of the little machines on the dapper little wizard's desk that confirmed his words.

It was *almost* completely the truth of course; those were always the best sort of lies.

For how could he explain his utterly irrational decision not to go back to Spinners' End, after he had taken Granger to London, when he did not even understand it himself?

What on earth had prompted him, shortly after dropping Granger off in central London (*Just right here, Professor Parvati's flat is only around the corner...*), to stop the Cortina outside a garishly decorated classic car sales garage?

And what had caused the equally impulsive notion to come into his head that he could find a new sense of direction in the capital if he sold the car and used that and his meagre savings to fund his keep?

He sighed and rubbed at his temple. He remembered thinking that staying in London was madness at the time, but sitting in the cooling interior of the old Cortina, waiting for the salesroom to open, his imagination had teemed with extracts from the Muggle musicals that his mother had so loved (*"If I can make it there / I'll make it anywhere!"*,

"Who will buy this wonderful morning?"). He had succumbed to a strange, unfamiliar, and overwhelming sense of hope.

Thankfully, his newfound optimism had not dulled his wits. He had known the value of the car, and despite all of his bluster and obfuscation, so did the owner of the salesroom. Snape had walked away, some forty-five minutes later, with a few thousand pounds in his pocket and the determination to begin anew.

He had taken a room in a cheap hotel and subjected himself to a series of desultory viewings of outrageously expensive flats, accompanied by a series of increasingly exasperated and irritable letting agents, until he had encountered the elderly Mrs Claypole and her recently vacated basement room.

Any attempts on his part to find employment, however, had foundered in the intervening weeks on the shores of his own apathy. Instead, he had spent his days listlessly wandering about the city visiting galleries, museums, and libraries, warming cold fingers on styrofoam cups of tea from frozen street vendors.

The barmaid reappeared with his next round. He paid her and swirled the amber liquid around in the glass.

His thoughts turned to the weekend ahead of him and more specifically to the appointment he had made to tour Granger's work at the Department. He did not want to admit to himself just how much he was looking forward to it. *Two days to go.* The fingers of his other hand strayed unbidden to his inside jacket pocket and the cool oblong of cardboard that had arrived the day after their meeting in the coffee house. His lips quirked upwards as his fingertips caressed the sharp edge of the note.

"Dear Professor Snape," the note read in her firm and precise handwriting. *"It was lovely to see you earlier today. I am sending this note to remind you that you PROMISED to meet me at ten o'clock on Sunday, 8th February, at the entrance to the Ministry of Magic on Marylebone Street. Yours sincerely, Hermione Granger. P.S. I have spelled this note to be flame and ink resistant. It also has a mild sticking charm on it, in case you wanted to put it somewhere to remind you."*

Snape rolled his eyes at the memory of her words and pushed the card more deeply into the breast pocket of his worn jacket, his cheeks rather warm. *Bloody woman.*

He sank the remaining scotch in his glass, shivering a little, and gestured to the barmaid for another. She was a pretty girl with a wide, open face that reminded him a little of Granger... despite the fact that the barmaid's hair was piled high on top of her head, coloured a disconcertingly bright orange, and her lip, eyebrow, and nose all sported elaborate piercings. Severus stared at her, fascinated by the way the metal in her lip sparkled in the bar lights. The girl smiled at him, tweaking the glass out of his hand. She turned to refill his whiskey, and Snape saw that her shoulder blades, virtually bare but for a few spaghetti strings from her top, were covered in brightly coloured tattooed images.

He was so distracted by the way the tattoos on her back and upper arms writhed as she pushed his glass up into the optic, as well as the sickly sensations in his stomach, that he did not see the attack coming until it was too late.

A heavy man sat next to him on the empty stool to his right, jarring against Severus and knocking him slightly off balance. As Snape turned to scowl at his clumsy neighbour, he felt a large hand grip his arm and the unmistakable sensation of a wand suddenly jammed into his side. *Fuck!* He tensed, his hands splayed out on the sticky bar...

"Don't move, you bastard," the man whispered hoarsely in his ear.

Snape felt a sharp, magical pulse from the wand tip, like an electric shock. "What do you want?" he hissed back. *That had bloody hurt!*

"You're coming with me, Snape." The man's voice was gruff, but somehow familiar. Severus recognised the clichéd phrase and was surprised. Aurors usually travelled in pairs, threes even. He tried to remember through the fug of the whiskey whether he had recently cast a spell on the restricted list... He knew he hadn't. So why was a Auror here?

He ignored the jabbing pain from his hip and twisted slightly to make out the identity of the wand-holder. Perhaps there had been some sort of mistake? The Trace wasn't always completely reliable, after all.

The answer came quickly. He caught a flash of reddish hair, the whiff of righteous indignation, and groaned: "Weasley."

His own wand was just out of reach, and the list of acceptable spells he could cast without risking his parole was deliberately inadequate. He stared forward, unseeing, the unpleasant sensations from his side rapidly dispelling the effects of the whiskey.

"*Outside,*" Weasley ordered. The hand holding the wand dug pointedly deeper into Snape's tender belly.

Snape turned to look at the younger man. Weasley's fleshy, broad face was red and sweaty. His eyes were bright and wild as he stared at Severus, and he was breathing heavily.

Severus raised his eyebrows. Go *outside*? Into the dark and unobserved street? Did Weasley think he was completely deranged?

"Who's your friend?" the barmaid interrupted, putting Snape's glass down on the bar in front of him. Snape understood the unsaid question. Decent bar workers have a nose for trouble.

He forced himself to relax and smile. The last thing he needed was for them both to be thrown out of the pub. "It's fine. He's a..." he considered his words carefully, aware of the continuing presence of the sharp point near to his testicles "...an old pupil of mine," he told her. "We haven't seen each other for a long time, eh? *Mister* Weasley?"

Weasley sat back slightly, leaving his hand, and the wand that it held, still on Snape's thigh. The redhead's jaw jutted forwards mulishly, but he nodded sharply and made no further comment. After favouring them both with a long, suspicious look, the barmaid took Snape's money and turned away to serve someone else further down the bar.

The pub was filling up with patrons and becoming increasingly noisy.

"What do you *want*, Mister Weasley?" Severus asked, trying to make his voice sound reasonable. The adrenaline pumping around his system was making his head swim, and the vicious sensation of nausea in his stomach had returned with a vengeance.

Weasley scowled. "Where is she?" he asked.

"Who?" Snape said without thinking.

Weasley was grabbing his arm again, pulling him off his stool and shoving him back against the bar. Snape looked about, but the barmaid's attention had been distracted by the rowdy group of city lads, and the general level of business in the pub masked their quiet scuffle at the bar.

"Hermione, you bastard." Weasley's breath was hot on Snape's face. "What have you done with her?"

Snape felt a sudden, sharp constriction in his chest. "Look, you fucking idiot," he gasped, "I've no idea what you are talking about."

The wand spat another shock into him, and Snape pitched forwards. He wasn't entirely sure, but he thought that Aurors usually *arrested* suspects before they started to rough them up rather than just getting attacking them in the middle of Muggle London. Did he dare a hex? He quickly ran through the list of acceptable spells in his head. The best he could do without setting off the Trace was probably an Impedimenta, and that wouldn't be much bloody use...

He felt Weasley's other hand on his shoulder, gripping hold of his jacket and wrenching him up again.

"Where is she?" Weasley asked again, his chin jutting out aggressively.

"I don't bloody know!" Snape snapped, his frustration mixed with a growing sense of apprehension. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Weasley's lips drew back from his teeth. "Hermione disappeared two days ago, and guess what I found in her diary?" Snape watched him dig about in his trouser pocket and pull out something that looked like a crumpled page from a notebook. He slammed it down on the stained dark wood of the bar.

Snape's heart began to thump irregularly in his chest. *Disappeared?* His old instincts flared, adrenaline began to course through his veins. *Misdirect and provoke*, he thought as he twisted his face into an exaggerated sneer. "Are you in the habit of reading Miss Granger's private memoirs, *Mister Weasley?*" he drawled, putting as much disdain into the question as he could.

It had predictable results. "Fuck you, Snape," Weasley snarled. "She's my *girlfriend*. We don't have secrets."

Severus arched his eyebrow. "Clearly you are as deluded as ever," he responded with some relish, flicking his fingers at the crumpled up piece of paper on the bar.

Weasley controlled himself with an obvious effort. He spread the diary page out and pushed it further towards Severus. "Wednesday, 5th February." Weasley read, pointing at Granger's familiar script. "Met *Professor Snape* today in the Ministry, then went for coffee. Persuaded him to come to the Department to see the work. *So excited.*" The last was spat out, the accusation clear.

Weasley leaned forward again. He was so close that Severus could feel the other man's hot breath on his face. "Where is she, Snape?" Weasley spat. "I know you've got her somewhere. You're the only bastard I know who could block my Tracking Spells."

Snape rolled his eyes. "You can't *seriously* be suggesting..."

Weasley jabbed his wand so hard into his gut that Severus saw stars. The hex combined with the horrible twisting sensation in his stomach left him gasping for air.

"Where is she?" Weasley repeated. "I swear to you, Snape, I'll set the Aurors on you. It won't take much to see you back in your prison cell. This, for example." He flourished the diary page in Severus' face.

Snape dragged another breath into his lungs and tried to focus despite the thumping pain in his head and stomach. He did not doubt Weasley's sincerity, and it was beginning to scare the hell out of him. If Weasley called the Aurors, his parole would be revoked. *Had he called them already?* The image of his dank prison cell swam before him.

He couldn't go back.

He wouldn't.

Granger is missing. He could feel the back of his neck begin to itch, sweat prickling under his arms. He replayed their conversation in the cafe, remembering how her earnest features had come alive as she had teased and bantered with him. He thought how jealous he had been of her academic passion, the way that she had leaned forward, her eyes sparkling and animated in the bright lights of the bizarre, subterranean coffeehouse.

He tried to cudgel his memories into order, but could think of no clue as to her whereabouts. She had spoken about her work, but only in riddles bloody woman! *No, that's not right*, he corrected himself. She had made an oath, so she couldn't tell. Clearly, she was involved in something secret... something *significant*.

What's the bloody girl done now? he thought in exasperation.

Suddenly, he remembered the note in his pocket. "I *did* see Miss Granger this week," he rasped. "But not since Wednesday, and I have an appointment with her in two day's time. Perhaps she has gone away for a few days... a holiday?" He winced at the weakness of the notion, even as he suggested it.

Weasley barked out a laugh. "Do you seriously expect me to believe you, you lying bastard? If you won't tell me, then I reckon the Aurors will be able to loosen your tongue..."

Weasley drew his breath and flicked his wand upwards, and Snape knew he was preparing to incant the Auror summons.

Whatever the hell had happened to Granger, they'd pin this on him.

He'd be back in Azkaban in hours.

He had no choice; he had to run.

Snape tried to remember what Weasley did at the Ministry. Granger had mentioned something, hadn't she? He was prepared to bet that it wasn't law enforcement.

If that was the case....

Severus sagged a little to one side and twisted his lower body away from Weasley's wand hand. Sure enough, Weasley lurched forward, off balance, and Snape reached down, grabbing his wrist with one hand, pushing the wand away from him and using his momentum to shove the taller, heavier man along the bar, towards the empty booth at the end where Severus had left his coat a few minutes ago.

Weasley grunted and turned, his wand rising, but Snape was too committed to care. Pulling his own blackthorn wand from his sleeve, he cast a curt, "*Consopera Maxima!*", pushing the younger man backwards into the empty booth. He watched in satisfaction as Weasley crumpled onto the leather seat and slumped insensate onto the table in front of him. Not as severe as a Stupify or Petrificus, two spells he was forbidden to use under any circumstances, the charm, Consopera, was one that a parent might use to lull their child to sleep. His lip curled in a sneer. If someone jostled the idiot, then he would wake up, but he had bought himself a few moments to get away without causing too much of a scene.

He walked quickly to the door of the pub and then outside onto the street. For a busy Friday night in the capital, the pavement was virtually deserted. Severus supposed that the weather had something to do with that; it was raining hard and bitingly cold. He shivered, the sharp droplets stinging his eyes, freezing on the skin of his chest through his thin shirt.

Severus ducked around the corner, into the alley behind the building where they kept the rubbish bins. The horrible cramping sensation in his stomach made him catch his breath as he tried to compose himself sufficiently to Apparate, running through a series of possible destinations in his mind. He could not afford to splinch himself. He forced himself to be calm, to find his focus, his back pressed against the wet brick wall, chest heaving with the effort.

Perhaps the Consopera spell had not aroused suspicion? Almost the moment that foolish hope had suggested itself, an Auror Notice appeared in front of him with a sharp snap. Without thinking, Severus snatched the black envelope out of the air, crushing it in his hand.

Shit. They would only be a few moments behind.

Blood pounded in his ears.

Granger is missing.

Granger is missing.

His head throbbed painfully.

Granger is missing, and Weasley thinks I've kidnapped her... or worse.

Fuck.

Fuck!

His stomach heaved suddenly, and a flood of choking, bitter liquid surged up his throat.

He spun around, propping himself up on the slick metal side of the bin next to him and vomited, his legs wide apart and trembling as the stream of bile and whiskey splashed on the broken tarmac at his feet.

His stomach clenched and clenched again until he was dry heaving and coughing.

Bloody woman! Where the hell has she gone?

He coughed again and spat the bitter liquid left in his mouth against the bin's base, allowing his forehead to rest gently against the cold metal in front of him as he tried to compose himself.

He had to go. He had only moments before Weasley righted himself or the Aurors arrived.

But go, where? Could he find her before the Aurors caught up with him?

"Stand up!"

Two hands grabbed him roughly from behind and pulled him upright. Snape spun around, trying to bring his wand to bear on his attacker, but it was knocked roughly to one side as his assailant grabbed the front of his sodden jacket and shirt and pushed him back against the wet brick of the alleyway.

Snape lashed out with his other hand, his fist connecting with a satisfying crunch into the side of the man's nose.

"Ow! Fuck!"

He was shoved backwards again, his head hitting the cold bricks behind him with a force that made him see stars. Nonetheless, he struggled to free himself from the tight grip the other man now had on his jacket collar until he was brought up short, staring in disbelief into the face of his attacker.

What the...?

"It's *me*, you idiot!"

That voice! Severus stared in disbelief as an *exact copy of himself* grunted a quick "*Episkey!*" and wiped blood from his nose and chin with the back of his hand.

The Snape before him, his harsh features illuminated by the guttering street lamp above, was wearing a voluminous set of black robes that wrapped about his body, secured by a thick leather belt. About his neck was a thick swathe of dark material that Severus dimly thought could have been fashioned into some sort of turban. His face was dark, tanned to a deep bronze, the effect making the whites of the man's eyes stand out with an even greater intensity in the flickering light from the street lamps. A thin cut, recently healed, ran across the blade of his cheekbone. The man glared at Severus as he swiped his sleeve across his upper lip, smudging the blood that still ran sluggishly from his injured nose, then returned his grip to Snape's shirtfront.

Polyjuice? Snape thought, still stupid from shock and the pain in his stomach. *Who the hell would want to Polyjuice into me, for Merlin's sake?*

Other-Snape's eyes were piercing, irresistible. "If I've timed this right, Weasley has just tried to hex your balls off, and you know that Hermione..." the man's voice cracked "...Hermione has gone missing."

Severus stopped struggling. "*What? How do you...?*" he breathed.

His doppelgänger glared at him. "I told you: I'm *you*, fuckwit." He shook Severus slightly for emphasis. "Shut up and listen. There isn't much time until the Aurors arrive." He nodded his head towards the High Street, then reached inside his strange, flowing robes and pulled out a golden pendant.

Is that a Time Turner? Severus' breath caught. "Where did you...? But they were all destroyed!" he blurted. *What I could have done with one of those bloody things a year ago....*

"Yes," the other man said with obvious impatience. "This one is new. Here." He pulled the chain over his head and thrust the device towards Severus, who received it in numb fingers, his hand closing about the circular device automatically.

"I can't say much, but you feel terrible because she's *gone*," Other-Snape said urgently. "You need to get her back or...*don't interrupt me!* You need to get to the Department of Mysteries to find her." He stared at Severus for a moment as if trying to find the right words to say.

"You must go after her," he continued after a few frustrated seconds. "I can hold the Aurors for a while. You've got about fifteen minutes or so until the Timeshift aligns and the paradox is resolved. Then the Aurors will come after you again. You must follow her, or the stupid woman will be lost forever."

Snape gaped at him. *Timeshift? Paradox?* His head throbbed painfully, and his stomach felt like it was on fire.

Other-Snape made a growling noise. "Look, I know you feel like shit," he said. "But you have to get a fucking *grip*." He pulled Severus towards him, snarling into his face, "You must go to the Department of Mysteries. Do you understand? *The Ministry*."

Severus nodded dumbly, fighting to reconcile the impossibility of the situation with the apparent sincerity of his assailant's intentions.

"And you have to take Weasley with you," he added, then rolled his eyes at Severus' reaction. "I know, it sounds impossible to believe, but he will help."

There was a sudden shout from the entrance to the pub and Other-Snape twisted around. "Fuck it. They're here! I'm going to give myself up. They'll have me and so won't pay any attention to your weaker signal for a few minutes until... well." He shrugged. "Redundant timeline."

Severus stared at him, the cramping in his stomach was suddenly so painful that he could barely breathe, let alone move. He grimaced.

Other-Snape frowned. "Oh, yes. Right." He pulled at Severus' shirt front impatiently and placed a hand over his bare midriff. The palm of the other man's hand felt painfully

hot on the sensitive flesh there, and Severus could not suppress an involuntary whimper. But Other-Snape refused to budge, staring intently into Severus' eyes as he murmured an incantation. A numb sensation spread from the hand on his stomach through his body, and Severus recognised what the other man was doing. He relaxed fractionally as the pain waned.

"Occlumency block," Other-Snape said matter-of-factly. "It'll help, but it won't last for long."

"Take these." Other-Snape pushed a thin vial of swirling memories into Severus' hand. "They might survive this time. It's worth a try." His harsh expression seemed to soften. "I'm sorry I can't tell you more, but I can't risk straining the paradox even more than I have done already.... Weasley will still be in there if you hurry. Tell him you know where she is, and he'll follow you. Get to the Department and... you'll see what to do."

Severus heard one of the Aurors at the entrance to the alleyway call out, "He's out here!" and he locked eyes with his counterpart.

Other-Snape made to say something, hesitated, and then placed one hand heavily on Severus' shoulder. "Go," he said simply and strode away.

Severus watched as he walked out of the alleyway, empty hands before him.

Predictably, the Aurors began to shout at him to put his wand down, to kneel in the street, to keep his hands where they could see them.

Severus barely had chance to hear Other-Snape sneer something insulting before the sharp crack of hexes drowned everything else out.

"That's got him," a deeper voice called out.

"Is that him? Check for Polyjuice!" A woman's voice, high with fear and excitement.

Severus' breath hitched.

A pause, then a third voice said, "It's him alright. It's the right magical signature. Bastard. Why d'you think he threatened us?"

Severus forced himself to resume his breathing as he froze, hidden in the shadows behind the bins. Three of them at least. His fingers clutched convulsively around his wand.

"Disillusion him, Abbott, and let's get him back to the Ministry," the deeper voice said. "Hurry up you two, or we'll have to Oblivate half the bloody street."

Severus heard a muffled spell, a short, scuffling noise, and finally the unmistakable crack of Apparition.

He sagged for a moment against the wall.

It had been true, then.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Granger was missing, and he had to find her.

Picking up his wand, Snape lurched to his feet and moved tentatively into the light. The rain was still falling, and he shivered in the keen wind. The strange Time Turner was an odd, heavy form in his fist, and he uncurled his fingers to look at it. The black sands in the tiny hour glass at its heart glittered, surrounded by four delicate rings of finely wrought, golden metal. Tiny runes were inscribed carefully into the edges of the concentric circles.

He had never used one before.

Albus had kept one of the damned things in his desk drawer, but he had made it clear that it was off limits. Snape closed his eyes and remembered the argument they had had about it. How useful it would be, should Voldemort truly return as Dumbledore insisted he would, for the Order's spy to be able to travel through Time with impunity... the opportunities it presented to be able to gather crucial intelligence, perhaps even to save...

"No, my dear boy." Dumbledore had held up his hand, and Severus had seen the briefest flash of the ruthlessness that lay at the old man's core... but just as swiftly, the harsh look that the old wizard had given him softened into the more familiar, kindly countenance.

Dumbledore had patted his hand. "Too dangerous, my boy," he had said. "Far too dangerous. The temptation would be too great for you to bear. Time Turners are the most dangerous of all magical objects."

Severus had known he was right and hated him for it.

He turned the object over in his hand carefully. *Far too dangerous for everyone except for a fourteen-year-old girl, that is* he remembered with a rueful snort. When Minerva had told him that Hermione Granger had been granted permission to use the Time Turner in her third year, he had stormed up to see the Headmaster, to rail at him again about House favouritism and the absolutely *preposterous* idea of providing a teenager one of *bloody-Potter's-friends* at that with "the most dangerous of all magical objects", only to find Dumbledore at his most maddeningly evasive. As usual in his dealings with the man, Severus had left the Headmaster's office unsatisfied.

Granger.

Shit, Granger.

Severus' fingers closed about the Time Turner, and he shook his head, willing himself to get his focus back and get moving again. As he turned to go back into the pub, to wake Weasley and drag him to the heart of the Ministry, he felt the ghost of that sharp, throbbing sensation return to his gut again and winced.

Bloody woman.

He didn't have much time.

*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*

A/N: The plot thickens... Huge thanks as always goes to my alpha and beta team of beaweasley2, Clairvoyant and nagandsev, without whom you would not be reading this! I do not own the Harry Potter world and make no money ("rolls eyes") from this endeavour. Thank you also to everyone who reads and reviews - you really do help me to carry on writing!

Chapter 5

Chapter 6 of 9

She reached for him, but he pulled backwards suddenly, his chin rising with an arrogance so familiar that she felt a sudden rush of hope.

"Eat your chocolate," he said and stood up to leave.

Chapter 5

Weasley was exactly where he had left him asleep, slumped over the sticky table in the booth at the end of the bar.

Severus glanced about himself quickly to check that no one was paying him particular attention, then reached down and pulled Weasley's wand out from underneath the young man's hand. He straightened up self-consciously, feeling the unmistakable sensation of a reluctant wand in his fingers. It felt sluggish and resentful, but he shoved it into his waistband pocket regardless, where it prickled uncomfortably against the skin of his hip.

He stared at the unconscious man before him. Weasley was snoring gently, his head resting on an outstretched arm, a thin line of dribble extending from his open mouth to the table top, the result of Severus' Sleeping Charm. His pale, fleshy face was flushed, and the boy's slack-jawed expression reminded Severus once more of the tedious years he'd spent trying to impart even a modicum of understanding into the brains of idiot teenagers.

Of all the Weasleys, he was simply amazed that Granger had connected herself to this one.

The eldest one had been an excellent potioneer, the one with the tattoos and the control freak had both been both superb Arithmancers, and the girl had excelled in Defence. The least said about the unholy twins the better, apart from the fact that their entrepreneurial talents had earned them considerable respect in the staffroom... but this one had had no discernible merit at all at school apart from as sidekick to the equally hapless Potter.

He shook his head. *She could do so much better*, he thought unaccountably.

Flustered, he regarded the sleeping young man for a further moment, trying to look for anything of value in the unconscious idiot in front of him.

I suppose he's tall, he allowed grudgingly before an ominous twinge in his belly reminded him of his current situation, and he pulled himself together.

He had to find Granger wherever the bloody stupid woman had gone off to....

Go to the Department of Mysteries, he remembered his future self saying.

And take Weasley with you.

He continued to look at Weasley, good sense warring with his doppelgänger's breathless instructions. As he stared, the pool of dribble under the freckled chin grew.

He snorted. *Bloody hell.*

Severus leaned over and shook Weasley roughly by the shoulder. "Get up, Weasley," he hissed. "We are leaving."

"Whu...?" Weasley came awake with a vacant expression that was entirely expected. He blinked stupidly at Severus and then jerked into a sitting position, scrabbling uselessly on the table for his missing wand.

Snape grinned nastily at him. Weasley's reaction was almost comical. He pulled his shirt out of the way, exposing the haft of the idiot's captured wand. "Mine, I think," he purred.

"What the...?" Weasley sputtered, his thick brows knitted together, his eyes darting about crowded pub until they focused on his pale wand in Severus' waistband. He froze.

Snape met his angry expression with a sneer. "If you want to find your bloody girlfriend, Weasley, you had better come with me."

oOo

She was awake, and she didn't know who she was. She lay in a kind of shocked terror, trying to assimilate all the information rushing at her from newly awakened senses.

It was hot. Hot and dark. She was thirsty, and her head was pounding with a fierce pain.

She was lying down on some sort of soft surface, her naked body covered with a sheet of a light, scratchy material. A damp cloth was on her forehead, covering her eyes. She welcomed its cool weight as it counterbalanced the painful throbbing in her temples.

Taking a deep breath, she searched her mind, gingerly poking at the swirling mist of unresolved memories and flashes of understanding in her consciousness. *Nothing*. She fought a rising surge of panic in her chest, pressing it down with an experienced firmness.

Wait! Experienced? She'd done this before she knew it. Her heart began to beat more quickly. She had trained her mind before now to focus and suppress... what? She searched her memory again. *Who am I?* She calmed herself, trying to float mentally in order to allow the memories to come forward into her consciousness.

Come on, she thought. *Come on...!*

Nothing.

She tried again, picturing herself floating in a deep pool of water... a black lake, the waves on its edges lapping gently against the shore.

Who am I? she heard herself ask, her voice quavering with quiet desperation.

She waited, sinking deeper into the cool, dark waters, watching the green fronds at the bottom of the lake wash and swirl about her legs.

Still nothing.

Her mind was a hazy blur. She hissed through her teeth in exasperation.

Determined, she regrouped. Focusing her mental energies into an imagined point, she tried to push through the frustrating smog in her mind. The occluded memories shifted under her assault... but the mist that shrouded them did not clear. She tried again, pushing until she felt sweat breaking out on her forehead and prickling her neck from the effort.

Brief, confusing flashes of things and people... a huge grey castle... a smiling woman offering her food... street lamps at night rushing past her vision.... flying on an invisible beast, its heaving sides caught between her knees and the ground speeding underneath her in a disorientating blur.

The images raced past. Carefully, firmly, she pulled back, deliberately slowing the cascade of fractured thoughts until they resolved into a single moment.

Her breath caught.

She was sitting in a white room. A thin, sharp-featured man with longish black hair scowled at her. Bright light reflecting off the surfaces of the walls and table between them enhanced the dark shadows beneath his eyes. He was familiar to her, she knew. Eagerly, she leaned forward, straining her mind to remember who he was.

He opened his mouth to speak, and her heartbeat increased. "You must be proud, bold, pleasant, resolute. And now and then, stab when occasion serves." His dark voice was deep and rich, the consonants rolling slowly from his lips as he stared at her with a compelling intensity.

A surge of recognition. *That's Christopher Marlowe*, she thought. *Hang on! How do I know it's Marlowe? Why am I thinking about Christopher Marlowe?*

She struggled to think more clearly. *Marlowe*, she realised, *playwright, poet... spy*.

Spy.... She stared at the thin-faced man sitting across from her in the white room. He sniffed at her thought as if she had voiced it out loud, but the look he gave her at the same time appeared to be grudgingly impressed.

She reached for him, but he pulled backwards suddenly, his chin rising with an arrogance so familiar that she felt a sudden rush of hope.

"Eat your chocolate," he said and stood up to leave.

Don't go! Terrified and excited, she leapt for the vision, trying to grasp it and draw it closer, but the man rolled his eyes and faded away, leaving a strange ache in her chest as he slowly diminished into nothingness.

Shit! She ground her teeth in frustration, suddenly aware of her real surroundings again.

Slowly, painstakingly, she flexed her muscles, feeling them burn and contract as she clenched her fists, moved her shoulders and arched her back. The action left her weak with the effort. Whatever had led to her lying here in this bed had certainly caused her body strain.

She turned her head. The cloth on her forehead slipped, and she lifted a heavy hand to pluck the soft material away from her clammy skin, blinking again as her vision cleared and her eyes adjusted to the diffused light in the room.

Not a room, she realised. *It's a tent. Some sort of yurt, or something.... A huge tent, made from heavy canvas, or woven matting. Some sort of nomads' dwelling.* That made sense; she could smell animals. She wrinkled her nose at the slightly sickly aroma.

She was on a low bench, perhaps a foot off the ground. There were other benches in the yurt arranged around the outside edges of the circular space. She blinked. The floor was covered with carefully laid rugs made from rushes and coarsely woven wool. She craned her neck, wincing as her muscles protested at the movement. Multicoloured fabrics hung around the walls.

A shout from outside the tent made her jump, her hands coming instinctively to her throat, plucking at the edge of the thin sheet that covered her. The action caused her head to spin. *Concussion?* she thought weakly. If she could just have some clothes...

She opened her mouth to call for help, but the cry died in her throat as the thought suddenly struck her that she may not be here willingly. Her initial caution reasserted itself, and she stilled. The voices outside the tent were still muffled, the words spoken indistinct.

Her breath caught in her her throat; someone was approaching the tent's entrance.

oOo

"Gerroff me!"

Snape's head throbbed with the after effects of Apparition, and he staggered slightly as Weasley tried to shake him off, slipping on the slick pavement beneath his feet.

Cursing, he reorientated himself, standing up and brushing himself down self-consciously. His Side-Along had clearly become a little rusty, but he certainly was not about to admit it....

Weasley loomed beside him, his bright red hair shining in the street lamp above them. "Where to, then?" the boy asked mutinously.

Snape sneered. "I would have thought it was perfectly obvious," he drawled. "Look where we are."

The younger man turned around, catching sight of the red telephone box that marked the public entrance to the Ministry of Magic on Marylebone Street.

Weasley's face darkened. "Look, I told you that I looked everywhere for her. We're wasting time! We should go to the Aurors. D'you think I wouldn't have checked her lab first?"

Snape took his time disentangling the non-sequiturs and incomprehensible grammar in Weasley's belligerent question first, then simply spread his hands before him. *He can help*, he remembered his future-self assuring him. Looking at the gangly redhead, with his sloped shoulders and stupid expression, he highly doubted his own words. *Never mind*, he thought. *Get on with it.*

"You asked for my help in finding Miss Granger," he responded snidely. Not entirely true of course, but it made him feel slightly better than *you stuck a wand in my gut and threatened me with the Aurors you little shit*. His side was still aching a little where Weasley had rammed his wand tip into the soft skin between his ribs.

"Bearing your request in mind," Snape continued, "my best suggestion is that we begin where, knowing Miss Granger, she probably spends most of her time."

Weasley flushed again at Snape's words, but then visibly pulled himself together. "Right, then," he said gruffly. "You'll need my help getting in here quietly, then?"

Snape debated a number of answers to the question and settled on yes.

Weasley nodded at the telephone kiosk. "Not here. We'll use one of the employee entrances around the side. Come on." He gestured to Snape to follow him about twenty feet away to a narrow side street. As Snape watched warily from behind him, Weasley stopped and faced a blank piece of plastered wall.

He turned to face Severus and held out his hand, palm up. "I'll need my wand," he said brusquely.

Snape took a short step backwards and snorted. "How do I know you won't simply call the Aurors?" he scoffed.

Weasley's face contorted briefly. "You'd hex me before I even started to speak, you bastard." He paused, then, "Look, I came to your first, didn't I? Just give me the bloody wand, so we can get in. Come on! She might be in serious trouble!"

Snape rolled his eyes. "Oh, please," he countered. "There are quite literally hundreds of other possible explanations for Miss Granger's temporary disappearing act not the least of which," he continued nastily, "is the same reason why she found herself in a churchyard on New Year's Eve this year."

Weasley's eyes flashed, and his fists clenched at his sides. "You're a fucking bastard, you know that? A nasty-minded, shit-stirring, little..."

"Ah, ah, ah!" Snape waved his finger. "You need my help, remember?"

Snape carefully pulled his own blackthorn wand from his sleeve and then gingerly withdrew Weasley's. "And mind your language, Mister Weasley," he added as he proffered the haft of the pale wand gingerly towards him.

Weasley scowled and practically snatched the wand out of his hand. "I'm not fucking thirteen any more, Professor," he snarled, but then he turned immediately away from Severus and pointed the wand at the featureless wall. He muttered something under his breath, and the wall shimmered and resolved into a very large and ornate door frame, bearing the words M.O.M. Goods' Entrance carved neatly into a wall plaque beside it.

Weasley turned back around to face Snape. "Right. Stay close to me, and the wards will recognise you as my... my..." He faltered.

"Companion?" Snape supplied, acid dripping off every syllable.

Weasley's pale eyes narrowed. "I suppose so." The younger man stuck out his chin. "Stay close, or the Ministry's night wards will have you strung up like a beetle."

Without pausing to see if Snape was following him, Weasley pushed the heavy metal door open and walked quickly inside.

The corridor was dark and sloped gently downwards. His companion seemed at ease in the deep gloom, but Snape was twitchy. Anything could be waiting for them in the darkness. He muttered, "*Lumos*," softly, still conscious of the Trace and wondering how much time he had until his other self ceased to exist and the Aurors came after him.

The light from Snape's wand illuminated a stark and bare corridor lined with concrete blocks and a rubberised matting on the floor, which deadened the noise of their feet as they walked steadily downhill.

Weasley snickered. "Relax, Professor," he said. "I come down these corridors every day, bringing stuff in to catalogue and study with my, uh... my colleagues in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office. The night watchmen don't come down here. They all stick to the public areas."

Snape didn't miss the slip among the false bravado. *My father*, Weasley had been about to say. *Hmmmm*. He said nothing, keeping in step with the younger man, his feet silent on the soft-tiled floor.

"We'll take one of the goods' lifts," Weasley said gesturing in front of them. Snape noticed that he had not sheathed his wand. He rolled his own in his fingers, feeling the reassuring thrum of its power in his hand.

The lift rattled and shook as it descended further into the bowels of the Ministry. Severus could feel his heartbeat thumping steadily in his chest in time to the rattle of the machinery. Weasley stood beside him, radiating tension, tapping his wand against the side of the elevator in a nervous tick.

What are you doing? Snape berated himself as the lift sank deeper towards the Department of Mysteries. *What are you doing? What the hell are you doing?*

But even as he asked himself that question, he knew the answer to it. According to his own self his own older, oddly-dressed, and strangely suntanned self Granger was in some sort of trouble, and she needed his help.

oOo

At the sound of the tent's door flap opening, she instinctively shut her eyes. *You're asleep*, she told herself. *Keep your breathing low and measured. Stay calm.*

There was someone moving inside the tent. *No, two people*, she corrected herself, straining to pick up any clues with her ears alone. She could hear the faint scuff of at least two sets of boots on the soft floor.

It took a considerable degree of resolve for her to keep her eyes closed as the noise of the quiet footsteps came closer to her.

A man's voice, thickly accented, spoke. The sound was guttural, the words flowing quickly too fast for her to catch enough of what was said to be able to identify the language. She ground her teeth silently in frustration at how sluggish her thoughts still were.

She could sense someone leaning over her, close. The smell of cloves and cinnamon stung her nostrils.

"Ochi." The man standing over her replied. His voice was deeper than the first, and even more heavily accented.

Arabic? she thought. *Am I Arabic? Egyptian, perhaps? Or is that Greek?*

The man close to her grunted and then, to her surprise, placed a gentle hand on her forehead. He spoke again, with satisfaction in his voice.

The other, lighter voice rattled off a comment. The man sounded nervous... or even agitated.

The hand on her forehead withdrew and she heard the older man groan a little as he straightened up. He rumbled another comment, the words slower and almost soothing in their tone. The footsteps retreated away from her again.

The older man spoke again as they both stepped away from her. She heard the soft rustle of heavy canvas as they reached what must have been the door. She strained to hear them, trying desperately to search her confused thoughts for any word or phrase that she could recognise as familiar.

The older man seemed to be reassuring his companion. She heard the flap of the yurt's opening slap back on itself, and the men stopped speaking. She heard another voice, more gruff than the other two speak in the strange tongue, but then, suddenly, she finally heard a name, but one which caused the breath to catch in her throat: "Hypatia?"

Hypatia? Now why was that name so familiar...?

Neither voice spoke for what felt like heartbeats, before the flap of the yurt opened and the men left the tent and walked away, speaking softly, their voices fading away.

Hypatia?

Hypatia of Alexandria?

Pages of text swam before her closed eyelids, bright memories of scholarly research in a vaulted room, where a pale blue light swirled about her in delicate whirls and eddies, and the sound of a thousand ticking timepieces filled the air....

She felt a fierce flush begin to spread hotly from her chest to her hairline, opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling tapestries.

She was on the edge of remembering she knew it!

What on Earth is going on?

oOo

The lift shuddered to a stop, jolting Severus out of his dark thoughts.

At once, he grabbed the cargo doors and pulled them aside, his wand held high for light.

He recognised the broad landing which preceded the final steps to the Department of Mysteries from his trial, and his heart gave a unpleasant wrench at the memory. He turned and grimaced fiercely at Weasley, hoping that the other man had not seen his hesitation. "Come on," he said roughly. "Let's get on with it."

Matching him scowl for scowl, Weasley pushed past him roughly and stalked across the landing to the ornate stone staircase on the other side. Snape walked quickly after him, wincing at the loud clatter of Weasley's feet as he took the stairs two at a time in his urgency to descend. The boy had all the guile and poise of a herd of Erumpents.

At the foot of the steps, Weasley spun sharply to his right and walked down the corridor which led to the entrance to the Department of Mysteries. Snape jumped slightly as, two-by-two, the sconces high on the corridor's walls flared into life, shining their cold blue light down onto the two men.

Severus followed closely behind him, fighting the dark memories of the last time he had been so close to the Wizengamot's court. He remembered the tight grip that the warders had had on his upper arms as they had led him away from the trial to his cell, the way his feet had dragged along the obsidian marble floor as he'd tried to keep pace with their urgent steps. The sound of the excited whispers from the public gallery that had followed him along the corridor, echoing about him...

Snape started from his thoughts, practically running into the taller man who had stopped in front of him. They had arrived in the circular entrance chamber for the Department, the floor a featureless sea of black marble, the walls equally plain, apart from the magical candles burning in small alcoves between the recessed, handleless doors set evenly around the room.

Weasley slowly raised his wand hand and said, "Two for the Time Room," in a clear voice.

His wand glowed for a second, and Severus felt a thrum of magical energy as the chamber recognised a Ministry worker. With a barely audible click, the third door on the left opened itself in mute invitation.

"It's a different one every time," Weasley muttered and set off towards the door.

Snape rolled his eyes. Did Weasley think he didn't know about the security measures designed to protect the Department? "I've been visiting the Department of Mysteries since before you were born," he sniped waspishly as he followed closely behind the younger man.

"I'll bet not since your trial, though," Weasley shot back over his shoulder, pushing the door further open with his large hands and disappearing through into the blackness beyond.

"*Sphaera lucis*," Weasley ordered, flicking his wand sharply, and light flooded out behind him into the entrance chamber.

Grinding his teeth, Snape followed him inside.

oOo

Wincing at the protest from her abused muscles, she sat up and half-rolled, half-fell out of her cot onto the floor. She paused for a moment, catching her breath, and tugged the rough sheet off the cot bed, wrapping it around her twice to give a semblance of modesty.

More images were coming back to her, despite the pounding headache and the mussiness of her thoughts. A well-ordered flat. Bookshelves and a daily newspaper. Making a cup of tea. Red buses and tall brick buildings. Whitehall. She felt a brief flash of humour. *British, then*, she thought, and then a shot of adrenaline stuck her: *If I'm British, what on earth am I doing here?*

She must find out what was happening. The two men that had visited her had not seemed to be overtly hostile in their intentions, but it was so hard to tell.

A giggling thought in her mind whispered of power in her fingertips, coursing through her body, drawing on the energy around her but she dismissed the idea as fantastic, and struggled to her feet on legs that felt like jelly.

She dragged in a breath and rubbed her face with her hands. *Come on focus!* She took a stumbling step, acutely aware of any noise her feet made. The tent's opening was about fifteen feet away. Slowly, she made her way towards it, frowning with concentration, her ears straining for any sounds outside the tent.

She paused when she reached the door, listening intently. She could hear animals moving a little, the clank of a herd bell, the occasional grunt or muttered word from a distance away. Her chest tightened with anxiety, and her hand, hovering by the heavy cloth of the door flap, shook with nerves. She closed her eyes and fought for calm.

Unaccountably, the image of the thin, dark-browed man swam before her. He said nothing but raised an eyebrow mockingly, a small smile curling his lip.

She let out her breath in a short huff. *Right.*

Pull yourself together. You have to know.

Slowly, she pulled the inner flap of the door to the side, shielding her eyes with a shaking hand to prevent the sun from dazzling her.

And she gaped at what she saw.

oOo

As he stepped over the threshold into the Time Room, the relentless sound of ticking immediately set Severus' nerves on edge.

The room was as cavernous as he remembered. Clocks and other Muggle timepieces lined the walls in between the huge bookcases and glass display cabinets which ran the length of the room on both sides. Twin rows of desks, most of them covered with parchments, clocks, and watches, stood before him, and the carpet on the floor was decorated with a range of astrological symbols and star maps which wove between the corners of the desks and the bookshelves at the perimeter.

"Oy, Snape!" Weasley's rough whisper caught his attention. "Her table is over here!"

Weasley had walked almost half the length of the room and was standing beside one particularly large desk, waving peremptorily at him.

Scowling, Snape stalked between the rows of laden furniture to where Weasley was hovering next to Granger's workstation.

The dark wooden desk was surprisingly orderly, compared to those around it. Three sets of books had been arranged beside each other, and behind them, a series of scrolls had been stacked neatly in a carved wooden box. A purple-covered, fine-lined notebook had been placed to one side, slightly offset from the others. He flipped the notebook open, recognising the pages from the leaf that Weasley had thrust at him in the pub less than an hour ago. It was Granger's research diary.

He touched the corner of it again and felt a strange tingling sensation in the tips of his fingers that made him jump.

His eyes flicked over the familiar, leather-bound volume of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which now sported numerous coloured pieces of paper sticking out from the sides, and rested instead on the top cover of a pile of largely Muggle books that lay beside it.

Hypatia of Alexandria (Revealing Antiquity), he read. He pushed the book gently to the side. *Hypatia's Heritage: A History of Women in Science from Antiquity through the Nineteenth Century* was the title beneath it. His brow furrowed. Beneath that lay another volume, *Feminist Perspectives in Medical Ethics* and at the bottom of the pile, the jarringly entitled *What's YOUR Connection? Wizarding Families Throughout the Ages* promised a "thorough and unprecedented guide to tracing YOUR wizarding family roots through Arithmancy and Divination!".

Severus could feel his eyebrow rise of its own accord as he turned his attention to the next set of books on the desk.

The other collection of books was based on the Muggle discipline of physics, apart from the heavy, blue-backed final volume at the bottom, which turned out to be an early copy of *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*.

"Curiouser and curiouser," he murmured.

"Well?" Weasley said aggressively.

Snape's lip curled in irritation. "Have you read all of this diary?" he asked, waving his fingers to indicate the purple-covered notebook.

Weasley nodded. "She's been working on something to do with the bell jar," he said, swivelling about and pointing further down the corridor of desks towards the giant glass mechanism at the end of the Time Room. Snape frowned. The last time he had visited the Time Room, he was sure that there had not been a screen partially obscuring the huge crystal vessel.

He picked up Granger's diary, ignoring the flare of magic in his fingers as he closed his hand about the little notebook. The relentless ticking of the clocks and watches about him was beginning to fray his nerves, as was the knowledge that his fifteen minutes had surely elapsed and he was due a visit from the Auror Department at any moment. He was running out of time.

"Show me," he said curtly.

A

A/N: I don't own the characters that JKR does. Huge thanks and hugs to the incomparable beaweasley2, nagandsev and Clairvoyant, without whom.... Thank you to all who take the time to review. The next chapter will be up in about three weeks' time. Best wishes, Px

Chapter 6

Chapter 7 of 9

For a moment, there was nothing audible in the room except for both men's shocked intake of breath.

Chapter 6

Bastard. Bastard. Bastard. Bastard. Bastard.

Ron's feet thumped angrily along the decorated carpet between the twin rows of desks as he led Professor fucking "watch your language" Snape towards the huge crystal edifice which dominated the far wall of the Time Room.

He had seen the bell jar a number of times since Hermione had started working at the Ministry, and it always sent a shiver through him. The glittering, spectral wind which circulated within it, carrying the tiny body of the Eternal Hummingbird through its perpetual lifecycle, quite frankly gave him the creeps. He still had nightmares from the battle that he and the others had fought through this Department in their fifth year.

Unconsciously, his left hand wandered to his right forearm as he approached the great glass edifice. Madam Pomfrey's ointment had almost completely removed the scars on his arms and chest, but sometimes it was almost as if he could still feel the tendrils writhing under his skin just like the memories of that horrible time.

He pushed the thought away as he reached the warded screen to the right of the jar. It was about twelve feet high and of finely carved wood, its surface gleaming with polish. It radiated power from the protective spells that Hermione had laid upon it. He could feel it crawling over his skin, uncomfortable pinpricks sending him shivering as he turned around to wait for Snape to catch up.

It spoke volumes about his desperation that he was pinning any hope at all on the sarcastic bastard. He watched Snape approach, the man's sallow face illuminated by the blue fractured light from the bell jar, all harsh lines and bruised shadows beneath his eyes. Snape was carrying Hermione's diary very carefully in both hands, weaving his way, snakelike, between the various items that were balanced on the research tables in the room. Ron forced away a stab of jealousy at the thought that Hermione might have confided something anything to the hateful git about her work.

The thought suddenly occurred to him that she may have confided even more to Snape than that. After all, Hermione had always refused to tell him anything about what happened between the two of them on New Year's Eve...

"Well?" Snape had stopped before him, his thin frame radiating irritated tension. Hermione's diary was still cradled defensively against his chest.

Ron fought the irrational desire to demand it back.

Instead, he turned his attention back to the ornate expanse of wood before them, fighting an impulse to back away from its forbidding surface. *A Compulsion Charm*, he thought, *among other protective spells*. Hermione had never allowed him to see behind the screen; he had never tried to argue it was enough that she let him come into the Time Room to pick her up for lunch sometimes.

Snape shifted beside him and clicked his tongue, obviously impatient.

Ron could feel heat prickling the skin of his neck. "The screen's warded," he explained, fingering his wand. Judging from the amount of magical energy emanating from the screen, opening it would not be a simple question of pulling it to one side to take a look.

"Yes?" Snape sneered. "It may have escaped your attention, Weasley, but we are on rather a *tight schedule* this evening." He gestured at the wooden screen, shimmering and beautiful in the glistening light from the bell jar.

Ron ground his teeth again and turned to face the ornate expanse of wood. "*Finite Incantatem*," he cast, then made to pull the screen aside.

The shock from Hermione's unaffected ward sent him back a stumbled step and set his teeth chattering.

Behind him he heard Snape sigh.

Ron cleared his throat. "*Finite Incantatum Totalem*," he tried again with an outward display of bravado that he didn't really feel. He touched the screen once more, only to find the wards as viciously intact as ever. *Shit. Bollocks.*

"I-I could send a Patronus to Bill," he offered. "There's not a curse or a ward he can't crack. He's out in Egypt at the moment, so it might take a little time to..."

"Oh, good grief! Get out of the way!" Snape jostled past him and stood silently in front of the shimmering wooden screen.

"This is *lignum vitae*, Mister Weasley," he murmured after a moment. "Also called Iron Wood." He held out a hand, allowing it to hover about an inch away from the screen. Ron saw the man's shoulders hunch and his eyelids slide shut. Snape's fingers lightly traced a pattern across the screen without touching it.

"*Lignum vitae*'s strength comes in part from the magical energies that it is able to connect itself to, utilising the power of localised sources to enhance its own," Snape whispered, as if reciting a page from a text book. "It is widely renowned for being one of the most effective materials to use in warding charms, its metamorphmagical characteristics lending themselves in particular to the use of feminine magic."

Patronising wanker, Ron thought, but said nothing as Snape droned on, the man's thin, clever fingers dancing across the surface of Hermione's wards.

As he watched Snape's fingers move onwards, feeling their way across Hermione's enchantments and seemingly unaffected by her protective charms, Ron forced down the jealousy he felt at the older man's magical abilities. Instead, he concentrated on his twin convictions that something about Hermione's disappearance was sinister and, furthermore, that his best chance of help was standing beside him.

He had not really meant his threat to call the Aurors in the pub. The awkward fact was that they were just as likely to arrest *him* if Hermione went missing as they were to throw the miserable, patronising git beside him into jail.

The last time that Ron had called the Aurors to report that Hermione had gone missing, he had been made to feel like the worst kind of stalking psychopath. His panicked Floo call to the DMLE after Hermione's disappearance at New Year had led to a series of events that had culminated in a humiliating lecture from a senior officer about wasting Auror time, a firm talking-to from his mother, and a near-hysterical dressing down from Hermione herself. He shifted awkwardly at the memory, his fingers still smarting painfully from the screen's hex.

He focused his attention back on what Snape was saying. "... Which is, of course, why so many wizarding jewellery boxes are constructed from this particular wood. *Ahhhh...* there we have it... Clever, clever, Miss Granger..." The man's stained fingers flicked more quickly over the surface, careful not to make physical contact with the warded wood beneath them.

Despite himself, Ron was prepared to admit to a grudging regard for the Professor's warding skills.

"Now, if I might just *suggest...*" Snape fell silent again, spreading his fingers out and moving them slowly closer to the screen's glistening surface.

Any second now, Ron thought. His earnest desire to discover what Hermione's wards had been guarding warred with a mutinous wish to see Snape humiliated by failure dumped on his arse by Hermione's charm work.

The pads of Snape's fingers gently pressed against the wood, and to Ron's irritation, the wards appeared to simply... fall.

Snape stood back, an expression of something like triumph written into his unforgiving features.

He spun around to look fully at Ron, raising an insouciant eyebrow. "... All of which I am sure you would have remembered, Mister Weasley, had you paid *any attention whatsoever* to your Charms lessons in your fifth year," he finished smugly while gently pushing the screen to one side.

Ron bit back the retort he was about to make as the screen folded back on itself and he saw for the first time what it guarded. At Ron's thunderstruck expression, Snape turned back around and stared too at what the screen had revealed.

For a moment, there was nothing audible in the room except for both men's shocked intake of breath.

Unbelievable.

Before them, thrumming with magical energy... magnificent, extraordinary and *impossible*, was an enormous, mechanised engine.

The machine's walls formed a roughly horseshoe shape, about fifteen feet high, with a space in the centre that was big enough for perhaps two or three people to stand inside.

Balanced above the walls of the machine was a huge hourglass which appeared to contain the same spectral material that filled the bell jar. Ron had never counted himself the most sensitive of wizards, but the magical energy that was coming off it set the hairs of his forearms and neck on end. Automatically, he held up his open hand, as if warming it on the machine's glow. He stared into the heart of the thing, trying to understand what it was.

As he stood, staring up at it, he began to feel the magical energy emanating from the metal structure fluctuate and change, morphing in much the same way as the Eternal Hummingbird altered its shape and form. What began as a warm and nurturing awareness, seemed to cool to a foreboding chill that made him feel older and drained. He shivered and pulled his hand away from the unpleasant sensation. Gradually, however, the warmth that had first drawn him in began to slowly envelop him once more.

He let out a shaky breath. "Bloody hell," he said. "Bloody... *hell*. What the...?"

"It is... remarkable," Snape said eventually.

Ron felt a surge of pride undercut his astonishment. He knew that Hermione was working on something, but he'd had no idea.... He gaped upwards at the towering structure, at the confusing amalgam of metal and glass. *No idea at all...*

And it looked like Snape had no idea, either.

He watched as the older man seemed to take in all the details of the strange construction, from its thick, rounded base to the web of transparent, twisted tubes that wrapped around the top of it, thin rods jutting out of each of them, all connected to each other in a latticework of shimmering golden threads and wires that seemed to pulse and wiggle as he stared at them. Ron stared, mesmerised and a bit revolted, as a thick iridescent liquid bubbled slowly upwards through the translucent piping around the structure towards the glass structure at the top of the machine.

The same blue spectral light from the bell jar also seemed to fill the hour glass; faint whippoorwills swirled around it, drawing Ron closer as he stared, feeling the thrum of its energy prick him with an eerie chill. Unthinkingly, he took a step forwards towards it.

Sharp fingers caught his elbow. "Don't," Snape cautioned softly, and Ron paused.

"Is that what she was working on?" he asked after a moment, his voice sounding hoarse in his ears. "The stuff from her diary?"

"I have absolutely no bloody idea at all," Snape replied, still clearly enthralled by the sight before them. His fingers, still gripping Ron's arm, shook slightly. A slight hiss of pain escaped the thin man's teeth.

Ron frowned. "Are you alright?" he asked.

The fingers dropped immediately. "It's nothing. A slight stomach complaint." Snape moved away from him, still clutching Hermione's diary tightly to his chest.

Ron shrugged. He didn't believe Snape, but if the man wanted to play the martyr, who was he to interfere?

He resumed his consideration of the series of toggles and switches before him.

Ron reached forward. "What does...? *Ow!*"

This time, Snape had rapped him sharply on the knuckle. "I told you: don't touch what you don't understand," he said shortly. "Who knows what damage you could create with your witless tampering?"

"Oh, sod off, Snape. Who put you in charge?" Ron countered mulishly.

"I rather thought that you had, *idiot*," Snape spat, waving his free hand about them. "Something to do with accosting me in a public house, demanding that I help you to find your missing girlfriend!"

"*Help* me, yes," Ron agreed, refusing to give an inch, *not* throw your weight around like I was some sort of bloody teenager."

Snape wheeled upon him. "Weasley, I am a convicted criminal on parole from Azkaban. We are in the very heart of the Ministry of Magic, a few floors away from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement... which is currently full of people who wish to see me returned to prison without asking too many questions first. If you can restrain yourself for *one moment*, from behaving like an erumpent in an apothecary's store, I may be able to discover what on earth is going on here."

Ron opened his mouth to retort, but something in Snape's expression made him shut it again. *Don't give the bastard the satisfaction*, he thought.

Snape watched him for a few seconds longer, then emitted a brief snort of satisfaction and turned back to resume his study of the machine.

Ron felt his embarrassment deepen. Muttering, "Wanker," under his breath at Snape's back helped him feel a little better.

Against the wall, to the side of the mechanism, stood two benches. Both were crowded with bits of Muggle machinery and other strange articles and artefacts. Intrigued, Ron drew closer and was surprised when he recognised some of them.

There was an old scooter carburettor, here a vacuum cleaner, its innards spilling out onto the metal top of the workbench. More Muggle electrical equipment surrounded an 'expresso' coffee maker that he had scrounged for Hermione only last week. He frowned hadn't she insisted that she wanted it for her flat? *Bloody hell!* He poked at the buttons on the machine, disappointed when the electricity didn't activate the indicator lights. He moved on.

Next, in front of the bench to his left, stood a dentist's chair, old and battered, its leather seat split and gaping open, the plastic arms reflecting the blue light from the bell jar behind him and the hour glass above. By its side stood a high stool, just like the sort that Flitwick had sat on in his Charms classroom. His stomach flipped; it had one of Hermione's cardigans draped over it. Ron resisted the temptation to pick it up, but he allowed his fingers to rub through the fibres of its collar. He pictured her wearing it, laughing with him at some stupid joke of George's, her hair tumbling down over his fingers as he caressed her neck...

He shot a quick look over his shoulder at Snape. The man was still holding Hermione's diary to his chest with one yellow-stained hand, as if it had been glued there. The blueish light in the room reflected on his narrow, lined face, casting deep shadows beneath his brows and cheekbones as he stared upwards, seemingly transfixed by the peculiar structure before him.

Not for the first time, Ron wondered just what his old teacher had been up to in the past few months. There had been no details in Hermione's journal (he had flicked through it quickly, searching with a shaking hand for the man's name). Only that short record of their meeting and her plans for another. He hadn't seen him since the trial which Hermione had insisted that he attend, gripping his hand so tightly in hers that he had almost lost all sensation in his fingers.

Snape had looked truly awful then: prison clothes hanging loosely off his thin frame, the thick, white bandages on his neck stained reddish brown, yellow and green from his wound underneath, and the harsh light of the courtroom further emphasising his usual unhealthy pallor and his sunken and sharpened features.

Hermione had been shocked at the punishment meted out to their old teacher by the Wizengamot, but Ron had not been surprised. He had found it impossible to forget the stories that Ginny had told him and knew that many on the Wizengamot had been less than convinced of Snape's 'heroism' during the war. If it hadn't been for Harry's testimony, Ron reckoned that Snape would still be rotting in Azkaban.

Snape grimaced as if in pain again, and Ron watched as he ran the fingers of his free hand through his lank hair. Snape's hand seemed to shake as he pushed through the greasy locks, his face pinched and tired looking to Ron's eyes.

What's wrong with the man? Ron shivered, his fingers clenching again into the soft yarn of the cardigan, pulling it off the stool and up to his belly. The connection with Hermione's favourite shrug forced him to focus. He needed to know. Hermione had told him virtually nothing about her encounter with Snape on New Year's Eve, but the way she had spoken about their disgraced professor, with a kind of sadness mixed with regret, had left Ron with the profoundly uncomfortable sense that the two of them had some sort of unfinished business.

He had to discover the connection between this dismal man and Hermione and whether or not it would lead to her return. Surreptitiously, he watched as Snape began to circle the machine. He noticed how carefully Snape stepped over the strange, twisted cable which ran from the base of the bell jar into the heart of Hermione's creation, picking his way around the foot of the giant metal structure with the same fierce attention that Ron remembered from school before disappearing from view.

Ron frowned, tempted to follow him but he caught himself in time. *Don't be a pillock*, he berated himself. *You're not going to tag along behind him like some sort of pathetic Crup*. Instead, he turned his attention firmly back to the stuff on the benches beside him.

He was strangely reminded of his father's shed at home. Old kettles and a toaster (why didn't Muggles simply put bread on a toasting fork?)... an ancient gramophone complete with a small collection of circular plastic-looking discs with scratches on them...

Something within Ron had actually believed the bastard's initial reaction in the pub, the way Snape's face had twisted in such utter shock and surprise at Ron's accusation that Snape had had something to do with Hermione's disappearance.

Perhaps Snape really doesn't know anything about Hermione's disappearance a small, traitorous voice whispered in his mind. *Perhaps she has just left me, after all*.

Again.

Disappointment twisted in his gut at the thought. His fingers clutched the soft wool of Hermione's cardigan in his hands.

No.

No. He would *not* be deterred.

He knew that something was wrong. He burned with the conviction of it, deep in his gut... and he also knew that if anyone could work out the puzzle of Hermione's disappearance, it was the greasy bastard whom she'd confided in. The man whom she'd seemed so excited about meeting again and who had broken through her wards with such ease.

His fingers sank deeply into the soft wool of the cardigan. He *had* to find her, to get her back.

Snape came back into view, moving slowly, still utterly focused on Hermione's creation. As the Potions master stepped delicately around the column, completely absorbed, Ron was unaccountably reminded of spiders.

Urgh.

Repulsed, but equally fascinated, Ron watched his old professor pause by the Muggle computer screen that was connected with a wild growth of electrical wires to the main base. The screen was showing revolving star constellations on one side and a series of what looked something like rolling Arithmantic calculations on the other. He had no idea what they meant.

Next to the screen, held awkwardly in place by some sort of sticking charm, was an ancient-looking piece of circular metalwork. The object was roughly eight inches or so wide and about two inches thick. Ron thought that he could make out a series of runes or writing around the edges of its rusted surface. He squinted at it. It looked so *weird* compared to the other equipment that surrounded it - battered and twisted, its edges rough and pitted with age.

Ron saw Snape reach out one long, tapered finger and brush it against the old metal. The finger lingered over the rough surface of the object for a few moments before Snape slowly withdrew it, curling the digit upwards to gently tap his thin bottom lip.

Ron realised that he was holding his breath, so intense was the atmosphere about them. Self-consciously he let it go, hissing outwards between his teeth. Snape snapped a look over his shoulder in Ron's direction and dropped his hand. The blue light from the upper bulb of the hourglass flickered and danced around them, casting crazy shadows about the vaulted room.

Snape turned away, cleared his throat and opened the diary. Ron noticed that the older man was holding the book oddly, with his left arm and hand underneath its spine, fingers curled protectively over the top of the double pages, the base of the book held snugly against his sternum, as if he were reluctant to let it part from him. Slowly, he turned a page, hunched over like some sort of dark creature devouring Hermione's words, blocking Ron from seeing anything.

What was he reading? What did he know? Ron rubbed his fingers again on the gentle fibres of her cardigan. He had glanced through Hermione's notes, nothing more, before finding the references to Snape and jumping to all sorts of conclusions.

Carefully, Snape turned another page. Then he looked up again at the machine and moved slowly back to the display screen to his left. The man paused, turned another page and scanned the screen, his right eyebrow cocked upwards as his quick, dark eyes took in the scrolling numbers before him.

Another twenty seconds passed. Ron thought he saw Snape's mouth quirk upwards slightly, as if he were privy to a secret.

"What are you looking for?" he asked, frustrated by the continuing silence.

Snape did not move his eyes from the screen. "Clues," he replied eventually, his voice nasal and patronising.

Ron saw the man's fingers tighten on the binding of Hermione's journal. He could feel his temper rising. "What kind of clues?" he gritted out from between clenched teeth, refusing to be intimidated by the surly bastard.

"Clues as to your... *Miss Granger's* whereabouts. That is why we are both here, after all," Snape sneered curtly.

Ron took a breath, refusing to rise to the bait. "Well, have you found any yet?"

Snape turned slowly to look at him, an expression of such intensity on his face that Ron almost took a step backwards. He raised his hand involuntarily. "Right, right. 'Fuck off, Weasley' I get it," he muttered, turning his attention back to the rest of the little area that had been partitioned off to contain the machine. Perhaps there was something here that might tell them where she was... or what had happened to her.

Ron poked and prodded his way along the jumbled bench, searching for anything that might point to where or why Hermione had gone. The objects skittered and slid against each other and across the table. The noise echoed loudly in the small space around the machine.

"Weasley, will you keep quiet?" Snape's voice, annoyed, interrupted him as he was fiddling with the mechanism of some sort of Muggle device.

Ron rolled his eyes and moved on to the end of the bench, muttering darkly under his breath as he continued to sift through the bits and pieces on the long table, searching for anything that might suggest an answer.

He couldn't for the life of him see anything that might help.

At the end of a bench, a shop mannequin was propped up against the wall. The female figure was clad in an elaborate wizarding cloak and wore, incongruously, a pair of old-fashioned aviator goggles. The light from the bell jar danced in reflection from the eyeglasses, giving a peculiar effect of animation to the still form.

The robes were Peverell's, he assumed. Draped over the mannequin in much the same way as her cardigan had been thrown over the back of the chair. He had met Hermione's Apprentice Master once or twice - a small, scuttling man with a nervous handshake and quick eyes that never seemed to settle in one place for long. Hermione called him brilliant and inspiring, but Ron had not liked him.

He shot another look back towards Snape. The man had not moved, still hunched over Hermione's notebook, his lips moving silently as he read.

Ron looked back at the mannequin.

He couldn't shake the sensation that something in the area was...*off*....

oOo

Severus sank further into Granger's words, trying to focus on the essentials of what she was recording through page after page of calculations and notes from this book or that.

He had to admit (privately to himself, of course) that the work was astonishing. There were comments on genealogy texts, an analysis of Einstein's and Hawking's works on Muggle physics, an essay on the life of Hypatia of Alexandria... a spirited defence of Anderson and Pell's thesis on Wizarding time theory... He leafed through the information, searching for anything that might draw it together.

Weasley moved about the area, prodding noisily at the mess on the benches, and Severus spared him a sharp look. Why was he even bothering with the detritus that had been left over from Granger's haphazard construction?

A flare of hot pain suddenly slid upwards through his belly. Snape grunted and tipped forwards. The Occlumency block had completely failed. He gasped as the panicky feeling of loss and distress that he had been fighting for hours, returned even more strongly than before, accompanied by a desperate constriction in his chest.

He shivered, remembering the look on the Other Snape's face outside in the alleyway. *Redundant timelines. Find Granger.*

For some reason, the bloody woman appeared to be responsible for an older version of himself who, dressed up like an extra from *Lawrence of Arabia*, was prepared to babble on about 'time-shifts' and 'timelines' before willingly throwing himself into the hands of the Ministry. He wondered suddenly whether the failure of the block meant that the Aurors had discovered his double's deception.

Aurors. Snape's heart thundered in his chest. How much longer would he be safe from capture? *Shit. Shit.* A further rush of adrenaline coursed through him.

He turned another page with a shaking hand. It was obvious of course, from her notes and the giant prototype before him, what Granger was trying to achieve... but to what specific purpose? Severus grimaced. He could feel the smaller device nestled on his chest, hot against his sweaty skin.

Why couldn't he see where she had gone? His fingers shook as he turned another page of Granger's journal, revealing more of the woman's dense, looping scrawl.

She always had written too much.

A loud crash from the benches by the wall of the room disturbed his concentration.

"Weasley, will you keep *quiet*?" he spat, the throbbing in his guts warring with the skittering sense of fear and urgency in his head.

Concentrate, damn you! His doppelgänger had spoken about finding the answers in the Ministry... Perhaps he was looking in the wrong place...?

He froze, cursing his fading instincts. The answer was not in the bloody book, it was elsewhere in the room. He allowed his magical senses to expand, consciously pushing outwards to assess the energies in the room.

Dominating all others of course was the machine before him the changing energies radiating from it pulsed and twisted, almost obscuring everything else. He could feel Weasley close beside him, his magical signature stolid and undemanding. He felt his own magic of course, a brittle and bitter thing, settling unhappily under the Trace. But there was something more. He forced himself to relax even further...

There!

Faint, but unmistakable. Skittish, but traceable. *Clever.*

"There is a Chameleon Charm here," Snape said softly.

Weasley froze, his wand raised immediately in front of him. Snape was reluctantly impressed both by the speed of the younger man's response and the stillness that now radiated from him as they both searched for the origin of the spell.

"Harry told me about those," Weasley breathed.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Oh, *good*," he drawled in a whisper that lost none of its acidic tone for all its quietude. "Did he mention how to counter one, then?"

oOo

Hermione woke, sprawled naked on the floor of the darkened yurt, her hands and arms tingling as if she had been electrocuted.

But she knew *who* she was, and *where* she was.

For a few moments, she lay there shuddering, breathing in and out and trying to control the wild beating of her heart.

Sweet Nimue, she had made it. She had done it! She was suffused by a savage, giddy feeling of excitement mixed with the same sort of terror she usually experienced when airborne.

Alexandria. The harbour and pharos. The *Serapium*. The greatest library of the ancient world.

Her heart beat so strongly against her ribcage that it almost hurt.

Oh. My. Word.

She sat up, and her head swam for a few moments. She calmed herself; a certain amount of disorientation was to be expected, after all. She pulled the sheet that had come loose around her and pooled at her waist back upwards, tucking it neatly under her arms, wondering again at her initial disorientation and the fact that she was naked under the rough linen sheet.

She fumbled with the linen. Why were her hands so numb?

Her memory was returning to her, but in fits and starts, like a disjointed puzzle slotting into place in a seemingly random order. She knew her name, that she had struggled to overcome significant obstacles to reach this place as part of a grand experiment which, if successful, would cement her position as a respected academic in magical theory. A warm feeling of accomplishment bathed her in its glow.

Beyond that, as far as her memory was concerned, however, things were a little... fuzzy.

A few images shifted across her memory. Her reflection shining and distorted in a great glass mirror, swirling blue energy, and the sharp pain of time transference. Time

transference. She paused a little, trying out that phrase in her mind again, but its meaning was elusive and impossible to define.

She breathed out in frustration, but rather than trying to pursue it, she decided to shift her concentration.

She found with relief that recent events were far more easier to recall.

She remembered going to the Bedouin tent's opening and teasing the flap apart to look outside, confused at her location, not remembering anything about the series of events that had sent her there. She recalled the light that had shone into her eyes and the wave of intense desert heat that had taken her breath away. She had blinked once... twice, as if in slow motion, as her irises had adjusted to the direct sunlight.

The sight of the ancient city before her, spreading out in its grid-like formation over the flat sea plain around the harbour, had taken her breath away. The houses and taller buildings... the sight of the ancient lighthouse and the gaily coloured sailing vessels that bobbed about in its lee. She remembered trying to locate where the other major civic buildings must have been from the ancient plans and maps that she had poured over for weeks.

She remembered reaching up to twist the tent's door flap further out of the way and the immediate shock that sent her tumbling backwards into the cool, darkened interior of the yurt.

Suddenly, she knew why her fingers felt as if she had touched fire, and the knowledge struck her like a well-cast Petrificus Totalis freezing her to the spot on the harsh fibres of the yurt's floor.

There were wizarding wards on the tent's door.

oOo

Snape moved silently to Ron's side, Granger's journal held tightly against his roiling stomach, sweat beading on his upper lip, wand in his shaking hand.

"Can you tell where it's coming from?" Ron whispered, keeping his wand hand raised as he scanned the room.

"Sssssshhhh," hissed Snape, his teeth bared in a sort of twisted snarl.

Ron stared at the older man. "You look awful," he said in a low voice from out of the side of his mouth. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

Snape made a frustrated noise in his throat, ignoring the question, continuing his slow sweep of the room until his wand was pointed more or less directly at the old shop mannequin by the side of the benches.

"Shit," Ron breathed, bringing his own wand to bear.

"Be ready," Snape whispered.

Ron nodded, tightening his grip on the willow wand in his hand, wondering just what exactly he was supposed to be ready for.

Snape stepped delicately to one side. "Come out, come out wherever you are," he called in a strange, sing-song voice, moving his wand in a series of elaborate twists and flicks which seemed to be describing a pattern of runes in the air before them.

Ron felt the air thicken, like the atmosphere before a summer storm. The mannequin began to shiver and shake. It rose slightly in the air and altered in form, twisting and reforming underneath Snape's obvious efforts. Ron stared in shock as the mannequin's head and body began to change. It was obvious that the hidden body was reluctant to form. Snape's lips were pulled back from his teeth into a savage grimace as he channelled all his energies into forcing the transformation.

With a final thrust of Snape's wand, however, the mannequin gave up its former shape, and before them, a small, sleek-haired wizard with heavy, rounded glasses shivered into being, clad in the same robe that had recently wrapped itself about the tailor's dummy. Emitting a frightened shriek, the man fell to the floor, clawing at the fibres of the blue carpet at their feet.

Snape sagged backwards against the metal column of Hermione's machine, panting with the effort it had cost him. "Master Peverell, I presume," he gasped.

*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*A*

A/N: I'm back! And I am really sorry for the delay in posting this chapter... *hangs head*.... Clairvoyant, nagandsev and beawesley2 are wonderful! I do not own these characters (well, most of them...).

Chapter 7

Chapter 8 of 9

"I've read her notes," he grated through his teeth. "And I've seen your machine. But it's all about the outward journey. What do you need to do to recall her?"

"Wait! What? Recall her from where?" Weasley's voice was high with fright. "What the bloody hell is going on, Snape?"

Chapter 7

A/N: I know it's been a ridiculously long time since I updated this story and I am so sorry about that! Thank you to those of you who sent me messages of support and have waited patiently over the past six months while I got my act back together. This chapter comes to you courtesy of beawesley2, nagandsev and Clairvoyant, without whom... without whom....

Hermione is missing and a reluctant Severus has been dragged to the Department of Mysteries to find her....

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Ron recoiled in shock as he saw Hermione's apprentice master grovel at his feet on the patterned blue carpet of the Time Room. The forced transformation had left Peverell breathless and Snape clearly badly drained, half-collapsed on the benches beside them, his laboured breathing harsh and painful.

He watched, unable to move, as Peverell clutched at the carpet beneath his pale, thin fingers. The sight reminded Ron suddenly of the moment when Sirius and Remus had transformed Scabbers into Pettigrew all those years ago in the Shrieking Shack. The memory of that horrible time made him feel a bit sick, and he stepped backwards a little to where Snape was slumped on the benches next to them.

Ron rolled his wand between his fingers. "What do we do now?" he whispered at Snape, uncertain.

Snape's eyes were squeezed shut, and he was pulling air into his lungs through his teeth with an audible hiss. His lips moved. Ron leaned closer.

"Aurors," he heard the older man whisper harshly in his ear. "Coming soon... illegal spell... *ask him!*"

Peverell coughed, a dry and hacking sound, and began to lift himself onto his knees. Ron turned away from Snape and held out his wand in a shaking hand. "W... where is she?" he stammered, cursing himself for a prat.

The old wizard recoiled, his face slack, eyes bulging as they focussed on the tip of Ron's wand. "Don't...! Please!" the old wizard gasped, pushing himself backwards onto his heels and blinking rapidly, both hands held out before him like captured Muggles in a war movie. He was shaking badly, as though terrified, as his eyes flicked between Ron's face and his outstretched wand arm.

Ron felt a wash of guilt wash through him. He hadn't threatened anyone since the War, and the realisation that Peverell was shaking with terror, kneeling before him, made him feel ill. He lowered his wand, holding his other hand out instead in what he hoped was a soothing gesture.

Behind him, he heard Snape hiss again in annoyance.

"Master Peverell?" he asked, ignoring Snape.

"Ronald?" Peverell's thin voice quavered.

Ron's insides twisted again. He shoved his wand into its sheath in his jeans and reached forward to try to help the small man rise to his feet. Peverell clutched at Ron's arm, his thin, bony fingers digging painfully into the exposed flesh.

"Ronald? Is it you?" Peverell asked again, blinking myopically up at the tall redhead.

"*Oh, for fuck's sake...*" Ron heard Snape mutter behind him.

"Yes, it's me, Master Peverell," he said loudly and, he hoped, soothingly, to the old man. "Hermione's *boyfriend*," he added deliberately for Snape's benefit. "Are you alright? Let's get you sat down, shall we?"

He carefully manoeuvred Peverell to the dentist's chair, feeling Snape's exasperated stare of disapproval burning into the back of his neck.

"You came, you came!" The old man was still grasping Ron's wand arm and breathing heavily, a thin whistle of air, but he stared trustingly into Ron's eyes as he sank into the cracked leather seat. Gripping Ron's forearm with his fingers, he turned his head to look at Snape. "She said that you would!" he added.

There was a pause, and Ron looked on in confusion between the two other men as Snape glowered back at Peverell, his eyes bright and black in the dancing light from the Bell Jar. The Potions master had collected himself, but it still looked as if every breath he took was an agony. However, his eyes burned with a fierce intensity as he stared back at Peverell.

"Um, yeah," Ron stammered, turning back to face Hermione's Apprentice Master, placing himself in the old man's line of sight.

Peverell focused again on Ron, then dabbed at his eyes with his crumpled sleeve, his other hand still clutched hard on Ron's forearm.

"Weasley...." Snape's voice was harsh, "the Aurors are coming...."

Ron gestured irritably behind him for the man to be quiet.

He cleared his throat. "We're looking for Hermione, Master Peverell," he began. "D'you know where she is?"

Tears spilled from Peverell's pale blue eyes, glinting on the rough texture of his stubbled cheeks. "I told her not to," he whispered, leaning forward, his thin fingers digging further into the flesh of Ron's wand arm. "We needed to run more tests, but the algorithms were lost... I'm so sorry...."

A sense of terrible dread settled in Ron's stomach. He shook his head, as if to clear his thoughts. "I don't understand," he blurted out. "What the hell has happened? Where is she?"

Peverell flinched, but did not speak, eyes wide in horror and panic. Ron drew in his breath to try again...

"Oh, for fuck's sake, get out of the way, Weasley!"

Ron felt himself shoved roughly to the side as Snape pushed past him to grab the little old man by his collar. Snape was clutching his side with his other hand, digging the fingers into his stomach, and his face was shining with sweat. He looked dreadful, his face contorted and his lips pulled back from uneven, yellowing teeth in a snarl.

"We don't have much *time*, Peverell," he growled. "Answer the fucking question, and no more of your fucking delaying tactics. I've been manipulated by a master, and you're not even fucking close. The question isn't where is she, is it? It's *when?* And *how are you going to get her back?*"

oOo

Hermione came back to herself slowly, her consciousness swirling and coalescing as her senses began to orientate themselves once more.

Oh, Merlin! She had a headache. It pulsed and throbbed from the back of her head through to her temples. She pushed herself shakily upright, her fingers digging into the rough fibres of the rug beneath her body. She could still feel the tingling running through the nerves of her skin.

The sharp prickle through her fingertips focused her memory.

Wards. On the door.

She looked about herself, remembering her disorientation, stumbling to the tent's opening, the sight of ancient Alexandria and that feeling of savage joy that she had accomplished everything she had hoped to do then, suddenly the shock of the wards on her fingers, falling to the floor...

Her fingers scrabbled uselessly in the sheet that was wrapped about her, but after a few seconds, she caught herself sharply, feeling foolish and panicked.

She fought to calm her racing heartbeat, to take deep, meditative breaths. *Just because your wand is gone and there are wards on the tent doesn't mean you're a prisoner* she told herself, but the words rang hollow and unconvincing in her mind.

oOo

Severus knew the Aurors were on their way - the sudden onset of the pain in his guts a few minutes ago had told him that his doppelgänger's mind-block had broken, which could only mean that the Trace was active on him once again. Forcing Peverell's Chameleon Charm to break in clear contravention of his parole was a sure way of pointing the fucking boys-in-brown straight towards him. *How long will it take?* he thought to himself, half-surprised that the idiots weren't already trying to bash the door down to arrest him.

He had to find her!

The cramping in his stomach was so bad he felt as if any further movement might cause him to actually vomit. *What the fuck is the matter with me?* he thought, baring his teeth against the torment in his belly. In vain, he tried to reestablish the Occlumency shield that the other Snape had put in place to reduce the impact of the pain, but his focus was in tatters. Hadn't his other self told him that the pain was something to do with the fact that the stupid girl was missing? He was disturbed that Peverell had recognised him, that he had been sure he would come *why the hell was that?*

"Watch the door, Weasley," he gasped.

"Why? What're you...?" The redhead closed his stupid mouth when Snape flashed him a savage look. If Peverell would not tell him directly.... He stared into Peverell's eyes, silently casting *Legilimens* while damning himself for a fool. Legilimens would land him in Azkaban for sure.

Peverell struggled beneath him, but he kept his fingers tightly wound into the old man's robe. The strange anxiety that he was feeling about Granger redoubled in force, and he twisted Peverell's collar tightly, the material digging into the soft flesh of the old man's neck. He struggled to connect with the old man's mind. There were defences there that he had not seen since...

A sudden thundering impact on the door to the Time Room interrupted his concentration.

Snape recoiled.

Oh, Fuck!

Fuck it!

The Aurors had found him. Thank the gods they had thought to ward the doors to the Time Room when they arrived.

His hand clutched tighter at Peverell's throat.

"Professor Snape!" Peverell squeaked in alarm, his rheumy eyes darting from side to side.

Snape could feel time passing with every thump of his heart. "I've read her notes," he grated through his teeth. "And I've seen your machine. But it's all about the outward journey. What do you need to do to recall her?"

"Wait! What? Recall her from where?" Weasley's voice was high with fright. "What the bloody hell is going on, Snape?"

The door thundered again. "SEVERUS SNAPE!" a magically amplified voice reverberated in the room. "WE KNOW YOU ARE IN THERE! COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS UP, OR WE WILL BE FORCED TO USE FORCE TO APPREHEND YOU!"

Snape rolled his eyes. *"Forced to use force?" Do they always have to speak in clichés?* he wondered

"Weasley..." he began.

"I'm on it," Ron interrupted, and Severus shot him a surprised look. The younger man's face was flushed but determined, his freckled jaw set.

Ron turned away from Peverell and Snape and pointed his wand through the open screen towards the door at the end of the room. Severus watched, nonplussed for a moment, as Weasley's lips began to move, sending strengthening spells towards the ancient wooden doors. *Who knew that the boy could actually do something?*

Peverell wriggled under his grip, and Severus' stomach clenched violently again. He shook his head. *Concentrate.* He redoubled his grip on Peverell's robes, virtually hauling the old man out of his seat, focusing his will on pulling the truth out of the cowering wizard beneath him.

"Speak," he enunciated clearly. "Where may she be found?"

Peverell licked his lips nervously. "You know already, Professor Snape," he said hoarsely. "Miss Granger has gone into the Temporal Accelerator... into the machine."

Snape nodded. That much was obvious. All Granger's notes, the machine itself with its use of the quantum gases from the Bell Jar... the odd allusion to her secretive research going on at the Ministry... the owed requests from Peverell for him to... *wait!*

Snape twisted his fingers harder, looked deeper into Peverell's mind. "You...she wanted me here *why?*"

Peverell had the nerve to smile in response to his question, but then he began gagging ineffectually. Snape realised that his fingers were so tightly wound into the man's robes that they were choking him. He relaxed his grip a fraction. "Why, Peverell?" he snarled.

"Please, Professor Snape! May I explain?" the old man wheezed. "We seem to have got off on the wrong foot, so to speak!"

"Snape! I can't hold them for much longer!" Weasley shouted, his hand wavering under the strength of the Aurors' assault.

"Up!" Snape ordered, pulling Peverell out of the dentist's chair and to his feet. "And don't lie to me,"...he hissed...*Merlin! This fucking hurts!...* "I've been lied to before, and I can recognise bullshit when I hear it. Now *where* and *when* is the bloody girl, and what's this got to do with me?"

Peverell fussed with his robes, straightening them. "Mister Snape, if she has survived the journey, she should be exactly where she planned to be." The old man paused, his eyes narrowing shrewdly. "And judging from the connection that you still clearly feel to her, she has indeed survived the transfer."

"What's he saying?" the boy shouted, pausing between the incantations he was using to shore up the wards against the Aurors.

"Weasley, keep your wand on the door!" Snape bellowed back above Weasley's spell casting and the sounds from outside the Time Room.

"What connection?" he hissed at Peverell. "What did she do to me?" His mind was whirling with the possibilities, fearful of the answer.

At the end of the cavernous room, the door heaved and groaned under the Aurors' spells.

Once again, the magically magnified voice of one of them echoed through the room, "OPEN THE DOOR, SNAPE! DON'T TRY TO RESIST ARREST!"

"Peverell...," Snape growled, advancing again. "They come for me they come for you, too. Judging from the way you were hiding before we arrived, I think you know that your experiment wasn't exactly legal. What bloody connection?" Merlin, his stomach!

Peverell held up his hands, and they were shaking. "Why, your New Year charm of course!" he babbled. "The one that you shared with Miss Granger!"

Snape froze in surprise. *The Redemption Charm? How is that possible?*

"What?" Weasley practically howled. "What's he on about!"

"Have you not wondered why you did not return to Spinner's End, Professor Snape?" Peverell continued, "and why you feel her... loss... so keenly?" Peverell leaned forward, his eyes alight with something like excitement. "We believe that your *Semper Meminere* created a bond between yourself and Miss Granger which in some way linked you together, much in the same way as... your previous experiences." Peverell's eyes flicked pointedly to Snape's left forearm.

Severus' hand instinctively covered the remnants of the Dark Mark, his stomach churning and cramping.

That was what his other self had meant!

There was another crash at the door. The floor shook, and a few clocks on the wall began to shake and fall, smashing on the desks and floor.

"Snape!" Weasley bellowed, "*They're coming!*"

Fuck! Severus ripped his attention back to Peverell.

"How can we get her back?" he snapped, already knowing the answer. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, adding to the pain in his nerve endings, making him shake and quiver with anxiety.

Peverell's shoulders slumped. He shook his head. "The Temporal Accelerator acts like a slingshot, providing an uncontrolled method of time travel. It can move a witch or wizard far beyond their own timespan far further than the old small-scale Time Turners! This machine enables us to travel to a time far, far in the past. The body is projected backwards or forwards in time, but there was no telling where it would end. It could be thrown into free fall, or find itself emerging deep in the ocean... even buried in the earth! To fully function, it required a navigational device, to focus the energy to a specific place much like the chain on a Time-Turner anchored the user to that very spot."

"She found it." Snape stated flatly. "A way to fix the arrival point."

"I... I think so," Peverell's voice quavered a little.

Snape remembered Hermione's research, the genealogical tables... the genetic studies.

"Blood," he said with sudden inspiration.

Peverell looked startled, but nodded again. "Quite so... quite so. Hermione posited that she could form a temporal bond with someone who shares her genetic signature or part of it."

"A relation? I was not aware that Miss Granger had a family?" Snape had a vague memory of her being an only child whose parents had been lost in the War.

"No! Further than that! Miss Granger is an *academic*, Professor!" There was reproof in Peverell's tone. "The opportunity to study the distant past! To meet those people that we can only read about in the historical records. That is what she is was consumed by!"

Snape gave a cynical snort. *Consumed...*! But then he had a sudden vision of her earnest face, open and passionate... the way she spoke of her desire to be useful, to make a difference... and then the careful notes in her diary....

"An... ancestor, then?" Snape frowned. "How could she trace her roots back so far...?"

Peverell leaned forward. "Indeed! She believed that she had found a way to link with the famous Hypatia of Alexandria herself!"

Whatever Snape was going to say in response was lost as another deafening crash echoed throughout the room, sending more clocks tumbling to destruction from the walls and cabinets. The Aurors had finally overcome the wards on the door. They burst in, shouting loudly, their wands spitting spells into the Time Room.

Weasley cried out, falling backwards through the ornate screen towards where Snape and Peverell were standing. He was breathing heavily, and his hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat.

"Sorry," he gasped.

"Severus Snape! Show yourself!"

Severus recognised the voice of the smarmy git from Level Two.

"What now, Snape?" Weasley wheezed.

Snape heard the Aurors muttering among each other. He knew that they would be spreading out now, cautiously moving forward, nervous of cornering him... *Snape the murderer... Snape the Death Eater....*

He grabbed Weasley and hauled him to his feet. "Don't come any closer!" he yelled out. "I've got Ronald Weasley here with my wand to his throat!"

"Wha...?" Weasley sputtered.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Shut up, Weasley!" he hissed. *And now I'm a kidnapper*, he thought wryly. *But it might buy us enough time.*

The muttering from the Aurors in the main body of the room took on a more urgent tone.

Severus turned to Peverell. "What now? *Quickly!*"

Peverell spread his hands widely in gesture of hopelessness. "I told you! She was so stubborn... We needed to run more tests on the machine to be sure. It's not like a Time-Turner, you know the power and unpredictability of the quantum mist is so great... sand is so much more stable... but we only had a tiny amount left, and she used it all in her transference...."

Snape suddenly remembered the golden pendant about his neck, thrust upon him by his other self. He scrambled to pull it out of his shirt. Glistening sand filled its hourglass core.

He shoved it towards Peverell, who took it with eyes bulging. "Where did you get that?" he breathed.

"You have one minute to let him go, Snape!" The Probation Auror's nasal whine called out.

"Can you use it?" Snape snapped at Peverell, beginning a silent countdown from sixty.

"Yes... yes...." The old wizard tilted the little device, eyeing the contents critically. "But it will only help to stabilise the transfer, to enable you to reach the time you need to find her. Your spelled bond will do the rest!"

"Do it," Snape bit out.

Weasley looked from one man to the other. "You can find her?" he said eagerly. "Where is she?"

Snape ignored him and focused on Peverell. "If by any possibility I am able to locate the woman, how do we reverse the process to return?"

Peverell scuttled over to the ancient circular mechanism that was connected to the rest of the machine by the strange, twisted cables and tubes. He laid his hand reverently on the rusted metal. "You must find this device, newly made," he breathed. "And harvest the original sands. Miss Granger will then be able to use her magical abilities to craft a new Time-Turner, one far bigger than this." He waved Snape's pendant dismissively in his hands, but then he froze. "Unless you can find the original sands from the Alexandrian astrolabe, there is no returning, Professor Snape."

Fuck it. "I stand in there?" Snape asked, pointing at the narrow chamber beneath the hourglass. *Thirty-eight, thirty-seven, thirty-six, thirty-five....*

"Yes," Peverell stepped forward tentatively, his hands hovering over the various knobs and switches surrounding the astrolabe. With shaking fingers, the old man muttered a charm and carefully poured the magical sand into the heart of the ancient, twisted metal.

"Wait! What are you doing?" Weasley asked loudly, catching hold of Snape's arm.

Snape bared his teeth at the younger man. "Getting your *fucking girlfriend* back," he snapped, shaking his arm free. *Twenty-nine, twenty-eight....*

He stalked over to the machine and ducked his body inside. The air seemed cooler inside. His heart was thundering in his chest, but oddly, the pain in his stomach appeared to have lessened a fraction.

Over at the controls, Snape watched as Peverell activated the machine. A low hum began to grow, and the blue gases above Snape's head began to circulate more actively. Severus took a few deep breaths, trying to quell the fear churning in his guts. He had burned his bridges and gone to his death before. He reached for his Occlumency skills to control his emotions.

The hum from the machine began to turn into a whine, something that could not go unnoticed.

"Snape? What are you doing? Mister Weasley, are you alright?" The Auror sounded panicked.

Snape sneered. *Idiots.* Weasley was staring at him with his mouth open, immobile, his hand raised as if to ask a question.

The giant hourglass began to spin above him, and Snape was sure that it was slowly sinking towards him. He breathed more deeply, willing himself to stay still, to not disgrace himself by falling apart.

If he survived this, he was going to kill Granger.

oOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

Chapter 8

Chapter 9 of 9

"Wands ready," he murmured, then counted silently down from *three*.

At *one*, both men poked their heads over the sharp ridge of sand on the crest of the dune.

"Oh, bloody Hell...", murmured Weasley.

Chapter 8

"Wait! What are you doing?"

Ron Weasley watched in shock as the huge machine began to whirl and shimmer. The blue swirling gases in the huge hourglass quickened in intensity, moving faster and faster, a hypnotic whirling maelstrom. The machine thrummed and pulsed with magical energy.

"Getting your fucking girlfriend back...."

Within the dark space below the giant hourglass, Ron could see Snape's white face staring out at him, dark eyes glittering with malevolence.

"Mister Weasley, are you alright?"

The metal mechanism surrounding the machine suddenly jumped and shook into life, and Ron saw the great hourglass began slowly to descend into its heart. He saw Snape glance upwards for a moment, then return his baleful glare towards Ron, thin lips pulled back in a sneer of derision.

"Mister Weasley?" The Auror's voice had risen a notch in both tone and volume. "We're coming in!"

The shouted threat finally jolted Ron out of his stupor.

"No!" he shouted above the escalating noise in the Time Room, firing off a quick *Impedimenta* around the edge of the screen behind him. He heard the Aurors cursing and

several scuffles out of sight.

Ron snapped his attention back to Snape and the machine. Snape was still staring at him with the same baleful expression on his face. The hourglass was slipping further down towards the hateful bastard.

He grabbed Peverell's arm. "Will he be able to find her?" he asked urgently.

An uncertain look settled across Peverell's narrow features. "Nothing is certain, Mister Weasley. The sands provide stability and some direction, and the bond between them should do the rest, but..." He shrugged helplessly.

Ron looked again at Snape, who stared mockingly back at him, bravely poised to rescue *this* girlfriend.

The bond between them, he thought. *Right*.

Well, bollocks to that.

He leapt forward, racing towards the base of the machine as the deep blue swirling mist of the time vortex lowered itself towards the base.

The last thing he remembered was the look of utter shock on Snape's face as he threw himself bodily at the older man inside the machine.

A

Hermione wasn't sure how long she had been in the tent. She could feel the adrenaline beginning to wear off, leaving her shuddering with shock and the after-effects of the time-shift.

It was cool and dark in the hut, and she had pulled herself back onto the low, blanket-covered couch, her knees drawn up to her chest. She was naked and wandless beneath the scratchy linen sheet that was wrapped tightly around her.

Her memories were returning to her slowly, forming in her mind as a combination of unsettling emotion and vivid images. She remembered her childhood and early life, before she and her parents could put a name to her strange behaviour and abilities... She remembered her teenage years supporting her friends and finding her place in the magical world... the experience of war and its associated privations and losses....

Books and cleverness, she remembered, thinking of her time as a student. Eager to please... keen to learn. Hands in the air with earnest desperation... fearful of failure but determined to prove herself. A researcher, not a do-er... hanging back, out of the action, or drawn along by the actions of her friends. An image sprang into her mind: Harry and Ron shivering and soaked, hauling themselves out of a nameless Scottish loch, high on adrenaline and sheer relief at their own survival, reaching backwards to pull her out of the freezing water after them, their fingers warm on her wrists, digging in to her skin, vital and alive as they hauled her onto the pebbled beach. Laughing through chattering teeth, Harry's grin lighting his pale and bruised face, green eyes dancing behind his glasses. Ron's flushed cheeks clashing horribly with his hair which stuck up in matted, weed-soaked clumps from his head.

Hermione could feel a slow tear track its way along her cheek and sniffed self-consciously, dashing her hand across her face to smear it aside.

What on earth were you thinking, doing this on your own? She berated herself, but then felt an answering wash of guilt course through her body sending her shivering again, making her pull the rough fabric closer to her body.

She took a few deep breaths, ashamed of her fearfulness.

"You didn't have a choice." The sound of her own voice, low and scratchy, but unwavering, steadied her a bit. She cleared her throat quietly.

"You didn't," she repeated, with more determination.

The exact circumstances of her time-shift were still hazy, mere shadows compared to earlier memories. She could remember the compulsion to take the immediate jump back to ancient Alexandria. She could remember the detailed diagrams of the city, the archaeological records. Hours spent pouring over the earliest histories of that timeframe, learning the names of the different districts, the biographies of those in power... even as much Coptic Greek and Latin as she could, in case her translation charms failed. She remembered her research into the Serapium itself, the extraordinary lost library of Alexandria. Part Graeco-Roman temple, part Socratic university... the resting place for thousands of priceless scrolls containing the wisdom of generations... and beneath it.

Beneath it.

The Bibliotheca Veneficia.

She rubbed her chest awkwardly. Her heart rate was calming, but she still felt an odd sense of emptiness tugging at her, as if the adrenaline had hidden a peculiar loss of some sort. It felt very strange... not quite a pain, but something uncomfortable, lodged inside her body.

"Some disorientation is to be expected," she murmured, as if reading from a page.

"Remain calm and in control of your emotions." It was a technique that she had read about somewhere. She frowned as she cudgelled the memory back. An American Muggle psychiatrist whose book she had read some time after she'd started to work at the Ministry had suggested that certain memories of trauma could be overcome by simply talking out loud to oneself. Ron had scoffed at the self-talk idea (as she had expected him to), but Hermione had found the technique helpful at those times when her thoughts began to race away from her and she needed to find a deeper focus.

"First things first," she murmured, shifting a little on the couch and taking a deep breath. *"Affect the things you can affect...."*

"Accio wand," she called, stretching out her hand in front of her, picturing the pale, smooth wood firmly in her mind's eye.

Nothing.

She held her breath and pushed outwards with her senses, calling to it again.

After a few seconds, she let her breath out, frustrated. Her magic felt... *off*, somehow... strangely ineffectual, fluttering tentatively through her.

What if it isn't... what if I can't...?

She looked about herself again, and her eyes alighted on the oil lamp near the foot of her cot. She stared at it for a moment, heart pounding.

"Lucerna inflamare," she whispered concentrating all her attention on the blackened wick and praying that her intent was focused enough to be able to enact the spell without her wand.

Eventually... after several heart-stopping lifetimes had passed, the lamp sputtered... choked... and a small blue flame guttered into life.

She collapsed backwards, sagging in relief into the rough cushions into life. "Okay... okay... okay..." she muttered to herself, blinking upwards at the ceiling, grinning like a fool at the shadows dancing around the interior of the tent.

"Okay. Right. No wand, but still got magic," she said. "Still got magic. That's good... that's good...."

She looked at the lamp again, her brows furrowed at the tiny scale of the magical flame she had conjured.

"Still got *some* magic," she amended, ruefully.

Her stomach fluttered again with that odd sensation of loss. She rubbed her fingers over her torso in small circles, then rubbed the tips together. With no wand, she would have to rely on wandless magic, never her strong suit. Perhaps her wand had been lost in the time-shift, along with her clothes?

"Don't be a prat," she muttered out loud. Losing her wand by accident was as far fetched as spontaneous nudity. And there was the matter of the warded tent doorway. She rubbed her chest again, wondering how long it would be until her captors returned to check on her.

A prisoner.

She rubbed at her goose-bumped arms self-consciously, staring at the tiny, yet defiant flame burning atop the ancient lamp. She had been a prisoner before, of course. The memory of how Bellatrix Lestrange had carved hatred into her skin burned through her. The letters of the scar on her forearm were flat and pale, faintly greasy to the touch.

Hermione looked at it briefly, then turned her attention back to the lamp.

She had been not much more than a child in those days, near-starving and unable to resist her capture... but she had learned so much more since then. She felt a pulse of energy from her core, and the light flared a little more brightly.

"Not again," she whispered, and the tiny flame flickered even more strongly than before.

She started at a sudden noise as the tent flap on the doorway was pulled swiftly aside and recoiled instinctively as the bright light from the desert illuminated her darkened hut. An accompanying hot blast of air brought the smell of acid burning and a gout of sand and dust along with it.

The lamp's blue flame doused in a moment and Hermione coughed, surprised by the swiftness of the interruption and squinting into the dazzling light.

There was a deep shout, a harsh rattle of language and a scuffle of feet outside the hut, before a tall, dark man in rich, impressive robes swept imperiously through the doorway.

A

Severus Snape came to consciousness with a face full of burningly hot sand and a tremendous headache. His body felt curiously unresponsive, as if he were emerging from heavy sedation, and his mind was similarly sluggish and dull.

He lay entirely still for a few seconds, noting with detached interest that he was, beyond all possible expectations, breathing... and that he was, therefore, actually *still alive*.

He paused again to allow that extraordinary thought to repeat itself more clearly in his mind.

Severus lifted his head and blinked against the glare from the fading sun. His head throbbed painfully, and his tongue felt like it was stuck to the roof of his mouth.

He could not see much beyond the low dune that he had, for want of a better word, landed on. Severus shifted again, and the dislodged sand ran down into the neck of his shirt, chafing against his sweaty skin.

He supposed that the desert sands he was lying on were the sands of ancient bloody Alexandria...*but*, he reminded himself sternly, *that would be an assumption*. He would need to scout out his surroundings properly.

If he was to see more, he would have to stand up.

Right. He gathered his strength.

But found that he was unable to move his legs.

For a moment, he panicked, thinking that he had splinched himself in some terrible way... but as he twitched and wriggled his body, he realised that a heavy weight was preventing free movement of his lower limbs. He felt about blindly behind him, with hands that did not feel quite responsive enough to his command, and discovered a mop of sweaty hair, a burly shoulder...

He swivelled his head around and looked down.

Weasley.

Unconscious.

Severus groaned, allowing his head to fall back to rest on his forearm.

He had not been mistaken. In the last moments before the vortex had enveloped him, he had thought that the ginger idiot had broken free from his gormless immobility and...

... and now he had another burden to consider.

Bollocks.

Letting out a series of hissed expletives, each more inventive than the last, Severus rolled and shoved at Weasley until he could wriggle his legs free and push himself away from the ginger menace.

He scrambled backwards in the hot sands up the slope behind him and felt inside his jacket pocket for his wand and Granger's notebook. He relaxed slightly when his fingers closed on both objects and he pulled his wand out of the pocket.

His head throbbed again. *Dehydration*, he thought. *You're dehydrated.*

He cleared his dry throat. "*Aguamenti*," he croaked, flicking his fingers in a well-practiced movement.

A thin stream of water issued sluggishly from the tip of the wand. Careful to keep the tip from touching his mouth, Severus allowed the blessedly cool liquid to splash onto his tongue and drank greedily.

After a few minutes, his thirst was assuaged and his headache abating. He spared a glance at the unconscious man lower down the dune's slope at his feet. Weasley did

not stir. Snape stared at him for a moment before cancelling the water charm.

He took a deep breath and struggled slowly to his feet, watching carefully for any dangers, his heart thundering in his chest. He wobbled slightly, the sands unpredictable beneath him, then stared about himself.

Perhaps he had been expecting pyramids, or something....

Severus narrowed his eyes against the glare from the sun and spun slowly around, taking in the rolling sea of featureless sand dunes around them extending towards the horizon.

He had certainly been expecting to see Granger.

At the thought of the maddening woman, his wand hand itched. Oh, yes he was definitely looking forward to seeing Granger again.... He rubbed his stomach reflexively too, but realised with some surprise that the terrible cramping pain that had debilitated him so badly back in the Time Room had virtually gone; there was only a pale echo of it left. Perhaps Peverell had been right there was some form of bond tying the two of them together. Now that he was closer to her, the bond had relaxed somewhat just as the constraints of the Vow relaxed when not placed under strain....

He grunted and looked around him again. *Where is the bloody woman?*

Peverell's words rang in his ears, "The sands will help to stabilise the transfer; your spelled bond will do the rest...!"

Well, so much for that. Snape spat in the sand at his feet. He could see for miles, and there was no sign at all of interfering bloody know-it-alls....

A stiff, hot breeze blew across him, and he heard the sand on the slope above shift and fall behind him with a sharp, hissing noise. He froze and turned. *What if...?*

It was about forty-five feet further up to the top of the dune that he and Weasley were on. There would certainly be more to see on the other side of the ridge. Perhaps she was just there? The slope was manageable, he supposed, but he had no idea what he would find once he reached the top. He glanced down once again at the prone man below him. Weasley was still out cold, but breathing steadily. Would it be better to wake him before exploring further?

Probably.

He slithered down carefully beside the other man and regarded him for a moment. Weasley's face was turned towards him, pillowed on one of his arms. His hair was full of sand and matted on one side. Snape noticed a faint hex burn on the younger man's cheekbone underneath the freckles and deep shadows under his eyes. He looked carefully around Weasley for his wand but could not see any sign of it.

"Wake up, Weasley," he whispered in a low voice. When the young man did not stir, Severus leaned forward reluctantly and prodded him hard in the shoulder with a bony finger.

Weasley writhed a little and his eyelids fluttered. He moaned softly and clutched at his forehead.

"*It lives,*" Snape muttered to himself, then, more loudly, "Get up, you bloody fool."

"Nnnngh... head hurts...." Weasley's voice was a cracked whisper, his eyes tightly screwed shut.

Snape scowled, muttered and flicked his wrist, splashing some water from his wand on Weasley's face.

"Snape? What the...eurgh, my head!"

"Sssssh," Severus hissed. "Keep your voice down, idiot!"

Weasley's eyes immediately sprang fully open and focused with almost comic intensity on the wand tip that was about four inches from his nose, water dripping sluggishly from it onto the sand in front of him.

"Drink it," Snape ordered shortly in a rough whisper. "It will ease your headache."

"Whu...? How?" Weasley stammered.

Snape rolled his eyes. Even more impaired than usual. "It's a simple enough charm," he snapped. "Open up you need the moisture."

Weasley scowled. "It wasn't the water, you...", he began, but didn't finish the sentence, instead snagging hold of Snape's wrist as he began to pull away in irritation and directing the thin stream of water into his mouth.

He drank noisily and with some coughing, much to Snape's fastidious displeasure, then splashed some of the liquid onto his face, and lay back down on the sand, scrubbing at his forehead with his fingers. Weasley bit his nails to the quick, Snape noted.

"Thank you," the younger man said eventually, waving his hand at Snape's wand. "That helped a bit. I think."

Snape frowned impatiently. "I do not know as yet if we are truly alone here, Mister Weasley. I suggest you draw your wand, if you still have it, and join me in reconnoitring the area."

Weasley coughed again and rubbed his face. "Ummm," he said, his voice faintly muffled in his fingers. "Right. Okay... hang on a second. Just getting my head together."

Severus exhaled in irritation. "If you are experiencing any slowness in your thought processes, you may attribute it, in part, to the temporal shock your body may have experienced..."

Before he could add a further, waspish comment, Weasley took his hand away from his face and smiled at him in a crooked way. "Nah. I always feel this way," he said. "Can't tell any difference, thanks."

Snape cleared his throat, somewhat disconcerted. "Well then"...he swept his arm around in a wide arc, indicating the desert vista spread out before them, and rose once again to his feet on legs that felt a little more secure than they had done a few minutes ago..."here we are."

Weasley coughed and pushed himself upright. He clambered slowly to his feet, weaving slightly. Snape looked at him with suspicion, but Weasley ignored him, his body shaking and yet remaining irritatingly upright as he revolved slowly on the spot, looking out at the endless sea of sand dunes, their flanks fiery orange and red in the declining sunlight.

"Where are we?" the younger man added softly and coughed again. "I thought you were supposed to go straight to her...."

"I have absolutely no bloody idea," Snape snapped, annoyed that Weasley was voicing the worry at the forefront of his mind. "We need to go higher, to see what is over the top of this line of dunes. Come on and don't forget to keep your head down and be as quiet as possible." He turned and began to climb the dune, feet digging deeply into the soft sand. Soon his thighs began to burn with the effort of climbing up the steep incline.

After a few moments, he heard Weasley puffing behind him, and the two men reached the top of the dune at the same time. Before they crested the ridge, Snape grabbed Weasley's arm and pulled him down to his knees. He put his finger to his lips and stared pointedly at the redhead.

"Wands ready," he murmured, then counted silently down from *three*.

At *one*, both men poked their heads over the sharp ridge of sand on the crest of the dune.

"Oh, bloody Hell...", murmured Weasley.

A

The man standing before Hermione was tall and dark skinned. His robes were heavily embellished with rich embroidery in shades of dark browns and greens, and they swirled about him in flowing waves as he stalked into the room. His head was shaved for the most part, the exception being a thin circlet of longer hair that had been allowed to grow over his ears and across his forehead. About his neck hung a long silver chain, from which a Christian cross swung heavily against his belly.

The effect was both impressive and disconcerting.

He regarded her for a long moment and then swept into a deep bow, the tips of his long sleeve brushing the rush matting on the floor. As he straightened, he asked her a question in a deep, rumbling voice or he appeared to anyway; Hermione could not determine the language he used.

"I-I'm sorry," she began, "but I...." She spread her hands widely to indicate her lack of understanding.

The man frowned and then waved his hand towards her in a complicated gesture.

Hermione noticed that he was wearing a beautiful jewelled ring on his forefinger as she felt the slick sensation of magic flow over her. She gasped and recoiled.

"You have awakened, I see," the man said again, and Hermione realised to her shock that she could understand him now.

"Good afternoon, madam," the man added, conversationally. "It is an honour to meet you at last. Have the Romans sent you to spy on us?"

A

The valley spread out before him in a confusing jumble of interlocking dunes and rocky outcrops. In places, the frozen waves of pure sand gave way to areas of sparse desert grass and sharp, sun-reddened rocks and stones.

Snape narrowed his eyes. In the distance, at the bottom of the shallow valley below them, as the desert gave way to rough scrubland, he could see a small, ancient town.

Water glinted in the desert sunlight. At the base of the valleys of dunes and desert scrubland were a series of small lakes, the water glinting brightly in the sunlight. Dark green trees and bushes sprang up around the water, and looking through the vegetation, Snape could see many squat, flat-roofed buildings clustered together. Behind the settlement, the desert stretched outwards again, dominated by a series of low hills, sand blasted into sharp relief against the blue sky.

"Oh, bloody Hell...", Weasley repeated again, and then he rounded on his old professor with a huge grin splitting his pale face. "That's *brilliant!*"

"What?"

"I know where we are! At least... I think I know, anyway! That's Siwa, that is. I've been here before... with Bill and the family when I was twelve or thirteen...."

Snape scowled, irritated by Weasley's enthusiasm and apparent knowledge. He ground his teeth together and reached inside his jacket pocket to pull out Granger's notebook again. It was unconscionable that the idiot boy should know more than him.

Weasley was still talking, "... Be able to get some food and maybe directions to Alexandria. The Egyptian and Arabic mages were awesome, Bill says..."

Snape ignored him, leafing through Granger's meticulous notes to the page with a hand drawn map of the region on it.

"... Something like one of those ancient cults, yeah? But full of really weird curse structures..."

He scanned the map, searching the desert region surrounding Alexandria for features that he would recognise. *Siwa... Siwa... Ah, yes.* He found the word encased in tiny curled brackets beneath another: Ammonium. He frowned at the map, then impulsively traced his finger over the cramped letters. To his surprise, the area he had brushed shimmered and enlarged on the page, providing a much more detailed map of the settlement, and more notes at the side.

Siwa Oasis ancient name Ammon / Ammonium was established as an oracle for the Egyptian god Amun-Ra (Gk. Zeus Ammon). Herodotus: "Fountain of the Sun ran coldest at noon" Book 1: 46 passim.

Herodotus... an early magical historian that the Muggles believed to be the 'father of lies'... wrote concise history of the early magical world, with a focus on the ancient and near east....

"... Not sure what exactly we should be looking for, 'cos its obviously not the same now, but she might have left us some clues to follow..."

"*Mister Weasley,*" Snape interrupted through gritted teeth, eyes still focussed on the map, but wand hand twitching. "If you don't mind...."

Weasley subsided into a sullen silence as Snape continued to skim through Granger's notes.

Poss. site for temp. black sands? Ref Herodotus 2:32. Meteorite impact?

??Oracle / Divination link? See Serapium ?B.V. Ref Jones 6: 834 / Scrimshank 34:2...

"*Hey!*" Snape felt his arm jostled and then tugged sharply downwards. He opened his mouth to snap at Weasley, but stilled instantly as the younger man pressed an urgent finger to his lips.

"We've got company!" He gestured with his thumb below.

Snape swivelled sharply and looked over the rise that they were perched upon. Sure enough, a slowly moving caravan of brightly coloured camels and their riders was emerging from one of the low sand dunes to his right. The animals moved with sluggish grace, effortlessly moving over the shifting sands without breaking their strides.

Snape counted quickly. There were about twenty beasts in all and some seven riders.

He ducked back down, his mind racing. It would be a way for us to arrive in the city unremarkably.... He felt for his magic *would it be strong enough?* he thought.

Time to see.

He turned to Weasley, who was still peeking over the ridge, staring at the approaching men with gormless anticipation.

"Come here!" he hissed.

Weasley slid down the slope towards him, mouth open to speak.

"Turn out your pockets and take of your clothes," he ordered brusquely and began to unbutton his shirt while shrugging out of his jacket.

"What? Why?" Weasley stammered. Severus spared him a glance as he unbuckled his trouser belt.

Weasley's eyes were boggling at him, and Snape sneered, delighted that he has regained the upper hand.

"It may have escaped your attention, Weasley, but you are wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and I am similarly ill attired. I need to transfigure your clothing... unless you are capable of doing it for yourself?"

A dark, dull flush spread slowly across Weasley's face.

Snape allowed a slight sneer to cross his features. *Thought not.* "Put them in a pile here and stand back," he said.

He turned deliberately away and took off his shirt and dropped it carefully on top of his jacket. He scrambled in his trouser pockets, pulling out a handful of Muggle coins as well as a few Knuts and a Galleon. He tossed them gently onto the sand beside the shirt before tugging off his boots and socks.

Behind him, he could hear Weasley puffing and panting, the noise of zippers and the jangle of loose change.

Quashing any self consciousness he may have entertained at stripping to his smalls in front of one of the most annoying students he ever taught, Snape shimmied out of his trousers and threw them on his pile of clothing. Without pausing to give Weasley any chance at a smart aleck comment, he envisioned desert sandals, a black jellabiya with a long robe outer layer and a length of turban material. He pushed his magic outwards, grunting in satisfaction as the clothes rearranged themselves as ordered.

He could hear Weasley hissing through his teeth in irritation and took a certain degree of satisfaction in the time he took to settle his new clothing about himself, thus leaving Weasley near naked and exposed on the hillside.

Finally, he turned to face the younger man and regarded him quizzically.

Weasley's face was red with embarrassment. "Come on get on with it, Snape!" he snapped, cupping both hands in front of his crotch, even though he had not removed his ridiculous bright orange underpants.

Severus paused, twirling his wand in his fingers, enjoying the moment.

"You do realise," he drawled, "that your hair is going to be a problem?"

A

"Madam?" the man prompted her, his voice deep and reassuring, but his eyes watchful. Hermione noticed that he was balanced carefully on the balls of his feet, his hands close to his sides, as if poised for action.

"Why did you bring me here?" she asked carefully, glad that she was able to keep her voice level and calm, thankful for the translation spell that had obviously been cast over her.

"Are you feeling better, Lady?" the man asked, and Hermione noticed that his right hand the one with the ring moved in a small half circle by his side. She stiffened slightly, feeling the unmistakable brush of magic caress her mind.

She nodded, trying to keep her mind focused on her emotions, pushing her concern and confusion foremost, keeping all other thoughts deliberately swirling and amorphous.

After a few moments, the unfamiliar magic withdrew, and the man smiled again. If he was disappointed, his expression did not show it.

"You were found wandering deep in Siwan territory, speaking in strange tongues, such as that of the Romans," he said smoothly, then added, "You have been in a waking sleep for a long time... many days." He paused, clearly to give her time to respond, but Hermione said nothing, holding her breath and keeping her thoughts as clouded as she could.

He let out a soft exhalation. "You don't remember?" he asked, moving his hand gently as before.

Hermione saw the movement and swiftly looked down at her hands, breaking eye contact with him and trying to remember as much as she could about Legilimens practice. She felt his magic flicker about her and shivered involuntarily.

Did he create the wards on the door? she wondered with sudden insight.

It was as if he had heard her. "These are dangerous times, Madam," he said, and a ghost of amusement escaped his lips. "You should be more careful with your escorts. They clearly robbed you and left you to die in the sand sea."

The sand sea...? Hermione thought frantically, picturing notes on a page... references to ancient texts.... The area to the southwest of the city. *What was I even doing there?* She tried to think, but her recent past was indistinct and shadow-like. She clenched her fist. Why couldn't she bloody well remember?

"What... what makes you think that... I am a lady?" Hermione asked carefully.

The man smiled again, then shrugged. "You have no slave mark... your hands are soft and your flesh pale..."

Hermione shuddered a little; she did not like the way his voice lingered on the words "soft" and "pale"....

"No woman would find herself so utterly alone in the sand sea in such a condition unless she was in some way *unusual*," the dark man concluded and smiled his wide, white-toothed smile once again.

Hermione could not shake the feeling that there was a significant undercurrent of understanding that was passing her by. She had to get away from this situation and into the city. She needed a plan quickly.

"The men who found you brought you with them to their camp, taking care to keep you safe. You spoke many words, some of which they knew and understood."

So she had been delirious... Had she said anything about her purpose in Alexandria? About the library? The circumstances of its destruction were well documented, after all. Did this... monk... know why she was there?

Hermione felt her pulse rate quicken. Her intentions to slip quietly into the city, to find and save what she needed, to disturb as little of the timelines as she could, were

evaporating with frightening speed....

"When they neared the city," the man continued, "word was sent for me to come and... bear witness..."

He was watching her very closely, she could tell. The questing tendrils of his magic were once more circling her, searching for answers. He reached slowly into the depths of his robe. "The tribesmen believe you to be a spirit oracle... or a saint. After all you had not died out in the deep desert."

His fingers withdrew a familiar length of polished, dark wood, and his eyes glinted with something like triumph when he saw her flash of unguarded recognition.

"After all," he concluded, twirling her wand between his fingers. "Only those with the power of *God* can survive in such circumstances... and such persons are of great interest to the Church."

Her heart thundering now in her chest, Hermione's eyes fixed on the heavy weight of the crucifix hanging from about his neck. He was still standing in the same position, lightly balanced on his feet, poised, but ready to act... cautious, but clearly intrigued.

She breathed out. "Well, If you believe that," she said, "then perhaps you should tell me your name and take me to the city to speak with your... master."

^*^*^*^*^*^*^*^*^*^*^*^*^

A/N: Thank you to the wonderful nagandsev and Clairvoyant for all their help and advice! I do not own any character you recognise - this is the world that JKR made! Thank you to all who continue to follow this story despite the woefully long time between updates....